Sainthood and Vilification in the Narrative of William of Norwich

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On Easter Sunday 1144, the body of a young boy named William was found in Thorpe Wood, Norwich. A Christian monk, Thomas of Monmouth, arrived nearly three decades later to take up William's cause by writing about the case in his work entitled *The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich*, in 1173. Monmouth's account of William falls into a common form of Christian propaganda used in the medieval period known as 'hagiography,' writings which depict the exalted life of saints and martyrs.¹ The narrative constructed by Thomas Monmouth details William's sainthood, but also vilifies the local Jewish community when illustrating Christian-Jewish relations, resulting in the notion of ritualistic murder known as 'blood libel' that would further impact the Christian-Jewish relations in Medieval Europe. Blood libel is accusation of ritualistic murders carried out by Jews on Christian children. This paper will examine Monmouth's motivations in writing William's hagiography, the ways in which Monmouth depicts William as a holy figure, the use of testimonies to help drive the narrative of the hagiography and the lasting effects for those deemed "offenders" in William's martyrdom.

To understand the narrative presented in Monmouth's account, the motivations for Monmouth's documentation of the case must first be understood. Thomas of Monmouth claimed to have had visions which prompted him to become an advocate for William's cause. These visions brought him to the Cathedral in Norwich in 1150 to take up the responsibility of sacrist, caring for the translation of the relics of William and writing an account of the miracles associated with them.²

The translation of relics was an important part of medieval religion. In translation, a saint's remains are exhumed and moved to another location to become a pilgrimage destination for Christians who seek out miracles.³ These items are believed to have holy mystic powers, and in the medieval Church, their acquisition and pilgrimages to them were a part of religious culture.⁴ William's relics were transported from Thorpe Wood, the initial burial site, to the Monk's Cemetery, then to the Chapter House and eventually, to the Chapel of the Martyrs at the time of the publication of Monmouth's work in 1173.⁵ Arriving several years after William's death, Monmouth set out to gather details about William's life and the subsequent miracles said to have occurred at his resting place to compose his hagiography.⁶ As hagiographies are used to demonstrate the holiness displayed by chronicled individuals, Monmouth's hagiography was written to demonstrate the martyrdom of William, his religious virtue and the miracles that make him worthy of sainthood.⁷ Thus, Monmouth, in his efforts to sanctify William, constructs a narrative suited for hagiography.

In the construction of the hagiographic narrative, Monmouth presents William as an individual who embodied aspects of life and death similar to Christ. The first case in the hagiography to demonstrate this similarity to the life of Jesus is the way in which William's mother learns of her pregnancy writing, "it was revealed to her how great should the sanctity and dignity of him whom she bore in her womb."⁸ This is akin to Mary's vision of the Archangel Gabriel and his message of the child she was bringing into the world and his role as

the Son of God. This parallel allows Monmouth to demonstrate from the earliest point of William's life his importance as a blessed individual. Monmouth also describes William's devotion as a boy when writing, "he [William] became so devoted to abstinence that, though his older brothers did not fast, he himself fasted on three days of the week."⁹ Monmouth's description reflects the narrative that William demonstrated piety as evidenced by his devotion. To this, Monmouth notes "the signs even thus early how great his merits were to be in the days to come."¹⁰ In reference to the "days to come" Monmouth alludes to the ensuing death of William which is central to his martyrdom. Monmouth once again draws from the life and death of Jesus when he interjects his opinion that "by the ordering of the divine providence he [William] had been predestined to martyrdom from the beginning of time."¹¹ This notion of William's predestination of martyrdom, or death for a greater cause, reflects the earlier vision William's mother had before his birth, which noted the sanctity of William, comes full circle in William's martyrdom for the Christian faith.

