

H. M. CHADWICK MEMORIAL LECTURES 19

KATHERINE O'BRIEN O'KEEFFE

Stealing Obedience:  
Narratives of Agency in Later Anglo-Saxon  
England



DEPARTMENT OF ANGLO-SAXON, NORSE AND CELTIC

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Hector Munro Chadwick (1870–1947) was Elrington and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon in the University of Cambridge from 1912 to 1941. Through the immense range of his scholarly publications, and through the vigorous enthusiasm which he brought to all aspects of Anglo-Saxon studies — philological and literary, historical and archaeological — he helped to define the field and to give it the interdisciplinary orientation which characterizes it still. The Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic, which owes its existence and its own interdisciplinary outlook to H. M. Chadwick, has wished to commemorate his enduring contribution to Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic studies by establishing an annual series of lectures in his name.

Stealing Obedience: Narratives of Agency in Later Anglo-Saxon England

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# Stealing Obedience: Narratives of Agency in Later Anglo-Saxon England

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'hanc oboedientiam mihi furatus es'  
(Wulfstan, *Vita Sancti Æthelwoldi*, cap. 14)

My title and its epigraph draw on a well-known episode in Wulfstan of Winchester's *uita* of St Æthelwold. In it, Æthelwold is remembered as testing the obedience of one Ælfstan, a brother of Abingdon. As Wulfstan of Winchester, and later Ælfric, structure the story, Æthelwold reveals sanctity in his double valence as lion and lamb by enforcing a monastic discipline defined by obedience at once humble and immediate. While this episode of the *uita* treats obedience as an untroubled category of monastic behaviour, that is, as the given by which Æthelwold's character as abbot is illustrated, in so doing the narrative produces some other, unsettling effects. Though the *uita* celebrates Æthelwold, which inmate of Abingdon is the hero of this account — the abbot charged with ensuring the obedience of his subject, or the subject who proves himself a man of great obedience? Against the backdrop of the renewal of Benedictine monastic life in England, this episode in the life of one of its great reformers asks attention to that virtue — obedience — through which Benedictine monasticism was identified and structured. With its fraught accusation of theft, the episode raises questions about the dimensions of agency — or its very possibility — in the exercise of monastic obedience. What follows attends to the discourse of monastic obedience driving three different narratives: the first of an abbot and a professed monk, the second of an oblate, and the third of a man contemplating conversion to monastic life. What I should like to argue is that attention to these narratives of obedience in both the polish of their surfaces and the fractures those surfaces conceal will show an intimate interconnection between monastic identity and a construction of agency markedly different from our own.

The reformed Benedictine monastic community, structured as *schola* as well as *familia* by the Rule governing it, remade the identity of all who lived within its walls. As a *familia* distinct from blood kin, such a community

refigured its members as spiritual fathers and brothers or mothers and sisters, and it set them apart as both servants and soldiers of Christ. As *schola* it aspired to a particular textual identity, played out ritually and somatically in relation to a written Rule and scripted liturgical performance. If obedience to the will of God is a general marker of Christian identity, the members of a Benedictine community pursued an ideal and a special case of such obedience. The Benedictine Rule embraced Christ's words of commission to the seventy-two disciples in Luke 10:16: 'Qui uos audit, me audit ...' ('He that heareth you, heareth me'), using it to model the relation of disciple to master on the gospel's relation of disciple to God.<sup>1</sup> Wholehearted obedience to a monastic superior was precisely obedience given to God.<sup>2</sup> And such obedience, understood fundamentally as a heroic denial of the will (the Rule calls it 'walking in the judgment and command of another'), was also understood as the ground of their agency.<sup>3</sup> For one following the Rule, the narrowed dimensions of such agency, exercised in doing the will of another, seem to lie in an iteration of the original commitment to obey. Each instance of obedience was, if you will, a willing to deny one's own will. Thus the nature of monastic agency and its intimate connection with the identity that structured it for the monks and nuns of late Anglo-Saxon England can only be understood in terms of the obedience required of them by the Rule that they lived.

Agency, as a historically marked condition, must be understood in contemporary cultural terms. 'Obedient agency' is thus the term I offer for the specific conditions of monastic agency in late Anglo-Saxon England. This term points to contradictions in the contemporary dialectic of predestination and free will, the dynamic relation (within obedience) of abbot and monk or abbess and nun; the acquisition of a specifically textual identity (driven by the Rule whose foundational virtue is obedience), and the fractures in the agency that was both demanded and impeded by the very identity in which it was installed and structured. Pursuing the forms and demands of agency in late Anglo-Saxon England requires attention to a master narrative of obedience that understands (and requires) every act to result from the will of a free agent. Within the constraints of monastic identity and the daily acts of obedience that structured and confirmed it, can we locate a space of agency in any way

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<sup>1</sup> *Benedicti Regula*, ed. Rudolph Hanslik, 2nd ed., CSEL 75 (Vienna, 1960), cap. 5.6 (p. 35) and cap. 5.15 (p. 37) (hereafter *RB*).

<sup>2</sup> *RB*, cap. 5.15 (p. 37).

<sup>3</sup> 'ambulantes alieno iudicio et imperio', *RB* V.12, p. 36.

recognizable to us beyond a simple volition to deny one's own will? I suggest that Æthelwold's charge of theft shows us where to look for the possibility of such agency.

In his *uita* of St Æthelwold, Wulfstan of Winchester is at pains to demonstrate how Æthelwold's famous severity to malefactors was balanced by his gentle treatment of the humble and obedient ('humilibus uero et oboedientibus'), that is, those practicing the cardinal virtues of Benedictine monasticism.<sup>4</sup> Yet for all Wulfstan's efforts to show that Æthelwold's exactions were not from cruelty but love, what stands out in his account is the abbot's 'zelus rectitudinis' (zeal for right), which pressed him to impose the yoke of discipline on the monks in his charge. However benign the abbot may have been to the humble and the obedient, the narrative of Æthelwold's disciplining of a monk he believed to have transgressed offers a striking account of the ways monastic obedience ordered relations between an abbot and his subject and mediated the exercise of will.<sup>5</sup> The monk in question, one Ælfstan, a member of the monastic *familia* of Abingdon, had been ordered by Æthelwold to cook for the monastery's craftsmen ('praeuidere cibaria artificum monasterii'), and the monk carried out this order sedulously, so much so that the abbot thought he had the help of a second man.<sup>6</sup> Ælfstan's industry elicits a startling reply:

Accidit namque quadam die, dum abbas more solito peragraret monasterium, ut aspiceret illum fratrem stantem iuxta feruens caldarium, in quo uictualia praeparabat artificibus, et intrans uidit omnia uasa mundissima ac pauimentum scopatum; dixitque ad eum hilari uultu: 'O mi frater Ælfstane, hanc oboedientiam mihi furatus es, quam me ignorante exerces. Sed si talis miles Christi es qualem te ostendis, mitte manum tuam in bullientem aquam et unum frustum de imis mihi impiger adtrahe.'<sup>7</sup>

'It happened on a certain day when the abbot was walking through the monastery, as was his custom, that he saw that brother standing near a boiling cauldron, in which he was

<sup>4</sup> *Wulfstan of Winchester, The Life of St Æthelwold*, ed. Michael Lapidge and Michael Winterbottom (Oxford, 1991), cap. 28, p. 44. This is Wulfstan ('Cantor'), precentor at the Old Minster, Winchester. For what is known of the life of Wulfstan see Michael Lapidge, *The Cult of St Swithun*, Winchester Studies 4.ii (Oxford, 2003), pp. 337–41.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Thacker, 'Æthelwold and Abingdon', in *Bishop Æthelwold: His Career and Influence*, ed. Barbara Yorke (Woodbridge, 1988), pp. 43–64 at p. 56 observes 'the story emphasizes rigour and discipline and is very unlike the stories told of, say, Cuthbert'. The account is found in *Life of St Æthelwold*, ed. Lapidge and Winterbottom, cap. 14, pp. 26–8. The account in Ælfric's *uita* of Æthelwold, cap. 10 (their Appendix A, p. 74), is almost identical.

