

To Take Care of the Monks, Take Care of Christina: Christina of Markyate and the Medieval Spiritual/Material Market

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Abstract

In this essay I will delineate two of these emphases: (1) Christina's powerful interaction with boundaries and the spaces they demarcate, and (2) the material/spiritual economy that develops between Christina and Geoffrey, the Abbot of the St. Albans Monastery. I will then argue that these emphases together form a message that might have been aimed at *The Life's* monastic (and to some extent aristocratic) audience, perhaps even the abbots who succeeded Geoffrey. This general message is that material support for ancillary, miraculous mediators¹ who stand outside official communal boundaries (whether the boundaries be ecclesiastical or civil) can result in valuable spiritual compensation.

Keywords

Life of Christina of Markyate, spiritual economy, miracles, St. Albans

Introduction

Christina of Markyate's 12th-century biography, *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, has a few salient features that distinguish it from the common run of prior or contemporaneous hagiographic works. There is an intimacy surrounding Christina that has led at least one influential critic to consider this text as moving far beyond the

¹ To avoid the awkward toggling between *mediator* and *mediatrix*, I will use the term *mediators* throughout to signify both male and female mediators.

normal literary structures of saints' lives.² Others, who see it staunchly positioned as a saint's life, take pains to point out that the writer's almost effortless weaving together of various narrative strands renders the text seamless—a hagiographic masterpiece.³ To this second group, narrative skill makes the work unique.

Yet germane to *The Life* are narrative emphases other than Christina's personality or her biographer's narrative skill that can be seen as representing Christina in a unique way in order to deliver a unique message to a particular audience. In this essay I will delineate two of these emphases: (1) Christina's powerful interaction with boundaries and the spaces they demarcate, and (2) the material/spiritual economy that develops between Christina and Geoffrey, the Abbot of the St. Albans Monastery. I will then argue that these emphases together form a message that might have been aimed at *The Life's* monastic (and to some extent aristocratic) audience, perhaps even the abbots who succeeded Geoffrey. This general message is that material support for ancillary, miraculous mediators who stand outside official communal boundaries (whether the boundaries be ecclesiastical or civil) can result in valuable spiritual compensation.

² This is C. H. Talbot, whose translation *The Life of Christina of Markyate, a Twelfth Century Recluse* is the text underlying much of the scholarship on Christina since then. He highlighted the text's emphasis on Christina's individuality and accessibility, noting that the "usual desire to deify, to speak only of the supernatural qualities of the Saint, to borrow from or draw parallels with the lives of other saintly persons is conspicuous by its absence. There is in the narrative a frankness, a vigour of expression, and an economy of words that must reflect direct contact with Christina herself" (*The Life* 6).

³ For example, Samuel Fanous, Head of Publishing at the Bodleian Library and co-editor of perhaps the most scholarly collection to date on Christina of Markyate. In his essay "Christina and the Double Crown," he points out that Christina's biography is almost completely entrenched in two hagiographic genres: the virgin-martyr narrative and the ascetic-martyr narrative (53). Yet he admits, "Christina's hagiographer is truly exceptional in deploying two fundamentally different forms of sanctity, giving each equal weight, and uniting these seamlessly in successive narrative sequences" (68-69).

Institutional and Ancillary Mediation

The concept of a boundary or border is clear enough in its physical application. A wall around a city or a fence around a plot of land indicates at least two things: possession and protection. But sometimes these boundaries also mean that certain modes of conduct or interaction may have to be exchanged for other modes depending on what side of a boundary a person is on. For example, inside the boundary of a church, one must act differently from how one can act while outside the church. And sometimes boundaries are viewed in terms of their portals (doors, gates, windows, geographic markers) so that their ability to be either open or closed can be foregrounded.⁴ In light of this, many boundaries have boundary keepers (porters, servants, etc.) whose main job is to watch over these portals to control the penetrability of the boundary. This holds true for figural boundaries or more abstracted ones like the socio-economic ones.

Many of the attributes of physical boundaries can be applied to spiritual boundaries. For example, on the precedents of St. John's description of the new Jerusalem in Revelation 21⁵ and of St. Augustine's description of the community of the elect in his

⁴ The work of Arthur Van Gennep (*Rites of Passage*) and of Victor Turner (specifically his *The Forest of Symbols* [1967] and *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* [1969]) have much to say on the significance of portals in relation to a person's emerging identity and social function. I do not draw from these authors, however, because their shared preliminal-to-liminal-to-postliminal schematic implies that the issue of portals plays a role only when the subject enters and then leaves the liminal state. In this essay I suggest only that Christina's abilities to supernaturally negotiate mixed border areas (partly material and partly spiritual) are showcased in order to qualify her as a miraculous mediator. I do not want to suggest that Christina is a liminal subject headed toward a stabilized postliminal function or position.

⁵ Another key biblical passage validating the analogy is Hebrews 11: 13-16, "All these people [certain Patriarchs and Judges of Israel] were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say

City of God, one could talk about the spiritual analogue between the heavenly city (or community) and the earthly one in grand, all-encompassing terms or in terms applicable specifically to an actual city or town.⁶ Knowing what side of this boundary one is on concerning the heavenly realm is extremely important: one's eternal salvation or damnation could depend upon whether one is a citizen of the heavenly city. Moreover, one of the functions of the Catholic Church was as a spiritual boundary keeper, or porter, to the gates of salvation; after all, it was the institutionalized Church that held St. Peter's keys and who had the power of excommunication, which is literally a closing off of access to a common area.⁷

In fact, at no time other than the Middle Ages was this concept of spiritual "border patrol" by the Church better understood, respected, and feared. This was so because the Church had assumed the role of being the laity's spiritual mediator and had regularized the process of one's approaching the Divine. For England and Western Europe during the mid- to high-Middle Ages, the notion of religious mediators standing between the laity and Heaven was a given. The sublime figures of the Blessed Virgin and her son Jesus Christ were, of course, the primordial mediators operating on behalf of the faithful as the faithful attempted their approaches to God the Father. But on a more mundane and visible level, this role of mediator was appropriated by the regularized Catholic institution. The monolith of the Church structured one's approach to the Divine, fashioning the approach more as a crystallized process through which one needed a guide than as a spontaneous act by which one touched God. This is evident in the

such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return." (All scripture passages are quoted from the New International Version.)