Upon discussion of William's death, Monmouth makes a connection to heighten the notion of William's holiness, describing William as a lamb and claiming, "then the boy, like an innocent lamb, was led to the slaughter."¹² Monmouth's decision to describe William as a lamb has several connotations, as a lamb is often a symbol of innocence and purity. Jesus himself is often referred to as the 'Lamb of God,' thus elevating William to a Christ-like level of holiness. Furthermore, Monmouth's description of William as a 'lamb' can refer to the biblical notion of a sacrificial lamb. William is said to be in possession of the Jews, Monmouth notes that William's head was "stabbed with countless thorn points," which resembled the thorn of crowns Jesus wore prior to his crucifixion, creating another association between William and Christ.¹³ Monmouth believes that William's death was an effort made by the Jews to make a mockery of the Lord's passion; first by torturing him, and then fixing him to a cross.¹⁴ Once again,

this draws a parallel between the William's death and that of Jesus, not simply by the supposed way of death, but also in the belief that the Jews were responsible for Christ's death. Monmouth's discussion of the mockery of the Lord's passion indicates that he believed William's death to be a symbolic message through repetition of Christ's shameful death. The dates and events surrounding William's death, as described by Monmouth, further the alleged religiosity of William. The events are noted to have occurred during Holy Week, between the Monday after Palm Sunday and the discovery of the body on the Saturday before Easter.¹⁵ Through numerous tactics worked into his account, Monmouth demonstrates William's pious and holy character and predestination. He is depicted as a boy who reflects similarities to Christ where he too is meant to fulfil a greater purpose which comes through his martyrdom.

The efforts of Monmouth to draw connections in order to enhance the holiness of William are derived from his own account, however, much of Monmouth's account in the hagiography relies on the testimonies of individuals who provide support for the narrative which he seeks to present. Monmouth himself wrote "All which I, Thomas, a monk of Norwich, after hearing it from their lips and knowing it to be certainly true, have been careful to hand down in writing, because I did not think that the story of so important a truth to be lost or concealed by silence."¹⁶ The incorporation of many testimonies creates a damning case against those accused of the murder while illuminating William's martyrdom. There are several witnesses that Monmouth uses to fill in gaps in the story. Creating a sense of reliability in the legitimacy of the narrative that he presents while also offering the believed perpetrators of the crime that occurred. Monmouth relied on William's mother to provide him with the details of William's life from conception to his death twelve years later. While her testament offers unique insight, it is the inclusion of several other witnesses to the events proceeding William's death that provide the bulk of Monmouth's account. While Monmouth uses testimonies to accompany

his writing to help develop the chronicle which he is presenting in the hagiography, it must be noted that these testimonies were included to aid in the narrative which Monmouth is seeking to develop. This can be understood to be a literary method used by Monmouth to further his narrative and provide 'proof.' While these testimonies—often referring to no one in particular and instead to an elusive source—may have been entirely fabricated to develop or fit the narrative, some aspects of them may hold some truthfulness.

The bulk of the testimonies Monmouth uses to direct his narrative come from people who implicate the Jewish community in the death of William. Monmouth makes mention of learning from, "certain Jews, who were afterwards converted to the Christian faith," that not only had William been targeted by local Jews who had required the assistance of a man, unknown by Monmouth whether he was Jewish or Christian, to capture William and bring him back to them before Passover.¹⁷ The decision of Monmouth to include such testimonies allows for the implication of the local Jewish community in a conspiracy to follow through on the planned murder of William. According to this account, the man lured William through the offer of work in the kitchen of the Archdeacon of Norwich and by offering his mother money for her consent for William's service.¹⁸

Other witnesses Monmouth uses in his account are William's aunt and her daughter. According to this testament, the aunt was told upon seeing the man accompanying William in Norwich that his mother had entrusted the man to William. This made the aunt suspicious, leading her to send her daughter to follow them, to which she reported seeing them enter the house of a Jew.¹⁹ The use of these witnesses are further used to implicate Jews in the city of Norwich in the death of William. The manner in which William is claimed to have been tortured and died is cited by Monmouth to originate from a Christian woman who waited on the Jews and provided him with a tale.²⁰ This testimony, cited by Monmouth, further implicates the local Jews in

the death of William.