<sup>6</sup> *Life of St Æthelwold*, ed. Lapidge and Winterbottom, p. 26. This Ælfstan later became abbot of the Old Minster (after 964) and then bishop of Ramsbury. See Lapidge, *The Cult of St Swithun*, pp. 284–5, n. 158.

<sup>7</sup> *Life of St Æthelwold*, ed. Lapidge and Winterbottom, pp. 26–8.

preparing food for the craftsmen, and entering he saw all the kitchen implements perfectly clean and the floor swept; and he said to him with a cheerful face: My brother Ælfstan, you have stolen this obedience from me, in which you employ yourself without my knowledge. But if you are such a soldier of Christ as you show yourself to be, put your hand into the boiling water and quick, take out a morsel for me from the bottom.’

Immediately, Ælfstan plunges his hand into the boiling cauldron. Not feeling the heat and completely unharmed, he retrieves the morsel for Æthelwold.

Three incommensurable narratives are at work in Æthelwold’s test of Ælfstan and his obedience. The first is a narrative of pastoral rule. The disconcerting detail that Æthelwold makes his demand ‘hilari uultu’ (with a cheerful countenance) at first blush seems to portray a sadist whose contemplation of his subject’s present discomfort and future pain brought obvious pleasure. But the following events, where Ælfstan’s unhesitating obedience does him no harm, clarifies the *uita*’s positioning of Æthelwold within traditional narratives of abbatial command. From just such a store of narratives, richly illustrated, for example, in Cassian’s *Institutiones* and the *Vitas patrum*, Smaragdus of St Mihiel drew in the *Diadema* to illustrate the heroism of monastic obedience in the face of commands that appear either pointless or impossible.<sup>8</sup> In one illustration, an abbot commands a would-be monk to water a dead stick in the desert until it blooms; in another an abbot orders a father to toss his infant son into a furnace.<sup>9</sup> Of particular interest to our episode in the *uita* of Æthelwold, however, is one such narrative that Sulpicius Severus offers in his *Dialogues*.<sup>10</sup> Here he tells of a postulant who wishes to illustrate the extent of his proffered obedience. Increasingly anxious at the prospect of being denied entry into the monastery, the postulant assures the abbot that he would walk through fire, if the abbot so ordered him. By chance, the narrative explains, nearby was an oven glowing with heat, ready for cooking some loaves of bread. As the flames lick outside its open door, the master orders the would-be monk to walk into the burning oven. The postulant’s immediate obedience is rewarded just as was the faith of the boys in the fiery furnace (Dan. 3:50). Unharmed, the young man is welcomed into the monastery.

<sup>8</sup> *Iohannis Cassiani Opera: De Institutis Coenobiorum et de Octo Principalium Vitiolorum Remediis Libri XII*, ed. Michael Petschenig, CSEL 17 (Vienna, 1888), IV.24 (pp. 63–4); IV.27 (pp. 65–7); see also *Vitas patrum*, PL 73, 948; 952.

<sup>9</sup> Smaragdus, *Diadema monachorum*, PL 102, col. 610.

<sup>10</sup> *Gallus, Dialogues sur les ‘Vertus’ de Saint Martin*, ed. Jacques Fontaine, with Nicole Dupré, Sources Chrétiennes 510 (Paris, 2006), cap. 18 (pp. 172–7).

As Wulfstan's narrative calls upon these earlier stories of heroic monastic obedience to affirm Æthelwold's status as 'pater ... et pastor monachorum' and 'errantium corrector',<sup>11</sup> Æthelwold is shown to give an order that both illustrates obedience and tests it. In the context of pastoral narrative, his comment, 'you have stolen this obedience from me', made 'hilari uultu' means to show not pleasure in anticipation of pain, but serenity in the knowledge that perfect obedience — an obedience that would confirm Ælfstan's identity as a monk — would keep the monk unharmed. Æthelwold's cheerful countenance is thus meant to show his good will (that he is not angry with the monk), his confidence in his command, and his assurance in the dimensions of the pastoral relationship, abbot to monk, superior to subject. And yet his radical test of obedience has more complex work to do, for the further strands of the narrative show us, by contrast, a different Æthelwold, disturbed by his subject's apparent insubordination and anxious to settle the issue.

The second strand of the narrative is Wulfstan's presentation of Ælfstan. While Wulfstan makes it clear that the younger man will go on to a distinguished religious career as abbot of the Old Minster, Winchester, and later, bishop of Ramsbury,<sup>12</sup> it is also clear that his response to Æthelwold's command well exceeds the order to 'provide food for the monastery craftsmen' ('praeuidere cibaria artificum monasterii').<sup>13</sup> Beyond overseeing the preparation of food, the monk cooked, served, lit the fire, fetched water, cleaned the pans so that they sparkled, and swept the floor. But such energetic work not only gained Ælfstan no merit, it opened him to Æthelwold's charge of theft. By doing more than the abbot's literal order to oversee the food, Ælfstan appears to keep for himself his own will in exceeding what was commanded of him. That excess, appearing to be the product of self-will (however praiseworthy the object of the exercise), removed him from the structured relation of superior and subject, in that by willing other than he was ordered, he was, in fact, acting as abbot to himself. In that refiguring of the relation between abbot and subject (where the abbot wills and the subject obeys), through the improper use of his will, Ælfstan would not only steal obedience but in so doing would steal his abbot's function. Such a reading of Ælfstan's act and Æthelwold's charge transforms the monastic relation into a struggle for identity. On this understanding, Æthelwold's claim to own the

<sup>11</sup> *Life of St Æthelwold*, ed. Lapidge and Winterbottom, cap. 28, p. 44.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28–9, n. 1.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, cap. 14, p. 26.



obedience due him reacts to what can only be perceived as improper action arising in Ælfstan's interpretation of the abbot's command. In refusing the latitude of the monk's interpretation, Æthelwold, as abbot, acts also as the God who tried Abraham's faith by testing his unquestioning obedience. But although Æthelwold as abbot acts in God's place, he cannot see the heart and intention of the subject he judges and tests.