⁶ See Meyer 47-48, and Lilley's "Cities of God? Medieval Urban Forms and Their Christian Symbolism," *passim*.

⁷ From the etymology according to American Heritage (3rd ed.): "ME *excommunicaten* < Llat. *excommunicare*, *excommunicat-* : Lat. *ex-*, *ex-* + Lat. *communicare*, to share (< *communis*, common [. . .]."

importance the Church placed on the standard, repeatable nature levied upon the Mass; on occasional (seasonal) ceremonies like Rogation and Easter; on the prayers offered by the cloistered clergy for the laity (the *Opus Dei*); on the birthing and dying rituals; and eventually on particular, annual confession. And by definition the regular clergy were involved in a deeply structured, organized, bordered life.

What the existence of these services and rituals means, however, is that the regularizing and institutionalizing tendencies necessarily spread past the clergy and infiltrated the arena of interaction between the clergy and the laity: since the clergy were bound to form, the laity became so, also. By their own example in their way of life, the clergy trained the laity to depend upon codification to the point that the laity assumed that their words or activities had to go through a process of validation and translation before effective communication between earth and heaven can come about. For example, if a layperson was to have his or her inner turning against some favorite sin be recognized as a legitimate spiritual act, the contrition would have to be publicized to an official validator—the penitent would have to voice the inner contrition to a priest during an actual confession (at least this was so in the high Middle Ages). Another example would be Extreme Unction. For a medieval Catholic to die without this ritual meant that this person died with unforgiven sins. This is regardless of the actual inner state of repentance or even of one's confession. The act of dying had to be codified in this way (via the application of the ointment) before it could be an efficacious act. It had to have an outside form levied upon it before it could act as a sign of one's forgiven state. This waiting for outside forms is a living within institutionalized boundaries.

The fact that many monasteries⁸ from the beginning supported themselves by various types of rents, gifts, and tithes shows that undergirding this regularized role of mediation was a

⁸ A broader term, and perhaps a better one, would be 'clerical centers,' for what applies to the monastery here also applied to abbeys, cathedrals, cathedral schools—in short any institution founded as a center of Catholic worship and service.

material/spiritual economy. That is, aside from the produce created by, and the currency earned from, monastic property holdings, the clergy were expected to gain some material support from the Catholic community at large by offering a spiritual good commensurate to the material one. The exchange took place in many forms. Men wishing to enter certain Benedictine monasteries in France during the eleventh, twelfth, and early thirteenth centuries were often expected to present a sizeable gift of money or land upon their entrance into the monastery.⁹ The richer in the lay community vied with each other in buying funeral plots within the parish church (as opposed to simply within the boundaries of the cemetery), the idea being that giving gold for such a spot would guarantee a favorable, front-line meeting with Christ on the day of Resurrection. The numerous dues and gifts that testators insisted on giving to the church in order to secure for themselves numerous masses after their day of death also testifies to this impulse in the laity to trade the material goods for spiritual ones. And during the time of the laity's restricted access to the bible (either by conciliar decree like that of the Council of Toulouse in 1229 or by simply the barrier of the Latin text), priests could earn money by reciting the Gospels to the laity.¹⁰ One would suppose that these instances of exchange would either serve as precedents for similar cases in the future or would be based on precedents from cases in the past. Thus even here, in the material/spiritual trade that could be varied in accordance to the actual wealth and needs of the individual parties involved, a general rule could be expected to emerge. In the very least, the most basic rule would be that of commensurate return: the thing you get is something roughly equal in value to the thing you give.

⁹ See Lynch's *Simoniack Entry*, first two chapters.

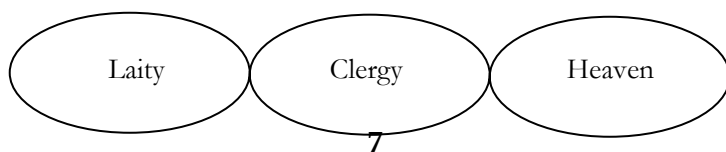
¹⁰ These examples are general ones, inserted here with the view of simply illustrating my point. See the first part of Eamon Duffy's *The Stripping of the Altars* and the first part of S. Greenblatt's *Hamlet in Purgatory*. See also R. C. Finucane's "Sacred Corpse, Profane Carrion: Social Ideals and Death Rituals in the Later Middle Ages," *passim*; Duby 173-196; Baskerville 19-25; and Lynch xv-60.

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This is a liminal economics, liminal because it accepted the in-between nature of the participants. For according to the Catholic notion of sanctification, both the clerical providers and the lay consumers were in the gradual process of leaving one station of existence (the terrestrial) and becoming fit for another station (the celestial). Although the physical lineaments of the earthly body might seem to have been a good candidate for a form that was truly stable, truly earth-bound (and thus a good candidate for a cog in this mixing of natures), the body failed to be recognized as non-liminal because of Paul's emphasis on the physical nature of the new spiritual body (per 1 Corinthians 15) and the Incarnation's validation of bodily flesh. Thus, since the physical body was not crystallized but instead was shifting on a spectrum ranging from materiality to spirituality (non-materiality), one could suppose that a physically solid substance like gold or land could also take on spiritual qualities and could properly be exchanged for clearly spiritual goods like prayers, good works, merits, and so forth.