Monmouth also makes mention of the reported wounds that had been found on William's body, the details of the wounds helping to illustrate the way in which he had been tortured and killed. The evidence used by Monmouth indicates that William was fastened and bound with chords and had had his left hand and foot pierced by nails as well as what was believed to be the mortal wound to his left side.²¹ Again, in his account of the aftermath of William's death, Monmouth makes reference to the testimony of one of the Jews, allegedly a part of the group, which consulted with one another as to how they should dispose of the body of William. According to the testimony of this witness, it is claimed that there had been discussion of disposing William's body in the cesspool, however, fear that the body would be discovered when the sewers were cleaned or new ones built, implicating the Jews in the murder, led to the decision to place the body of William in a place distanced from the Jews, in an attempt to shift the blame.²² The use of a witness who is said to have been present at this gathering allows Monmouth to demonstrate two things; the first being an issue of disposing of the body as to not implicate the Jews, and the second, a way in which the final location of the body not only made sense but also shifted the blame. The next witness Monmouth makes mention of is Ælward, a Christian man walking near Thorpe Wood who claimed to have come across Jews carrying a sack on a horse. Being suspicious of them, he approached them and felt the sack, at which point, he claimed to feel a body. However, it was the quick flight into the woods by the Jews who he claimed to have come across that heightened his suspicions, although he did not come forward with his suspicions at the time.²³ According to Monmouth, Ælward shared what he had seen five years later on his deathbed after seeing a vision of William, who urged him to share what he had witnessed.²⁴ This testimony used by Monmouth demonstrates two things important to the narrative as it not only once again implicates the Jews in the death of William, but it also demonstrates the holiness of William, as

he appears in a vision to Ælward. While the other testimonies were used primarily to place blame solely on the Jews for the events that Monmouth writes about in his hagiography, Ælward's is the first testimony to associate William with divinity.

Ælward's account marks a turning point in the testimonies Monmouth uses to place the blame of William's death on the local Jews. The testimonies that follow allow him to demonstrate a holiness surrounding William through the way in which his body is discovered. The inclusion of these testimonies is pivotal to the creation of the narrative of the sacredness of William's body after he is martyred. Monmouth writes "the divine grace, which is never absent from His own, vouchsafed to exhibit round about the body of the glorious martyr, which was lying in the wood, certain glorious testimonies of His pity."²⁵ While this statement comes from Monmouth himself and not from a witness, Monmouth uses subsequent testimonies to support this notion he puts forth about the holiness around William's body as a way to further demonstrate the sanctity of William himself. Monmouth relies on the presentation of two claims by Henry de Sprowston and Lady Legarda to present a narrative concerning the sacredness of William's body. In these presented testimonies, it is claimed that "a fiery light suddenly flashed down from heaven" and is said to have shone on the place where William's body was located, appearing as two rays creating the shape of a ladder.²⁶ These testaments are used by Monmouth to present the reader not only with imagery, but also to demonstrate the connection between William and God, as it presents the notion of heaven opening up to allow William to ascend. Monmouth relies on Legarda to develop the narrative of William's divinity when writing of her desire to find what the heavenly light led to. According to the account, Legarda followed the light and came to the body of William in the wood, where the ravens were said to be trying to feed on the body but were unable to do so. This account again allows for the depiction of the holy divinity of William's body and, as Monmouth notes, a sign of God's protection of William's body from mutilation

and corruption.²⁷ The testimonies used to create the narrative of divine intervention in the discovery and protection of William's body in the wood allows for Monmouth to present William's body as sacred. The narrative constructed by the testimonies depict William as a holy boy, who was martyred at the hands of the Jews but due to his sanctity was able to ascend to heaven, his body protected by God. This demonstrates the importance of not only William's death, but also his body after death. The depiction of the body as protected and sacred ties back into Monmouth's duty over William's relics, as the story gives feasibility to the sacredness of those items. While Monmouth presents William's holiness through his own description and the use of testimonies, in the construction of his narrative, Monmouth villainizes the Jews in order to build his narrative into one of a martyr, as well.