As the Rule specifies, the obedience owed to a superior meant an abandoning of one's own will,<sup>14</sup> and Ælfstan's industry, by contrast, appears to contravene that requirement.<sup>15</sup> If he has indeed anticipated Æthelwold's command, Ælfstan has made it impossible for himself to obey Æthelwold and has diminished Æthelwold's ability to direct him. In so doing, he will have taken from Æthelwold the obedience due him, disrupted the relationship of subordinate to superior, and undone his own identity as monk and brother of the community, for his identity is precisely dependent on repeated acts of obedience. Such expected behaviour is made clear by the Rule's criticism of the detested Sarabaites, who live in groups of two or three, but have no abbot or rule to direct them: 'for them, the pleasure of their own desires is law'.<sup>16</sup> The threatened inversion of the monastic relation in Ælfstan's act is hinted at in the expression on Æthelwold's face ('hilari uultu'), which is that expression expected of the compliant monk in the Rule of St Benedict ('hilarem datorem').<sup>17</sup>

The third strand of the narrative — where Æthelwold commands Ælfstan to reach into the boiling pot and retrieve a morsel of food — is structured as a judicial ordeal.<sup>18</sup> Of the several possible forms of ordeal, this trial by stew-pot evokes the ordeal by boiling water.<sup>19</sup>—This form of ordeal

<sup>14</sup> 'uoluntatem propriam deserere[s]', *RB* V.7 (p. 35).

<sup>15</sup> The first degree of humility is obedience without delay, and such obedience must be performed as if it had been commanded by God himself: 'mox aliquid imperatum a maiore fuerit, ac si diuinitus imperetur moram pati nescient in faciendo' (*RB* V.4, p. 35).

<sup>16</sup> 'pro lege eis est desideriorum uoluptas', *RB* I.8 (p. 18).

<sup>17</sup> 'God loves a cheerful giver', *RB* V.16, p. 37; cf. 2 Cor. 9.7.

<sup>18</sup> Patrick Wormald, 'Æthelwold and his Continental Counterparts: Contact, Comparison, Contrast', in *Bishop Æthelwold: His Career and Influence*, ed. Yorke, pp. 13–42 at pp. 13–14, lists the incident of the stewpot as a type of ordeal without further comment. Robert Bartlett, *Trial by Fire and Water: The Medieval Judicial Ordeal* (Oxford, 1986), p. 9, discusses trial by cauldron as the early Frankish form of proof. See Gregory of Tours, *De gloria martyrum*, ed. Bruno Krutsch, MGH *Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum* 1.3 (Hannover, 1885), pp. 432–3. See also Paul Hyams, 'Trial by Ordeal', in *On the Laws and Customs of England: Essays in Honor of Samuel E. Thorne*, ed. Morris S. Arnold *et al.* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1981), pp. 90–126 at p. 93, n. 13.

<sup>19</sup> See *Dictionary of Old English: A-G*, ed. Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos and Antonette diPaolo Healey (Toronto, 2007) (hereafter *DOE*), s.v. *ceac*, sense 'c', where the word for 'vessel for water or other liquid' stands for the ordeal itself. See Patrick Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1999), p. 172 and n. 40.

took place in a church, where the water was heated to a boil. No one might enter the church after the water was set to boil, except the priest overseeing the ordeal and the subject of the trial. This ordeal required a stone to be suspended in the boiling water: for a ‘single’ accusation, the proband had to plunge his hand in up to the wrist; for a ‘threefold’ accusation, up to the elbow.<sup>20</sup> In Wulfstan’s account, Æthelwold as priest and Ælfstan as proband stand before the cauldron as the parties in this ritual. The instrument of Ælfstan’s ordeal is the kitchen’s boiling cauldron (‘feruens caldarium’), and his order, to draw the morsel from the *bottom* of the stewpot, suggests the severity of a ‘threefold’ accusation, where Ælfstan would have had to reach into the boiling liquid up to his elbow. The severity of this test indexes the degree of Æthelwold’s uncertainty. In Robert Bartlett’s elegant formulation, ordeal was only resorted to when ‘certain knowledge was impossible but uncertainty was intolerable’,<sup>21</sup> and its use in the episode portrays an abbot unable to interpret the conundrum of Ælfstan’s actions, that is, the unreadable intention behind his subject’s performance of obedience. In short, the problem that Ælfstan’s behaviour poses for Æthelwold is a problem of knowledge whose resolution can only be achieved by divine intervention. Ælfstan, whose guilt or innocence of *furtum* is being assessed, is kept harmless from the water, presumably by an act of obedience perfect and swift that affirms his identity as Æthelwold’s subject, and by the judgment of God, who read the innocent intention of Ælfstan’s prior act. His present, perfect obedience makes plausible his earlier obedience; his unscalded hand and arm confirm it.<sup>22</sup>

What we see in this story, repeated almost verbatim in Ælfric of Eynsham’s version of the *uita*,<sup>23</sup> is the crucial importance of obedience in monastic life as surrender of the will. Such ideal surrender of the will is illustrated in the several instances of Æthelwold’s own obedient acquiescence to the king’s orders (in tonsuring, in accepting monastic life), the implication being that his obedience put him in harmony with God’s plan.<sup>24</sup> If we find

<sup>20</sup> *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, ed. F. Liebermann, 3 vols. (Halle, 1903), I.386–7, ‘Dom be haten isene and wætre’. For a translation into English see *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings*, ed. and trans. F. L. Attenborough (Cambridge, 1922; repr. Felinfach, 2000), Appendix II, ‘Dom be hatan isene and wætre’, pp. 170–3. See also II Æthelstan 23.1 (Liebermann, *Gesetze*, I.162) and Wormald, *The Making of English Law*, p. 374.

<sup>21</sup> Bartlett, *Trial by Fire and Water*, p. 33.

<sup>22</sup> The immediate plunging of his hand into the stew pot was done, as the Rule specifies (*RB* V.9, p. 36), ‘ueluti uno momento’, with Æthelwold’s order.

<sup>23</sup> See *Life of St Æthelwold*, ed. Lapidge and Winterbottom, Appendix A, 70–80 at cap. 10, p. 74.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, cap. 7, p. 10; cap. 9, p. 14.

these instances strangely passive, their point was to demonstrate that the saint's life was not determined by his own will, but by direction from above.

Æthelwold's test of Ælfstan is multiple: at its simplest it is a test of his subject's obedience. If, on the model of the trials of obedience exacted by the desert fathers, Ælfstan complies immediately, he proves both his obedience and his identity. But the scripting of the test as an ordeal shows that more was at stake than the simple performance of obedience. The ordeal invokes God's judgment to clarify the unreadable intention of the abbot's subject, that is, to determine whether Ælfstan's previous behaviour was true obedience or theft. As pastor to his flock, Æthelwold's own salvation depends on his conducting all in his charge to heaven,<sup>25</sup> and Ælfstan's possible disobedience puts his abbot at risk. A successful negotiation of the ordeal will also have confirmed to Æthelwold the true relation of abbot and subject in the good will (which is to say dead will) of the younger monk. But the test was meant to establish something further — Ælfstan's true identity as a monk in the *familia* of Abingdon. We see this in the words that preface Æthelwold's testing command: 'si talis miles Christi es qualem te ostendis' (if you are the soldier of Christ that you show yourself to be) makes obedience *the* critical test of monastic identity. But as the work of obedience is never finished, such identity is always subject to fracture, uncertainty, and anxiety within the dynamic relation of superior and subject.

Ælfstan's story, showing the obedience of a professed monk, is driven by an understanding of the nature and function of obedience as a practice that consistently denied the will in order to structure and ensure the monk's identity. But in it we see another face of obedience that the narrative will not acknowledge: that monastic obedience is a dynamic relation, in which the possibility of agency may be discerned as an effect of the mutual interpretation of a subject's act. I will explore these implications in my conclusion. For now, let us turn to a different sort of narrative that shows us the consequences of obedience for identity, not in its perfection, but in its failure.