What this institutionalized mediation and liminal economics together suggest to me is that the medieval mentality of the laity included a notion that there was a certain way to communicate with heaven while still on earth and a certain material cost connected to it. One went to the Church and through it, and one had to pay for the guided passage. The protocol emerging from this general process as it repeated itself can be imagined as a sort of basic 'Law' guiding the operation. Eventually this Law, among other things, ordered the hierarchy of the clerical structure, ordered the arrangement of the Mass, regulated the interpretation of the Catholic dicta, informed the interface of the laity and the clergy, created borders around the ideology that came to be known as orthodox, and set prices concerning the donations expected from pilgrims, from monastery novitiates, from the landed nobility, and from parishioners engaging in a holy rite of passage (marriages, Christenings, funerals).

One would be tempted to visually represent this relationship between the laity and the clergy as follows:

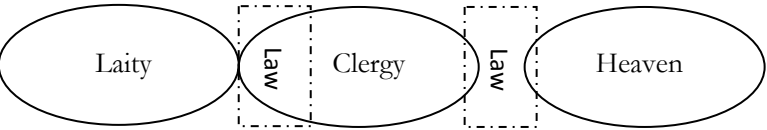


Here the clergy fits nicely between the laity and heaven, and the snug position suggests that the clergy had a distinct and discreet connection to both groups. However, because the clergy members themselves could not approach heaven outside of the regulations they had raised, they, too, had to follow a protocol in their approach to the Divine. This is seen in many places. One need think only of what was needed, in terms of liturgical order and presentation, for the successful administration of that service the individual churches were absolutely expected to provide on a regular basis—the mass.

With this in mind, one can see that it is better to suggest that the arrangement of the circles be as follows:



The clergy enters into the Law, having had some hand in its formulation, and the Law enters heaven, being (per the clergy) a divinely sanctioned, albeit symbolic, representation of the mandates of heaven. But because of the clergy's insistence in a protocol of sorts in its relations with the laity, there is also within the clergy a primary border jutting against the contact point with the laity such that when the laity approaches the clergy, the first thing that is effected in the laity is an awareness of this protocol. I suspect the version of the protocol positioned at this contact point is somewhat porous because the material needs of the clergy forced the clergy to improvise based on the exact particulars of what a specific laity group could materially offer. Taking all this into account, a more nearly complete representation of the dynamic can finally be depicted as:



Before moving on, I want to point out two things about this diagram. First, the circle of the laity is still physically touching the circle of the clergy because the physical members of the laity could still directly access the physical members of the clergy: face-to-face communication was possible. Although some of the more ambitions (or more confused) of the clergy might insist that this same face-to-face relationship was essentially at play in the clergy's connections to heaven, I strongly suspect that it was not the same literal way that the physical contact was in play between the laity and the clergy. For any contact with the Divine for the clergy within the Law took place via signs: the wafer, the Monstrance, relics, etc. Dreams and visions and such should not be considered part of the Church dynamic because these events could not be consistently repeated by the clergy. This lack of iteration renders the event untrustworthy in its ability to consistently take part in efficacious ecclesiastical ritual. If the Church's mediation took place primarily and almost exclusively through repeatable, codified ritual, then it must be granted that dreams and visions were not part of the mediatory process.

Second, it is also clear that although the clergy claimed for itself a connection to heaven *via* the Law, there is still a gap between the clergy and heaven *because of* the Law. This gap insisted that the freedom of the clergy in this approach was, in fact, only apparent. For Law mandates form: the clergy was not free to approach in any way, with any request. Law had to be followed, its limits obeyed. This is to say that the clergy realized that there was a certain way 'official' prayers from the Church to heaven were to be made, a certain way Mass was to be sung, and so forth. The totality of these established customs is Law. Consequently, in the schematic presented above, there is a gap between the circles of the clergy and heaven. It is a gap that is subsumed by the Law, but it is a gap nonetheless.

The boundaries of this institutionalized protocol—this ecclesiastical Law—necessarily set up an arena in which an ancillary system of mediation could be situated, ancillary because it operated alongside of the institutionalized system of mediation but not within it. If the Law bound one to ritual in one's approach to the Divine, these ancillary mediators eliminated the ritual and provided

a unique, spontaneous, need-specific path to the Divine. If the Law, because of its ubiquitous presence even between the clergy and the Divine, introduced a distance, a gap, between the traditional mediators and their celestial audience, the ancillary mediators broke down that distance, providing the Christian in need of mediation with a sense of an immediate spiritual audience: these special mediators made one feel as if one were in the presence of the Divine. And if the Law upheld the role of the bounded sign (the sign that constantly remained at a semiotic remove from its audience and thus maintained its own identity as a sign), then the ancillary mediator endeavored to empower the sign with a celestial potency, creating a sense that the signs used in this particular sort of mediation were living signs, powerful words, miraculous figures—an actual, pulsating interface with celestial entities.

The words *miracle* and *miraculous* describe well the essential quality I want to assign to this ancillary mediation. The kernel quality of every miracle is its ability to break down borders, to dissolve limitations that separate—and thus distinguish—one subject group from another. A miracle will mix the ontological classes of these groups or will eliminate the ontological barriers that impede an entity's presence from being in a certain space. This mixing or elimination of boundaries creates a field wherein a subject feels he or she is simultaneously part of the two hitherto incompatible realms and can profit from such a position. The miracles of the New Testament all involved a unique (unique to every case) mixing of the spiritual and the temporal, of the time-bound and the eternity-bound. The first miracle of Christ broke the physical laws of water and wine composition; the last miracle (his ascension) broke the boundary between the terrestrial and the celestial. The most important miracle of Christ, if one were to arrange them in terms of their efficacy in bringing human subject directly to heaven, is, of course, the resurrection, where Christ broke the boundary separating death from life, or the boundary between the temporal and the eternal. In fact, in the resurrection Christ created a space where life and death mix to, in a sense, erase the negative to support the positive: one cannot know that one's state of eternal life is miraculous if the shadow of the former Law (the prior norm) were to be erased completely. Nevertheless, in this

most important of miracles, eternal life—bound(ary)less life—is given ontological priority. Death remains only as a semiotic echo of what once was but is now no more.

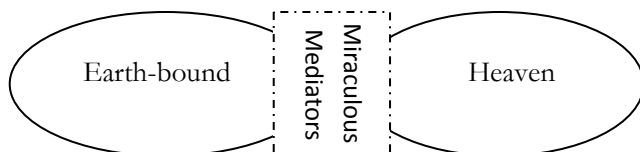
I will assign the term *miraculous mediator(s)* to the group of mediators that consistently could break down the barriers between the physically-bound subject and a non-physical reality and yet could maintain the validity of the earthly knowledge or register as it stood in opposition to the heavenly one. This is to say, the miraculous mediators did not erase earthly knowledge and experience; they informed and amplified it with a power that was far beyond the means of institutionalized religious mechanisms. In this breaking down, I include the process of receiving secret revelations of knowledge that could be used to inform another person of events in his or her present behavior or imminent future. Thus, Julian of Norwich would not be included in this category, as her revelations in 1173 lasted only about a day and a half and set the stage for a magisterial function, not a function of mediating the marvelous. Neither would Margery Kempe be included, whose visions, themselves prescribed by Augustinian texts of contemplation for the laity, were much more geared toward inner meditation and sanctification, not a consistently powerful mediation between the laity and heaven. Rather, the figures that fit this category of the miraculous mediator, to name a few, are Brigitta of Sweden, some of whose repeated visions often benefited certain political rulers of her day; Yvette of Huy, whose clairvoyance often counseled those around her of their sins before they made mention of them to anyone; Christian of St Trond (or Christina Mirabilis), who, among other things, was able to diminish by half the pains of purgatory for a certain count of Hasbania; and Christina of Markyate, whose virtues will be discussed below at length.

Under this ancillary model of mediation, the distinctions between the laity and the clergy break down, allowing both groups to form a homogenized audience for the mediators because both the laity and the clergy are in the same position concerning the power these miraculous mediators claimed. The officers of the Church were raised to their position because of learning and mastery of ritual, not because of certain powers to ontologically erase boundaries. The official clergy could in no way create a truly

liminal space that opened one to a possible direct experience with God. They could only mediate signs. Thus, they, too, occasionally had need of the miraculous mediator or, if they did not have a conscious need, undeniably could profit from such mediators.

This is not to say that these people unified by their physically bound bodies somehow were void of all spiritual material; one assumes that they would in no way doubt the existence of their own souls. Rather, this is to say that this class of subjects could not on their own power break through the divide between the terrestrial mode of existence and the ontologically spiritual mode without first going through the passage of a genuine death. For them, death was indeed a door used to pass from the earthly to the heavenly, but it was a passage that was final and irreversible: in this passage one ultimately and permanently changed one's material status and one's obligation to a ecclesiastical Law. With the miraculous mediator, however, there was a way for a person under the Law to experience a temporary release from the Law. For a miraculous mediator was someone who could create a space within which the Law-bound could experience the freedom and immediacy of a liminal space that brought together heaven and earth. In themselves, these mediators could erase the boundaries between a terrestrial mode of existence and a celestial one; they could become portals or doors allowing at least a temporary passage from one realm to the other. Or, if some did not specifically allow this passage, they at least presented a powerful, living representation of the celestial realm to the terrestrial one in such a way that the representation appropriated a power unto itself and brought about the birthing of conviction, certainty, peace, etc., within the psyche of its seeking audience.

These liminal figures were mediators by definition, but because of their ability to appropriate this celestial power, their Law-bound audience felt them to be more-or-less transparent. This is to say that in this special, supra-Law mediation, the act of mediation disappeared and a sense of immediate contact with the Divine emerged. One can see that such power in mediation would place these figures in a class of their own, a group which could be profitably used by both the most simple layperson and the most advanced clergyman. This being the case, the following schematic may best represent the ancillary model of mediation.



To be sure, the Church tried to regulate these miraculous mediators. More or less, this was always a cumbersome attempt. Anchoresses or recluses that were granted housing, board, and a quasi-official recognition in addition to the de facto popular recognition were partnered with spiritual overseers who continuously sought to align them to the Church. Besides this, the vast scriptings of miraculous lives into conventional hagiographies can be seen not only as appropriations of cultural memory but also as appropriations of erstwhile independent power. Before his or her death, the saint's power belonged to no one but the saint; after the death, after the memorializing (per the sacred biography), and after the canonizing, the power belonged to the Church, which materially profited from this power when the relics were put to use in service of the laity. For example, a very common practice was to house these relics in accessible shrines so that a pilgrimage market could be set up. Finally, those miraculous mediators whose activities were too public or radical to ignore or tolerate could always be ostracized, at least symbolically, by means of the protocol of the *discretion spirituum*, or the official checklist of questions, formed by leading theologians like John Gerson, that attempted to determine the provenance of the revelations: if it could be shown that one's vision or revelation was given by a demon or by the Devil, the visionary would be sufficiently discredited and would thus cease to be a threat to the Church.