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<sup>25</sup> *RB* II.6-7 (p. 20). In his commentary on the Rule, the Carolingian abbot Hildemar specifies that on the day of judgment the abbot would have to render an account of his subjects' obedience, 'utrum sit perfecta an imperfecta' (*Vita et Regula SS. P. Benedicti*, ed. Rupert Mittermüller, vol. 3, *Expositio Regulae ab Hildemaro Tradita* (Regensburg, 1880), cap. 2, p. 91. Smaragdus of Saint-Mihiel (*Expositio in Regulam S. Benedicti*, ed. Alfred Spannagel and Pius Engelbert, *Corpus Consuetudinum Monasticarum* 8 (Siegburg, 1974), p. 63, lines 15-21) explains that the test of that obedience is the humility with which the abbot's subjects obey him as vicar of Christ.

Ælfric recounts a cautionary tale of agency within the master narrative of obedience in his homily on St Benedict, the founder of Benedictine monasticism. It is the story of an oblate — a small child given by his family to St Benedict’s monastery in Nursia — and the child’s refusal to stay given.

Sum munuccild drohtnode on his mynstre. and hæfde micele lufe to his fæder and to his meder. swiðor for ðære sibbe þonne for godes dæle.<sup>26</sup> wearð þa oflangod ungemetlice. and arn buton bletsunge of mynstre to his magum. and swa hraðe swa he him to com ydæges swa gewat he of ðisum andwerdum life; Þa he bebyriged wæs. ða ne mihte seo byrgen hine gehealdan. ac wearð his lic on merigen afunden bufon þære byrgenne; His magas hine eft bebirigdon. and he wearð eft up aworpen. and swa gelomlice; Þa magas ða comon and mid micclum wope þæs halgan weres fet gesohton. his gife biddende; Se halga benedictus him sealde godes husel mid his agenre handa. and cwæð; Lecgað þis halige husel upon his breoste. and bebyriað hine swa; Ða þis gedon wæs. ða heold seo eorðe þone lichaman. and syððan ne awarep.<sup>27</sup>

‘An oblate was leading the monastic life in his [= Benedict’s] monastery and he had great love for his father and his mother, more for his kindred than for God’s inheritance. He was immoderately afflicted by longing and he ran without a blessing from the monastery to his kinsmen. And as soon as he got to them, on the same day he departed this present life. When he was buried, then the grave could not hold him, but his body was discovered in the morning above the grave. His kinsmen buried him again, and again afterwards he was tossed out, and so on continuously. Then his kinsmen came with great weeping and sought the feet of the holy man, begging his favour. Saint Benedict gave them the Eucharist with his own hand and said ‘Lay this holy Eucharist upon his breast and bury him that way.’ When this was done, the earth then held the body and didn’t toss it out thereafter.’

As Gregory the Great presents the story of the runaway oblate in *Dialogues* II.24 (Ælfric’s source), the narrative is meant to highlight Benedict’s spiritual merits and the favour in which he is held by God.<sup>28</sup> By contrast, Ælfric’s translation and adaptation gives the story a more dramatic profile than its source, focusing on a single act and its results. His alterations highlight the runaway’s wilful behaviour and the consequences of his disobedience. The narrative’s juxtaposition of the boy’s untimely death and his wilful departure from the monastery presses the inference, *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, that he died *because* he ran away.<sup>29</sup> The child’s wilful action has a further, uncanny

<sup>26</sup> For *dæle* with the sense of *portio* see *DOE* s.v. *dæl*, sense B.1, ‘inheritance’.

<sup>27</sup> Ælfric’s *Catholic Homilies: The Second Series, Text*, ed. Malcolm Godden, EETS ss 5 (Oxford, 1979), pp. 102–3, lines 362–75.

<sup>28</sup> *Grégoire le Grand, Dialogues*, vol. 2, ed. Adalbert de Vogüé, trans. Paul Antin, Sources Chrétiennes 260 (Paris, 1979), II.23, pp. 210, 212.

<sup>29</sup> On punishment and Gregory’s hierarchical reasoning see Charles M. Radding, *A World Made by Men: Cognition and Society, 400-1200* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1985), pp. 67–9.

consequence: no matter how many times his family buried him, the grave wouldn't keep him and his body was tossed out. As the narrative structures it, the condign punishment for the child's leaving God's place *sua sponte* was that in death the earth kept returning him to his family. Having left his proper place, abandoning the *familia* of the monastery for the family of his own blood, he could not, in death, have a place until St Benedict intervened with a miracle. The account in the *Dialogues* emphasizes the offence to Benedict of the child's leaving without his blessing, and Gregory draws the conclusion for Deacon Peter and his readers that the incident shows Benedict's extraordinary saintly merits: 'Perpendis, Petre, apud Iesum Christum Dominum cuius meriti iste uir fuerit, ut eius corpus etiam terra proiecerit, qui Benedicti gratiam non haberet.'<sup>30</sup> ('Think, Peter, what merit this man had with the Lord, Jesus Christ, that even the earth would reject the body of someone who did not have Benedict's favour.')

While Ælfric is clearly interested in Benedict's miracle-working record in this homily, by contrast with that of Gregory his structuring of the narrative places primary emphasis on monastic institutional issues — the boy's transgression, his ante- and post-mortem punishment, and the saint's miraculous power — which play out in a conflict between agency and identity within an implicit narrative of obedience. In using the technical word 'drohtnode' (the past tense of OE *drohtnian*, 'to live one's life' with its sense of living in obedience to the monastic rule), Ælfric emphasizes that the boy was a member of the monastic community and was practising monastic life.<sup>31</sup> To illustrate this tension between agency and identity, let us look at an opposition Ælfric establishes in his translation between 'drohtnode', with its sense of the stability of repeated daily actions of monastic life, and the OE verb 'arn' (ran). That contrast throws into stark relief the child's spontaneous departure. He ran. In the contrast between 'drohtnode' (lived the life) and 'arn' (ran) Ælfric sets up the oppositions that define the horizons of the boy's world and the range of his desires: family and monastery — or more precisely the family of his blood and his spiritual family — flesh and spirit, proper and improper love, desire, will, and obedience.

Ælfric's dramatic revision of Gregory's narrative affectively particularizes the Latin 'parentes' as mother and father, expands 'ultra quam debebat diligens' (loving more than he ought) to 'had . . . more [love] for his

<sup>30</sup> *Dialogues*, ed. De Vogüé, II.24.16–19 (p. 212).

<sup>31</sup> The Old English verb for such action is *drohtnian*. See *DOE* s.v. *drohtnian*, sense 5, 'to live according to a rule, a teaching, a will or purpose'.

kindred than for God's inheritance' and intensifies the neutral 'exisset' (departed) to 'ran'.<sup>32</sup> In these added particulars, Ælfric dramatizes the child's sin as an act of choice. A misplaced love drives him to choose kindred (*sibbe*) over 'Godes dæle' (God's portion (= inheritance)), and in so doing lays out the institutional terms in which the boy sins in violating his identity. The boy's perverse choice was to return to the family of his blood, rejecting the (spiritual) inheritance that would be his expectation were he to continue his life with the *familia* of Benedict's monastery. The moral valence of such a choice is made clear by Ælfric's identification of what we would call 'free will' with choice. The word *cyre* (choice), related to *ceosan* (to choose), is his preferred translation for Augustine's 'liberum arbitrium', and in discussing it in that context, is a word he coupled with *gehyrsumnesse* (obedience).<sup>33</sup>

If we return for a moment to the child's departure, we might imagine him frozen in mid-run, suspended between *monasterium* and *habitaculum*, between his spiritual father and brothers on the one side and his mother and father on the other, neither sent by St Benedict nor taken by his family. In the space between his former and current home he is attached to nothing; the habit he wears functions only negatively: it marks him as no longer of his blood family. But by his wilful departure the habit can no longer mark belonging under the sign of obedience within the monastery, and instead is rendered merely a badge of his incoherence. Suspended in the space between the two structures shaping who he might be — the family of his birth and the *familia* of his spiritual life — the child's improvisation in leaving shows *us* a terrifying moment of agency whose consequence, played out in the empty space between the two places of his life, is detachment from the structures that gave him meaning, a repudiation of the past and a present without content. Driving him is desire: he 'ran' because he was 'oflongod ungemetlice' (immoderately afflicted by longing),<sup>34</sup> and Ælfric diagnoses that longing as a symptom of his misplaced love, more for his mother and father than for God's inheritance, that is, for the heavenly portion awarded for a dutiful, monastic life. The child, unmindful of the consequence of a disobedient desiring to be other than he is, ends up with no place at all. No longer belonging to his

<sup>32</sup> For *dæl* as religious inheritance see *DOE* s.v. *dæl*, sense B.1.

<sup>33</sup> *DOE* comments that the word is 'disproportionately frequent' in Ælfric' (s.v. *cyre*). On the work of choice in obedience (or disobedience) see *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series, Text*, ed. Peter Clemoes, EETS ss 17 (Oxford, 1997), I.7, lines 150–61 (pp. 236–7).

<sup>34</sup> In this usage, 'oflongod' ascribes to the child the same class of longing as the speaker has in *Wife's Lament* 29b. See *The Exeter Book*, ed. George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records 3 (New York, 1936), pp. 210–11.

family, the child cannot be properly buried by them. Because he lacks a proper place, even the earth won't have him.

The story of the *munuccild* epitomizes a critical difference between early medieval notions of agency and our own. Contemporary engagement with the question of agency concerns itself with the possibility of responsible action in the face of power. The yardstick of agency in our present moment is transgression, whether agent action is sought and measured as a surprising improvisation within cultural constraints or, in the absence of surprise, an action is interpreted as agential on the argument that the structures of power are not monolithic.<sup>35</sup> In these two instances, agency is measured or adjudged when the action in question appears to counter power or social structure. That is what interests us.

Quite the opposite is the case in the early Middle Ages. In writings both Latin and Old English, agency (that is, responsible action) is measured by the yardstick of obedience, and this notion has a rich history beginning with St Paul. As Albrecht Dihle puts it succinctly: 'To St Paul, every factual fulfilment of the Law is primarily an act of obedience, appropriate in every creature towards the Creator. It can be performed, as St Paul observes, with and without the explicit knowledge of the divine commandment, and it is only the act itself that really matters.'<sup>36</sup> This idea finds its most compelling formulations in Augustine: as Evodius is made to say in *De libero arbitrio*, 'Voluntas illius mihi est necessitas'.<sup>37</sup> True freedom lies in obedience; otherwise one is enslaved to sin (Rom. 6:16–18).<sup>38</sup> Prosper of Aquitaine, who softened many of Augustine's more rigid formulations in popularizing the works of the bishop, explains how we do God's will and our own at the same time: 'Men do their own will, not God's, when they do what displeases God. However, when they do what they will in such a way that they serve the divine will, even though they will what they do, they do His will, by whom what they

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<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Dorothy Holland, William Lachicotte Jr., Debra Skinner, and Carole Cain, *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), p. 272; see also Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, 1997), p. 15. In their book, *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Philadelphia, 2001), Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing seek to interpret women's agency and its absence in Anglo-Saxon England.

<sup>36</sup> Albrecht Dihle, *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982), p. 80, writing on Romans 2:18.

<sup>37</sup> 'His [God's] will is my necessity'. *De Libero Arbitrio*, ed. W. M. Green, CCSL 29 (Turnhout, 1970), III.26 (p. 279).

<sup>38</sup> In her analysis of Augustine's formulation of free will in *De libero arbitrio*, Eleonore Stump points out 'a person who is unaided by grace cannot do otherwise than sin, and yet she is morally responsible for the sin she does'; 'Augustine on Free Will', in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 124–47 at p. 131.

will is both foreseen and appointed.’<sup>39</sup> Such an understanding of and demand for responsible action I have termed ‘obedient agency’ — where freedom of action was measured by the degree to which one’s every choice was in alignment with the will of God.

Ælfric’s revision of Gregory’s miracle story shows us the consequence of problematic desire, the child’s desire, from the monastic perspective, to be other than what he is by both God’s will and his parents’ gift. If in our own moment we may identify agency in the child’s improvisation and are tempted to admire the freedom from institutional constraints that shows the act as truly his, by contrast, Ælfric’s narrative assesses the act as a transgression arising from disordered love, a misprision of identity that leads to placing the self before the community, an indulgence of desire that leads to destruction, and a catastrophic failure of obedience within a structure that supports identity and promises the reward of eternal life. Such disobedience, understood within the monastic context of Ælfric’s thought, showed not freedom but slavery to sin, the persistence of the ‘old’ man (Eph. 4:23; Col. 3:9), and the hopeless chaining of the will to destructive patterns of behaviour. True freedom lay in obedience to God and in the freely given, obedient bending of the will to one’s monastic superiors.<sup>40</sup>

Such an understanding of the dialectic of freedom and obedience was fundamental to the training of a young oblate and the successful life of a monk, whether found in the realm of the practical, as the Rule of St Benedict was read in chapter, or in the many iterations of Augustine’s thought, found in curriculum authors such as Prosper of Aquitaine. We see this logic worked out time and again in the narrative of early medieval saints’ lives. A telling example is Alcuin’s account of St Willibrord’s decision to evangelize the Frisians, in which he aligns the saint’s desire with his mother’s prophetic dream about her son and demonstrates the relationship of both to God’s will. Alcuin writes: ‘So that the truth of the dream which his mother testified that she had once had concerning him might be fulfilled in accordance with God’s providence, aware of his own purpose, although ignorant of divine providence,

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<sup>39</sup> ‘Suam uoluntatem homines faciunt, non Dei, quando id agunt quod Deo displicet. Quando autem ita faciunt quod uolunt, ut diuinae seruiant uoluntati: quamuis uolentes agant quod agunt, illius tamen uoluntas est, a quo et praeparatur et iubetur quod uolunt.’ *Sancti Prosperi Aquitani Liber Sententiarum*, ed. M. Gastaldo, CCSL 68A (Turnhout, 1972), CCCXL, p. 344.

<sup>40</sup> *RB*, Prologue, 1–2; cap. 5; cap. 71.1–4 (pp. 1; 35–8; 161). For the notion of freedom as service to God see, for example, Prosper of Aquitaine, *Epigrammata*, PL 51.524, *Epi.* 85 (from *Sententia CXXIV, Liber Sententiarum*, ed. Gastaldo, p. 285).



he decided that he would travel into those parts ...'.<sup>41</sup> That is, Willibrord's decision is simultaneously free and directed; it is made at one and the same time both independent of his mother's dream (which articulated God's will) and in order to fulfil it.