In spite of these attempts, what finally remained during the mid- to late-medieval period in the West was a potentially uneasy yoking: the mediatory institute of the Church warily admitted the

validity of the ancillary dynamic of the miraculous mediators.¹¹ Granted, some overly individual miraculous mediators were ostracized by the Church, but in the main the parallel system in itself was recognized. Yet even when the Church officially incorporated some of these living mediators into its folds, it could not regulate the interactions between these persons and the laity as much as it might have wanted to in the cases where the ancillary mediators lived an uncloistered life. In turn, this fact meant that the Church would have had to put up with the laity's channeling some sort of payment to this ancillary system of mediation and away from the institutionalized one. If these miraculous mediators did not possess the power they had, the Church would claim their mediatory function and thus direct these deviant fees back into its coffers, but since the power in these mystics and visionaries could not be denied, and since access to them by the laity could not be legitimately and efficiently denied unless the mystics and visionaries on their own accord placed themselves under completely under the Church by means of a cloistered life, the Church could not deny the laity the right to pay for their own purchases in their own way.

I am assuming that the laity paid the ancillary mediators. There is very little hard proof of this.¹² It makes sense to think that a laity accustomed to giving tithes to the regulated Church and bringing

¹¹ For more on this uneasiness, see Steven E. Ozment's "Introduction" in his *Mysticism and Dissent: Religious Ideology and Social Protest in the Sixteenth Century*.

¹² Two recent works that take up this issue in one form or the other are Fiona J. Griffiths's "The Cross and the *Cura Monialium*" and John W. Coakley's *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators*. Neither looks at the dynamic as one structured on an economic sense, however. In her article, Griffiths argues that the medieval monastic aversion to women as creatures of sin was countered by a view that held them to be an instantiation of the friction needed to ensure the salvation of the monks who took care of the disenfranchised female. Coakley examines nine pairs of holy women/male clerics, producing a descriptive analysis on how the partnerships were often used by the men to validate their own institutional standing and authority. The lineaments of a rudimentary ancillary mediation are present in these works but their emphases are not the same as mine is.

gifts in kind to the dead saints in the shrines (there is ample proof of both activities) would consider it almost unnatural to not pay for the spiritual benefits they reaped from these living miraculous figures. These ancillary mediators could certainly use payment, for although they were often involved with working relationships with the Church, the Church did not view them as deserving a regular dole. What was given to them by the Church was often in the form of a gift or a one-time transfer of a parcel of land, small enough that its loss to the Church would not substantially hinder the amount of produce the Church reaped from its lands in toto.

I am also assuming that this payment was never stable. That is, it could not be viewed by the ancillary mediator as a steady source of income, for the services he or she provided were contingent upon the specific needs of individual people. It is possible that some of these miraculous mediators found patrons who continually gave them what they needed in return for spiritual guidance or for direction gained from the mediators' clairvoyance. If this were the case, however, the income would last only as long as their patrons lasted, and after a patron died, who would then provide this income?

Christina of Markyate as a Human Spiritual Resource

As stated in my introduction, I believe the *Life of Christina* provides evidence for the existence of this material/spiritual economy: the abbot Geoffrey gives Christina material wealth in order to receive spiritual benefits. Furthermore, because of the timing of the work, a case can be made that the book was written in order to convince somebody to become a new patron for Christina. If this is a case, then the vita is indeed a piece of support, albeit a singular one, for the existence during the mid-medieval ages in England of a sustained liminal economy benefitting the ancillary mediator.

The question first to be addressed is whether or not Christina of Markyate fits this construct of a miraculous ancillary mediator engaged in a spiritual economy, securing and valorizing spiritual boundaries for protection and salvation around earthly inhabitants in exchange for material support. Her biography suggests that she does by its emphasis on Christina's powerful interactions with earthly/spiritual borders and then by its close detailing of the

development of a spiritual relationship between Christina and abbot Geoffrey, who provided her material support.

Christina's affinity to boundaries is stressed. *The Life* represents Christina as having a preternatural ability to cross physical and spiritual boundaries and to either control or be controlled by a demarcated space. The text opens with an account that foreshadows this ability. Her mother, while pregnant with Christina, receives the sign of an actual dove's lighting upon her during a Saturday, a day devoted to the Virgin Mary (*The Life* 35). For

seven days it nestles alternately in the mother's arms, and bosom. The dove is a common symbol for the Holy Spirit, but in light of the fact that the infant Christina would soon be held in her mother's arms, lap, and bosom, along with the fact that she would become a special devotee to the Virgin Mary, the dove also prefigures Christina. The point I want to stress for my argument is that to get to Christina's mother, this dove starts from a sacred space (the monastery) and flies into a domestic space (the house) through a portal of some sort (35).

The foreshadowing turns into reality soon enough. Just as the dove is able to pass easily from one clear holy space into one in which such holiness was muted (Christina's house was not an evil space as yet, as it will become later in *The Life*, but its holiness at any point in time is not to be compared to that of the monastery's), just so the toddler Christina is depicted as having an early freedom of this sort. For example, she had no trouble penetrating into a sacred space¹³ in order to converse with Christ: she "used to talk to

¹³ Perhaps here I should say she had no trouble *creating* a sacred space, for there is nothing in the text that suggests movement from one space into another, and therefore my *penetrating* must be taken figuratively. But regardless of how she did it, what results is a space in which she could engage her nascent intercessory powers, for she apparently managed to turn the space around her into a sort of holy meeting ground allowing her to converse face-to-face with divinity. This act itself is a sign of a special privilege being bestowed upon Christina, one linking her to Patriarchs of the faith (cf. Exodus 33:11, "The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend" and Deuteronomy 34:10, "Since

Him [Christ] on her bed at night just as if she were speaking to a man she could see" (37).