Ælfric's cautionary tale shows us the consequences of failure of obedience in an oblate, whose life in the monastery was by way of the gift of others. I would like to turn to a very different exploration of obedience, this time in the *vita* of St Dunstan, where we are asked to consider the relative values of obedience and will in a narrative of conversion to monastic life.

In thinking through the narrative of obedience and its implications for both monastic identity and agency, I will focus on the account Osbern of Canterbury gives of Dunstan's conversion to monastic life. The peculiarities of Osbern's account — its loving attention to the hesitations of conversion, its departure from convention, its confection of direct address, and its shocking critique of monastic obedience — draw on and react to the traditional narrative of monastic identity and obedience. These features become all the clearer when seen against the backdrop of the other hagiographical accounts of the same event in Dunstan's life.

The first of these accounts, by an author who gives only the first initial of his name — B. — was written relatively shortly after Dunstan's death.<sup>42</sup> B. structures the account of Dunstan's conversion in terms of 'struggles and temptations' ('temptamentorum luctamina'), in which the devil determines to subvert Dunstan by infecting him with sexual desire for women, so that he would then embrace the rest of the delights of this world. B. presents a Dunstan luridly seduced by the devil into desiring to marry that he might be cherished daily by a girl's caresses.<sup>43</sup> By this stratagem, the devil manages to get Dunstan to refuse the insistent urgings of his kinsman, Ælfheah, bishop of Winchester, that he become a monk.<sup>44</sup> When the bishop learns Dunstan's

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<sup>41</sup> *Vita Willibrordi Archiepiscopi Traiectensis Auctore Alcuino*, ed. Wilhelm Levison, MGH, SRM, VII (Hannover, 1920), cap. 5 (p. 119, lines 16–18): 'Sed ut somnii, Deo dispensante, inpleretur veritas, quod mater olim de eo se vidisse testatur, suae conscius voluntatis, licet ad huc divinae dispensationis ignarus, illas in partes navigare cogitavit.'

<sup>42</sup> As Michael Lapidge has argued, early in the reign of Ælfric, archbishop of Canterbury (995x1005). See Michael Lapidge, 'B. and the Vita S. Dunstani', in his *Anglo-Latin Literature 900-1066* (London, 1993), pp. 279–91 and 487, at p. 279 and n. 2.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Winterbottom and Michael Lapidge, eds., "The Early Lives of St Dunstan," forthcoming, Oxford Medieval Texts, cap. 7.1. I am grateful for their kindness in allowing me to see and use their text in advance of its publication.

<sup>44</sup> But see Nicholas Brooks, 'The Career of St Dunstan', in *St Dunstan: His Life, Times and Cult*, ed. Nigel Ramsay, Margaret Sparks, Tim Tatton-Brown (Woodbridge, 1992), pp. 1–23 at p. 7, who suggests that B. was

decision to decline monastic life ('quod ille ab instinctu praefati fraudatoris renuncians'), he prays that God will send signs of his disapproval ('correctionum suarum indicia'),<sup>45</sup> that Dunstan might heed the bishop's advice which he had earlier disregarded. God obliges, and Dunstan is afflicted with such desperate pain and swelling over his whole body that he believes that he is suffering from elephantiasis (a virulent form of leprosy) and despairs of his life. In this way, B. portrays Dunstan as having been 'reproached' by this illness. In great distress he sent for the bishop, and begged to obey his beneficial advice.

In B.'s narrative the bishop stands in the place of an abbot, and to obey him is to obey God ('qui uos audit, me audit'). Dunstan is set between two forces: temptation and salvation, the devil and the bishop. The saint interprets his illness correctly as the monitory sign that it is, and the virtue of his subsequent decision to become a monk lies in obeying (and B. uses the word *oboedire*) the bishop's advice, thus aligning his will with God's plan for his life.<sup>46</sup> The elements in the narrative structure Dunstan's 'choice' as a morally-fraught exercise not of simple preference (as we might view it) but of interpreting the obedience required of him.<sup>47</sup>

This is the account that Osbern inherited from B., and as he did elsewhere in his life of Dunstan, he proceeded to add to and modify it.<sup>48</sup> Most striking in this regard is his treatment of Dunstan's conversion to monastic life, which takes its force from a remarkable exchange between the future saint and his kinsman, bishop Ælfheah. In Osbern's version, Dunstan, leaving behind the envy and hatred of him at court, visits the bishop, who urges him to become a monk on this argument: since Dunstan's conduct demonstrated that

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either exaggerating the significance of a distant relationship or misinterpreting adoptive kinship in the bishop's *familia* as a blood relationship.

<sup>45</sup> Winterbottom and Lapidge, 'The Early Lives of St Dunstan', cap. 7.2, print 'indicia' based on MS C (the St Gallen manuscript), which they demonstrate preserves B.'s original text of the *uita*. Stubbs's reading, 'judicia' (William Stubbs, *Memorials of St Dunstan*, Rolls Series 63 (London, 1874), cap. 7, p. 13), is that of the later redactions.

<sup>46</sup> B. recounts Dunstan's tonsuring (admission to minor orders as a secular cleric) as his parents' doing (Winterbottom and Lapidge, 'The Early Lives of St Dunstan', cap. 5). The exercise of volition in Dunstan's conversion lies less in choice than in willingness to obey ('oboedire se uelle eius salutaribus monitis nuntiauit' (*ibid.*, cap. 7.2)). Such a presentation of Dunstan's conversion to the monastic life thus illustrates the contemporary understanding of the operation of human agency as an individual's orientation to the Divine will.

<sup>47</sup> Here, Dunstan's inclination to marry is presented not as an option but as an occasion of sin, because clearly not willed by God. Although the verb that B. uses, *maluit*, expresses preference, that preference is not in line with God's plans for the saint, as ensuing events make clear (*ibid.*, cap. 7.2).

<sup>48</sup> See David Townsend, 'Anglo-Latin Hagiography and the Norman Transition', *Exemplaria* 3.2 (1991), 385–433, at 396–403.

he had in him the beginnings of the angelic way of life ('angelicae conversationis initia haberet'), he argues the younger man should show steadfastness in the conduct of his life ('perseverantiam in habitu demonstraret') by taking the habit. In striking contrast to the exemplary behaviour of other saints (and Æthelwold comes immediately to mind), Dunstan does not obey:

... respondit ille excellentioris gratiae esse qui in saeculo consenuit et tamen quae monacho digna sunt fecit, eo qui se monasterio dedit, nec quicquam aliud praeterquam quod sibi statutum est post haec facere potuit. 'Alterum', inquit, 'necessitatis est, alterum libertatis.'<sup>49</sup>

'He responded that that man would be of superior quality who grew old in the world and nevertheless did what was proper for a monk, because the one who gave himself to a monastery was not able after that to do anything other than what was commanded him. The one, he said, is a matter of necessity, the other of freedom.'