Christina quickly¹⁴ begins to use or control boundaries either under her own initiative or under the coercion of others in order to protect her developing identity as a holy person. While she is still a child, Christina and her family visit the St. Albans Monastery on her birthday, and there she dedicates herself to a holy life, scratching "a sign of the cross with one of her fingernails on the door as a token that she had placed her affection there" (39). The doorway is a border, a portal, and Christina is identifying with it with this semi-autographic nature: the cross by definition is an X, which itself is a sign a small child might make by way of signature.

Later, in her adolescence, to escape the advances of a lustful bishop she slips out of his arms and locks a door between herself and the would-be seducer (43). Here she uses boundaries not for identity's sake but for protection, effectively locking herself out of an evil space. This pattern of her seeking protection through boundaries continues throughout the first half of the narrative. For example, to strengthen herself against temptations as she serves wine to merchants, she glances through the open doors of the hall in order to see the monastery dedicated to the Virgin Mary (49). To evade Burthred, who is trying to deflower her, she engages two boundaries, one open and one closed: "as he came in one door, she fled through another. In front of her was a kind of fence which, because of its height and the sharp spikes on top, was calculated to prevent anyone from climbing over it [. . .]. With amazing ease she jumped over the fence and, looking back from her place of safety, saw her pursuer on the other side, standing there unable to follow" (53). And to escape once and for all from her father's house, which can be seen as a moribund space, she flees into Alfwen's cell, a holy

then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face").

¹⁴ 'Quickly' in terms of textual representation in *The Life*. The book leaves it as an unstated, obvious fact that years are passing.

space, relinquishing to her sister Matilda¹⁵ the keys to her father's chest of material wealth (93). Apparently Christina's parents entrusted Christina with the material economy of the household, a trust that she was ready to give up in order to assume her spiritual duties.

In her maturity as a holy woman, Christina negotiates and secures spiritual borders and spaces for the Abbot Geoffrey's benefit. These actions of hers towards Geoffrey's benefit will necessarily be a part of discussion later in this essay; here I wish only to highlight how she manipulated borders to do it. In a vision, she travels over a wall and into a chamber in order to learn of his sick condition; knowing this, she prays for him and he is healed (141-142). She is able to penetrate the borders of his innermost thoughts in order to examine how "he bore himself towards God" (153) so that she might the better admonish him in his spiritual walk. In a scene where this ability of Christina's is particularly highlighted, she has a vision of herself in a room with two divine figures and a dove. Geoffrey is outside the chamber "trying without success to gain entrance to her" (157). The dove, representing the Holy Spirit, circles the chamber but does not leave it to go outside to Geoffrey. "When she saw this, God's servant took courage and would not stop [. . .] until she saw the man [. . .] either possessing the dove or being possessed by the dove" (157).

In addition to these instances, to protect him when he has to travel for the king, she prays for Geoffrey's safety at least three times. Each time she receives a vision showing Geoffrey being kept safe by protective boundaries. In one vision, she sees Geoffrey cemented into the very mortar and bricks of a wall (161). In another, she sees that Geoffrey is enclosed by a transparent fence whose sole gate is God (165), and in the third vision she sees herself encircling Geoffrey within the boundary of her own arms, a

¹⁵ Matilda is an interesting figure. Some of Christina's siblings follow her lead into a holy life, but Matilda is consistently representing as staying in the world (cf. the penultimate paragraph of Talbot's translation). Thus, she figures as a good recipient for the keys of earthly treasure.

boundary that, with the divine aid of Christ's hands resting lightly upon her own clasped hands, is unbreakable (169).

Christina's relationship with borders now having been established, it is time to examine Christina's relationship with Geoffrey so that Christina's role in a liminal economy might become clear. Christina figures as Geoffrey's spiritual resource, a resource that can gain access to heavenly realms in order to secure protection and spiritual blessing for Geoffrey in exchange for Geoffrey's material support. As soon as Geoffrey is introduced in *The Life*, he is represented as having earthly power and wealth (135). These he directs to the monastery, not knowing Christina. In their first encounter, when Christina rebukes him for his stubbornness, Geoffrey rejects her advice. But when he is punished by demons for this rejection, he changes his mind about Christina (135-137). To her he promises "to avoid everything unlawful, to fulfill her commands, and to help her convent in the future: all he asked was her intervention with God" (139).

Directly after this scene, the biographer directly praises God for the establishment of this sacred give-and-take: "Hence Thy virgin was relieved of material poverty, whilst Thy abbot was freed from the burden of spiritual troubles" (139). In the next paragraph, the biographer again makes mention of this exchange of benefits, saying, "Their affection was mutual, but different according to their standards of holiness. He supported her in worldly matters; she commended him to God more earnestly in her prayers" (139-141). This exchange deepens over time as Geoffrey becomes more convinced of Christina's spiritual worth: "Henceforth the man devoted to good works visited the place even more: he enjoyed the virgin's company, provided for the house, and became the supervisor of its material affairs. Whilst he centered his attention on providing the virgin with material assistance, she strove to enrich the man in virtue" (155).

As the above passage claims, Geoffrey benefits not only in promises of protection and enclosure in a secure place but also in personal spiritual growth. In contrast to his initial habit of stubborn assertion of his own will over others, he learns that in order to receive true spiritual benefit he must treat Christina

properly; he must view her as a flowering herb that must be squeezed gently for its juice (153-154).¹⁶ Besides this, however, the book makes numerous mention to Geoffrey's developing holiness in general. From the start of their relationship, when Geoffrey felt himself slack in spiritual fervor, he would spend time with Christina to be rekindled. Christina, "seeing that the abbot was ready to undertake greater tasks and that through the intervention of so lowly a person as herself he had overcome evil and was now bent on doing good, cherished him with great affection and loved him with a wonderful but pure love" (139). Later, the text points out that as she "became aware that he was making every effort to become more spiritual, she was so zealous on his account that she prayed for him tearfully almost all the time and in God's presence considered him more than herself" (143-145). Finally, Geoffrey's spiritual maturation is complete. This near perfect state of holiness is represented as being caused by Geoffrey's generosity, and he himself is represented as the model donor:

From that time forth the abbot withdrew all his hope from the world and fixed it on Christ; he laboured wholeheartedly on what was useful, manfully renouncing the things of the earth and longing for those of heaven. Nevertheless one consolation gladdened him that, unknown to the world, he could bestow his earthly riches on the poor of Christ. Indeed, far from seeking unjust gain, he lavished his just possessions on worthy aims. What he had expended formerly on worldly ostentation,

¹⁶ What is surprising about this particular passage in *The Life* is that Christina corroborates this interpretation of herself as someone who exists in order to undergo a sort of holy, quiet exploitation. Geoffrey has been discussing this interpretation with his friend en route to Christina's priory, and when he arrives Christina, having plucked a flower beforehand, "went towards the abbot as he approached and as if about to greet him said: 'This is the flower, is it not, which you saw in your vision during the night?' and she showed him the plant" (153). Of course, she herself is directly in front of Geoffrey, so the demonstrative *this* could well be applied directly to Christina.

now he sought to bestow as unostentatiously as possible
on hermits, recluses, and others who were in need, thus
deserving the apostle's
commendation 'as having nothing and possessing all
things'. All this he attributed to the grace of God and the
watchful care of the maiden.
(151)¹⁷

A Message to the Monastery?

The writer of *The Life* was a monk at St. Albans¹⁸ and the manuscript is in Latin. These two facts strongly suggest that the audience for the work was the monastery itself. Moreover, besides her relationship with Geoffrey, who is both a noble and a cleric (135), Christina is involved in two other extended relationships with people from both the clergy and nobility: her relationship with the duo of Burthred and the bishop Ranulf (aka Ralph) Flambard, and her relationship with the cleric with whom she resides for a while after the death of Roger. This cleric is a man who was "at once a religious and a man of position in the world" (115). Why is this important? While being obviously clerical, the St. Albans monastery was involved, as were most monasteries, with the nobility because it was the nobility who gave much material wealth to the Church and who often, by one way or the other, supplied the monastery with more than a few monks.¹⁹ Therefore, if there

¹⁷ Notice the appeal to Geoffrey's rejecting of ostentation. If there is a message here for the monks of St. Albans, which is what I will argue in the conclusion, it is fitting, for some of them seemed to have been overly attached to the gold and silver dedicated to the shrine of St. Alban. When Geoffrey sold some of the treasure to feed the poor, it was begrudged. In a tone of 'he'll-get-his,' the writer of the *Gesta Abbatum Monasterii Sancti Albani* says, "If this was done rightly or wrongly, He knows who forgets nothing" (qtd. in Koopmans 684).

¹⁸ He discloses this fact early in his work: "Autti and Beatrix brought their dear daughter Christina with them to *our* monastery of the blessed martyr St. Alban" (39, italics mine).

¹⁹ Perhaps a first born would be dedicated to God and placed in the monastery in order to pray for the upkeep of the family; perhaps a younger son who would receive no land or wealth to speak of upon

is a connection to be drawn between the monastery and these men involved with Christina, it is to be founded along the lines of their commitment to participating in, as Talbot puts it, "a twofold status" (115).

Granting this interpretation that the men of twofold status can represent the monastery, one is able to draw a conclusion about the monastery as a whole from the conclusions concerning the relationship Christina has with these men. The bishop Ralph wants Christina to satisfy his lust (41-43) and when he cannot, he attempts to spoil Christina's virginity via Burthred (45). Christina responds to this by fleeing from them and enclosing herself in boundaries that they cannot penetrate, namely Alfwen's and Roger's cells. The cleric Christina stays with after Roger's death also plans to use Christina to satisfy his selfish desires, and after successfully rebuffing his advances, Christina estranges herself from his house (115-119). These lustful approaches are ultimately grounded in greed, in a selfish desire to consume the other, but they inevitably lead to estrangement. No one in this early part of this narrative receives any spiritual benefit from Christina.²⁰

In contrast to these men, who have at best only fractured relationships with Christina, Geoffrey's relationship, as delineated above, flourishes. Christina's biographer eventually paints an extremely favorable picture of Geoffrey as one who learns to use Christina for spiritual, not earthly or selfish, profit. Furthermore, Geoffrey is depicted not only as being very generous to Christina but also as being properly and fully reciprocated for his investment in this spiritual resource, for it is only between Geoffrey and

inheritance joined the monastery as a way to escape the situation; perhaps a daughter who remained unmarried would join in order to escape the stigma.

²⁰ One more duo can be taken into account: Christina's father Autti and Robert Bloet. Autti wants Christina to get married in order that she might enrich him with grandchildren (67-69), and by bribing the bishop Bloet, Autti is able to get Bloet to reverse his initial, favorable judgment over Christina's marriage (favorable to Christina in that it had annulled the marriage). Bloet, in fact, is explicitly linked to greed (67) and is described as "Christina's most persistent persecutor" (119).

Christina that a genuine love based on spiritual values—a love placed in a spiritual space within spiritual boundaries, if you will—develops.²¹ It is not inconsequential that this fruitful relationship springs up only when the opposing relationships founded on selfishness and greed are removed.²²

What specifically might this message to the monastery be? In short, support Christina materially and thereby profit spiritually by her intercession between the earthly monastic community and the spiritual realm. Why did the monastery need to hear this message? Although Geoffrey definitely had a hand in legitimately situating Christina at her priory at Markyate, her church's consecration in 1145 was at the hands of Alexander, bishop of Lincoln, who had also been the one who had received Christian's profession of monasticism in 1131. This means that Christina's priory was not officially attached to St Albans. Furthermore, Christina's priory apparently was constantly in need of material support.²³ Geoffrey knew this. As shown in *The Life* and reiterated in the *Gesta Abbatum Monasterii Sancti Albani*, the record of the deeds of the abbots of St

²¹ I quote an illuminating passage from Meyer: "Augustine presents his moral theology as an inseparable feature of his teachings on the Church. As a *corpus permixtum*, the Church exists in the same precarious present as the human soul: it is a mixture of otherworldly yearning (*caritas*) and carnal misdirection (*cupiditas*). He identifies these competing directions as the opposing activities of two societies or cities, or of two Churches within one Church. The activity itself—as Augustine defines all activity, human and divine—is love: "Two cities [. . .] have been created by two loves: that is, the earthly by love of self extending even to contempt of God, and the heavenly by love of God extending even to contempt of self" (62).

²² Christina escapes from her parents c. 1115-1116; Burthred officially releases her from the marriage c. 1118-1122, and Robert Bloet dies in 1123. Christina meets Geoffrey c. 1124. Her last persecutor, the bishop Ralph Flamstead, who paired with Burthred, dies in 1128 and in 1131 Christina officially makes Markyate her home, a move that brings her fully into the open as a holy figure accessible by both the laity and the clergy. For these dates and more, see Talbot 14-15.

²³ Koopmans 664, 681, 685; "Houses of Benedictine Nuns: The Priory of Markyate," pars. 2-4.

Albans, Geoffrey was tremendously generous towards Christina and was her house's main source of support, using even the monastery's tithe in order to maintain the priory at Markyate.²⁴ This did not bode well with many at St. Albans, for as noted above Markyate lay outside the ecclesiastical responsibility of St. Albans. Indeed, Geoffrey's generous action was listed as negligence in the record of his tenure as abbot.²⁵ After Geoffrey's death, St. Albans became hostile toward Christina, and one can assume that the funding initiated by Geoffrey was terminated.²⁶ Was this anticipated? Given the monks' public grumbling against Geoffrey's habits, probably. Was an attempt made to convince these monks otherwise? I say yes. This attempt was *The Life*.

It is possible that the attempt was made by Geoffrey himself. *The Life* may have been written under the supervision of Geoffrey: Rachael Koopmans, whose essay "The Conclusion of Christina of Markyate's *Vita*" I have used extensively in the preceding paragraphs, suggests that the time of composition coincided with Geoffrey's tenure and shortly after Geoffrey died, the writing stopped.²⁷ (Koopmans 686). If somehow Geoffrey did have a

²⁴ Koopmans 684.

²⁵ "Moreover, using the property of this [St. Albans] church, [abbot Geoffrey] twice constructed the church of the Holy Trinity of the Woods [i.e., Christina's priory] and the rest of its buildings from their foundations; and to the same church he impetuously conceded, without the convent's consent [. . .] the whole of our toll from the dominion of Cayso and two parts of the tenth of the wheat of the whole region of Watford" (*Gesta abbatum* qtd. in Koopmans 684).

²⁶ Koopmans 694-696. The *Gesta abbatum* gives ample evidence of the economic activity of the succeeding two abbots. Abbot Radulf (1146-1151) focused on building up the St Albans abbey itself and of paying its debts. He seemed almost desperate for money (see *Gesta abbatum* 107-109). Succeeding Radulf, Abbot Robert (1151-1168), who was abbot when Christina died, was much more liberal but seemed to confine his gifts to other clergy whom he needed to bribe or to Pope Adrian IV, whose favor toward Robert was tenuous (Robert had rejected this pope when he (Adrian) was a mere clerk seeking entrance into St. Albans!) (see *Gesta abbatum* 109-182).

²⁷ Koopmans 686.

hand in the composition of *The Life*, the emphasis on the fruitfulness of a properly conducted economy between himself and Christina makes sense: if it worked for Geoffrey, by extension it would also work for the monastery, provided the monastery continued the support.

Furthermore, Christina's famous psalter, known as the Psalter of St. Albans, was given to her by Geoffrey,²⁸ and some claim that he actually helped copy and collate it.²⁹ In this psalter, the capital for Psalm 105 shows a woman in front of monks who have taken shelter behind her.

Christ is in front of her. She is in the space of the monks, included with them in the green half of the background. The whole background is divided into a green half and a blue one spangled with stars. She is with the monks, but the woman's fingers stretch to



Christ and crosses into the blue field of the right sector of the capital, the side that portrays Christ in his heavenly real. This capital was not originally in the psalter; it was added to it on a later date, perhaps when it was decided by Geoffrey that Christina would use the psalter.³⁰ It has been convincingly argued that the

²⁸ Haney 345.

²⁹ Powell 302.

³⁰ The capital is on p. 95 in Geddes's *The St Albans Psalter* (see note below). See also the online photos at the University of Aberdeen's The St Albans Psalter Project, www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/. The link for the capital is www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/english/commentary/page285.shtml.

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woman in the capital is Christina and that the monk immediately behind her, with his hand on her shoulder, is indeed Geoffrey.³¹

The interesting thing is that the emphasis of Psalm 105 is on punishment inflicted on those who refused kind treatment to Israel, God's chosen people who were "few in number," wanderers and "strangers," living as "an alien in the land" (Psalm 105:12-13, 23). This description of Israel fits the miraculous mediators of mid-to late-medieval England, who often literally wandered through their districts until housing was provided by an unofficial patron. The psalm's promise was that God would be faithful to his own, supporting them and giving them "silver and gold" (Psalm 105:37). The question posed by this is, 'Would others be as faithful in support?' The answer given in *The Life* is that they certainly should be.

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³¹ Geddes 122-124.

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