In stark contrast to the motivation for Dunstan's initial refusal of monastic life that B. imagines (the desire to know the caresses of a wife), Osbern makes Dunstan's refusal the result of a principled argument on the better way to lead one's life, an argument that undercuts the central rationale of Benedictine monasticism. 'Libertas' in this argument is the freedom to choose good or evil with which man is endowed. With such freedom, Dunstan argues, at each moment of his life, any act of monastic discipline would be the product of choice, a matter of individual intention. In short, Dunstan argues, shockingly, that an act of monastic discipline freely willed by the individual was of greater intrinsic merit and made the man of 'greater quality' than the same act performed under the rule of obedience. Under the condition of freedom, there would be no need for an abbot to read his intention, judge his achievement, or stand between him and God. The multiplicity of free acts that Dunstan is made to imagine in this anecdote would, by virtue of their superior, individual merit, produce a life of greater worth than the bound life of a monk, who had irrevocably committed himself to a monastery. In Dunstan's argument, the latter acts by necessity, the former from free choice. The description of a monk as one 'qui se monasterio dedit' is not innocent: the monk's conveyance to the monastery makes him a gift to God like the *munuccild*, and as gift each acts at the command of another. After such a commitment, Dunstan is made to argue, the monk's act can be no more

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<sup>49</sup> Stubbs, *Memorials of St Dunstan*, cap. 12, p. 82.

praiseworthy than merely carrying out what he is ordered to do, because he lacks the full agency of those not bound by his vow.

Immediately following this, Osbern has the bishop mount an argument that is supposed to answer Dunstan's objection. Ælfheah builds his case by arguing that the fires of concupiscence lead to the fires of Hell, and that salvation requires removing the 'tinder' ('fomenta' for 'fomes') igniting such fires:

Ad haec episcopus, 'Omnibus,' ait, 'in commune summa necessitas est, ut qui ignem gehennae voluerit effugere, ignem concupiscentiae studeat extinguere. Ignis vero concupiscentiae non multum extinguitur, si fomenta illius humanis sensibus non subtrahuntur. Sicut enim ligna ad ignem, sic ea quae sensibus subjacent, ad concupiscentiam. Sed nulla erit fomentorum subtractio, si saecularium negotiorum non fuerit renunciatio. Ex quibus omnibus id elicitur; ut si ignem gehennae volueris effugere, saeculo studeas renunciare. Ad haec quod praecipue in mundo appetitur, libertas est hominis. Hac enim ommissa, caetera possideri nequeunt. Quod si possidentur, illa non desinit haberi. Quapropter quamdiu illam retinueris, illud Deo non dedisti, quod maxime dilexisti: ut ergo des quod maxime diligis, illa desinat haberi.'<sup>50</sup>

'To these things the bishop replies: For all people in general it is of the highest necessity that whoever wishes to escape the fire of Gehenna should strive to extinguish the fire of concupiscence. In fact, the fire of concupiscence is rarely extinguished if its tinder is not removed from the human senses. For things of the senses are to concupiscence as wood to the fire. But there will be no removal of the tinder, if there is no renunciation of the things of this world. From all this it is ascertained: if you wish to avoid the fire of Gehenna, you should strive to renounce the world. In this connection, what is especially sought after in the world is human freedom. Without this, the rest cannot be possessed. For if they are possessed, then that [*scil.* freedom] does not cease to be had. Wherefore, for as long as you retain that [*scil.* freedom], what you have not given to God is what you have loved most of all: therefore, that you may give what you love most of all, let freedom cease to be possessed.'

In his lengthy answer, Ælfheah changes the grounds of the argument, even while denying Dunstan's premise, that there is spiritual value in the actions of a man in the world, and that obedience is unhelpful and unnecessary. Without explicitly using the language of sacrifice, Ælfheah nonetheless calls on the argument of sacrifice to assert that obedience is central to salvation. In doing so, he recuperates Dunstan's hapless monk who gave himself to the monastery ('se monasterio dedit') and was unable to do anything thereafter, by redefining the gift given as what a man loves most in the world, his freedom. As the

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, cap. 12, p. 82.

*munuccild* is the sacrifice of his parents, freedom is the sacrifice of the monk. Without that ultimate gift, Ælfheah claims, there can be no renunciation of the world.

Dunstan continues to hesitate (and considering that Ælfheah didn't meet his objection, little wonder). Agitated by his indecision, he contracts a terrible fever, which leaves him and all who saw him in doubt of his life. Upon his recovery (not, as in B.'s narrative, while in the grip of his illness), he leaves behind the prospect of pleasure and a wife on the argument that such things leave the living unsatisfied and the dead without hope. He thereafter devotes himself to virginity in the monastic life.

I should like to suspend considering Osbern's account, and turn to the two, later, versions of Dunstan's *uita* by William of Malmesbury and Eadmer of Canterbury. In both we see elegantly crafted versions that reshape B.'s narrative line and carefully avoid Osbern's. Neither later version reports a conversation between Dunstan and the bishop. Eadmer has Ælfheah cite Mark 10:21 (and also Matt 19:21) in enjoining Dunstan to leave all that he has and follow Christ. Eadmer's Dunstan does not refuse monastic life, and although much influenced by the bishop, he nonetheless vacillates about a contracted marriage. Eadmer carefully purges Dunstan's speech and records him only as making objections to conversion 'which seemed reasonable to him'.<sup>51</sup> Thereafter, Dunstan is afflicted by a fever 'nutu Dei' (by God's will) and in his illness, Dunstan thinks no more of marriage. Embarrassed that the heat of a fever did more to eradicate the desires of his flesh than evangelical fire,<sup>52</sup> Dunstan then calls the bishop to him and does penance that he had not obeyed him immediately (Eadmer's word is 'obtemperauerit').<sup>53</sup>

William of Malmesbury follows B.'s narrative line by presenting a Dunstan much influenced by the possibilities of unspecified pleasure (although no mention is made of marriage).<sup>54</sup> William keeps a censorious corrector's eye on Osbern's version and gives Dunstan no direct speech, though he reports that the young man put the bishop off with witty remarks. As disapproving as William is of Osbern's version, he is also concerned to

<sup>51</sup> 'quae sibi rationis uidebantur'. See *Eadmer of Canterbury: Lives and Miracles of Saints Oda, Dunstan, and Oswald*, ed. Andrew J. Turner and Bernard J. Muir, OMT (Oxford, 2006), cap. 10, p. 64.

<sup>52</sup> See Luke 12:49, 'Ignem veni mittere in terram' ('I am come to cast fire on the earth').

<sup>53</sup> *Eadmer of Canterbury: Lives and Miracles*, ed. Turner and Muir, cap. 10, p. 64: 'quod sibi uiam perfectionis suadenti non statim obtemperauerit, quod habitum religionis monasticae ad uerbum eius non susceperit'.

<sup>54</sup> In *William of Malmesbury, Saints' Lives: Lives of SS. Wulfstan, Dunstan, Patrick, Benignus and Indract*, ed. and trans. M. Winterbottom and R. M. Thomson, OMT (Oxford, 2002), p. xxii, the editors point out that William deliberately avoided Eadmer's account.

report facts gleaned from earlier accounts, and he edges around the scandal of Dunstan's reply, reporting that: 'sometimes he also claimed captiously that the life of monks did not please God any more than that of laymen.'<sup>55</sup> This, of course, grossly understates his source. Osbern's Dunstan argued that the life of an equally observant layperson was *more* pleasing than that of a monk because not obligated by obedience. Unlike Osbern, William follows B. in having Ælfheah pray for a bodily sign to warn Dunstan. Following a terrible inflammation over his whole body, Dunstan calls for the bishop and becomes a monk.

Common to these accounts (and Adelard does not treat the incident) are the following: insistent urging of the bishop, temptation to pleasure, a refusal or a deferral of some magnitude, illness as a divine sign, and conversion in the illness. Both William and Eadmer knew Osbern's account and were clearly scandalized by it. In reaction, they return to the scripting of B., where Dunstan's illness comes as a chastisement from God's hand, and where obedient action is the result of reading the sign of God's will.

In contrast, Osbern shows us Dunstan choosing monastic conversion without a divine sign, and without God's causing his illness; he shows us a choice made freely by rational argument, not as a result of the bishop's dialectic or his prayer. But this behaviour of Dunstan contrasts even with that in earlier chapters of Osbern's *uita*, where Dunstan is shown conforming his will to that of his parents ('quorum ille voluntate humiliter parens minores gradus et habitu suscepit'), and when he goes to visit his uncle the archbishop, he does so 'permissu parentum suorum'.<sup>56</sup> In these earlier chapters, Osbern also emphasizes God's will for Dunstan, in terms of predestination and providence.<sup>57</sup> Such careful portrayal of Divine will, and of the saint humbly deferring to the will of others, makes his subsequent unwillingness to become a monk when urged by bishop Ælfheah, and his scandalous argument, the more unusual and dramatic.

<sup>55</sup> *William of Malmesbury, Saints' Lives*, ed. Winterbottom and Thomson, cap. 7, p. 184: 'nonnumquam etiam monachorum uitam non magis placere Deo quam laicorum cauillatus'.

<sup>56</sup> *Memorials of St Dunstan*, ed. Stubbs, cap. 8, p. 77; cap. 9, p. 79.

<sup>57</sup> Although, in the preceding chapter, the devil's unwitting accomplishment of God's will ('ignorans malam voluntatem suam Deo famulari') is described in terms of predestination ('praedestinauerat'), see *Memorials of St Dunstan*, ed. Stubbs, p. 81. When the devil prompts the jealousy of others at court, Dunstan leaves by his own choice ('sponte sua'), interpreting this trial as the beginning of the spiritual struggle foretold by the miracle of the harp (*ibid.*, cap. 10, p. 80). Dunstan's choice, marriage or the monastery ('virtus an voluptas, uxor an uirginitas,' *ibid.*, p. 82), is portrayed as free (that is, unmodified by words for predestination or providence). For a study of the difficult terrain negotiated by Anglo-Saxon writers on free will and predestination see now Aaron J Kleist, *Striving with Grace: Views of Free Will in Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto, 2008).

Osbern constructs a story of resistance (however conventionally it is resolved) centred on Dunstan's desire to retain his self-will, and the question that Osbern has Dunstan frame undercuts the entire monastic enterprise. Acknowledging that obedience is the fundamental identifying characteristic of a monk, Dunstan's question challenges the value of that obedience and the necessity of that identity. Rather than ensuring value to each act of the obedient monk, obedience, in this argument, by transforming each act of a monk into the activity of a drone, makes monastic life of less value than the life of one for whom each religious act is a praiseworthy act of the will. Dunstan's objection in Osbern's account thus aims at the linkage of monastic identity and agency. While Dunstan's speech challenged the value of obedience, Ælfheah's argued its utility. But the larger, unspoken issue in the episode is the way in which individual acts work within God's providential will. Here is where Osbern shows a particular anxiety in trying to portray that Dunstan's decision to become a monk is free at the same time as it is directed by God. This anxiety explains why there is no place in his narrative for the chastising sign of illness in B.'s account, sent at the prayerful entreaty of Ælfheah. If the heroism of Dunstan's conversion in Osbern's narrative is magnified by the gravity of his objections, nonetheless the scandal of his objection to what Osbern portrays as an obedience without agency hovers over the text.

As these three vignettes illustrate, obedience is both the stuff of monastic identity and the test of this cardinal virtue's successful incorporation in the monastic subject. Yet obedience is never perfected, never finally achieved, for its end is only continued obedience. Its aim, as Foucault observed in his study of the pastoral relation 'is to act ...so that there is no other will but not to have any will'.<sup>58</sup> As obedience is the performative through which monastic identity is installed, tested, and ensured — an identity in which self-will is left behind — the effect of that obedience, arising in the unstable relation between abbot and subject, is the opening for a re-formed, much narrowed agency whose field of possibility is the interpretation of the abbot's order and the subject's response. While Osbern's Dunstan shows us self-will as a temptation more seductive than sex, the narrative struggles to frame Dunstan's embrace of monastic life as both accession to the will of God and an act that is completely free, thereby conserving an agency that is scarcely recognizable to us. Illustrating the danger of choice, Ælfric's

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<sup>58</sup> Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (London, 2007), p. 178.

*munuccild* presents a cautionary tale of will and desire that lead to a catastrophic failure of obedience and terrifying consequences for identity itself. Both present obedience in simple fashion as the behaviour proper to a monastic subject.

But the story of Æthelwold and Ælfstan with which I began shows obedience not in terms of an individual, but as a relation between abbot and subject. If such an account invites a reading in terms of the master-slave dialectic, I suggest a more fruitful mode of analysis will look for agent action in the space of possibility that opens when abbot and subject are joined in the interpretation of order and obedience. As we have seen, obedience — immediate, cheerful, and complete — is commanded of monks or nuns in a Benedictine community. Beyond that founding injunction, the Rule of St Benedict, in prescribing that the abbot's command and the resulting obedient act take place 'ueluti uno momento' (as if at one moment), imagines not only a temporal oneness of command and act, but a unity of will and intention for abbot and subject. As it celebrates Æthelwold's zealous pursuit of just such obedience and offers for our admiration an exemplary relation within obedience, Wulfstan's *uita* of the saint (as well as that of Ælfric), shows just as clearly the fissures of the central, imagined unity of monastic obedience. Instead of a unity of action between superior and subject, as the Rule imagines and prescribes, we see a dynamic relation where subject and superior are joined in complementary acts of interpretation. Instead of unity of will, we see a contest of reading, where intention and will are continually at play in the relation between the two. We see, in short, in the imagined unity of obedience a space of uncertainty opened for the possibility of agency as responsible action.

The subject of obedience must ask of an order, 'What does it mean? What does he want?' before acting. His obedience is thus always first an act of interpretation. For his part, the abbot who orders must interpret his subject's act to assess its degree of compliance. However, his understanding of compliance, always lagging behind the performance of his subject, is thus always dependent on his subject's performed interpretation. The monastic subject, in attempting to meet the demand of his abbot, invents (successfully or unsuccessfully) the terms of his obedience, and in these repeated acts of obedience both forms and discovers himself as an obedient agent. Monastic identity is no less dynamic. Though reinforced in superficial ways by the wearing of the monastic tunic and cowl and the exercises of liturgy and Rule, such identity was fragile and contingent upon repeated performance of acts of



obedience whose goal was denial of the will and humility of mind. Repeated obedience was the assurance of continuing identity, but practicalities of understanding an order and of ascertaining obedience — in the details of the act and the disposition of the will — ensured that the possibility of agency, as we understand it, remained a part of the dynamic. Æthelwold's test of Ælfstan's obedience, in which heaven itself must read the good will behind the monk's execution of his order, dramatizes what was at stake in a subject's interpretation of an order. For many reasons, perhaps, God cleared Ælfstan of theft.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> I should like to acknowledge the kind suggestions of Michael Lapidge and Jill Mann on a number of issues in this paper. What errors remain are mine alone.

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