Monmouth's narrative places the blame on the Jews as he, a devout Christian, did not believe a Christian could be responsible for such an act. This vilification could demonstrate the Christian-Jewish relations that existed at the time, and could have had a defining role in the notion of blood libel that would develop as a result. In medieval England, the king claimed dominion over the Jews who were recognized by the king and surrounding society as an independent self-governing community, separate but present within the larger overall society.²⁸ At the time of William's death in 1144, the Jewish community in Norwich was known to be the second largest such community, with only London outnumbering it as the largest.²⁹ While the Jewish and Christian communities are noted to have coexisted peacefully, the ongoing crusades fuelled anti-Jewish sentiments as crusaders drew a connection between the Jewish and the Muslim enemies to Christianity.³⁰ During the first crusade in 1096, the People's Crusade began to slaughter Jews as they moved through the Rhineland. In response, it is reported that Jews, instead of facing slaughter or forced conversion, began to kill their own children before committing suicide.³¹ These events were chronicled and should be considered

as a possible factor in the Christian understanding of Jews as killers and deviants. Another part of Christian belief is that any rational being would be able to see the truth of Christianity, which leads to the belief that Jews were not rational. By not accepting the Christian beliefs, the Jews were believed to be lacking a perceived fundamental aspect of humanity, and therefore not human.³² The ability to dehumanize Jews allowed for further separation between Christians and Jews within communities such as Norwich. These can all be considered factors in Monmouth's presentation of the Jews in Norwich as the perpetrators behind the murder of William and in the acceptance of others of this accusation.

The accusation of Jews, which Monmouth presents in his narrative of the events surrounding the death of William, develops the notion of ritual murder which would become known as blood libel. Blood libel rituals were believed to include mixing the blood into ceremonial foods, medicines and sorcery.³³ The case of William, which Monmouth explores in his hagiography, implicates the Jews in carrying out the murder to fulfill some means in time for Passover. While Monmouth doesn't make the accusation of blood libel, his account sets a basis for blood libel to become a viable motive and explanation for the death of children throughout Europe. A part of the accusation of blood libel is said to be an implication of which "Jews, as an ancient people with mystical powers, retained profane magical practices – represented by using blood as a magical ingredient – that stood in contrast to sacred Christian norms."³⁴ Author Simon Bronner identifies that Jewish law forbids the use of blood sacrifices, but the legend surrounding blood libel neglects this and instead focuses on portraying Jews as "bloodthirsty, demonic and depraved."³⁵ This concept of blood libel and ritualistic murder, which derived from Monmouth's accusations in his work began to spread throughout Europe and provided an imagined threat of Jews against the Christians, which, in turn, developed into a greater anti-Jewish sentiment.³⁶ The use of blood libel accusation and myth developed from Monmouth

and disseminated throughout Christian Europe allowed for justification of Christian hostilities towards Jews, seeing them as an enemy to Christendom.³⁷ Monmouth's use of vilification to deepen the victimization of innocence in the case of William of Norwich can be both reflective of existing Christian-Jewish relations, but must also be recognized as an instigator of growing hostility and an obstacle further hindering the Christian-Jewish relationship in Europe.

Monmouth's hagiography, while creating a narrative that demonstrated the sanctity and martyrdom of William of Norwich, required the vilification of local Jews, which can be reflective and formative of Christian-Jewish relations in Medieval Europe. It was Monmouth's task to create a narrative that embodied the holiness of William to give meaning to his death through his hagiography. This required the inclusion of testimonies of those who had been present at the time of William's life to help guide the narrative which Monmouth set out to present. While the inclusion of testimonies and accounts helps to build the case of William's sainthood, Monmouth also maligns the Jews as the perpetrators of William's death. By scandalizing William's death through the presentation of the local Jewish community as perpetrators, Monmouth plays on existing relations and tensions in constructing a fictionalization of the motives and actions surrounding the event. Thus, Monmouth leads to the development of blood libel which would further hinder Christian-Jewish relations in medieval Europe. While the intent of Monmouth is to demonstrate the righteousness of William and his sainthood, his hagiography had a larger, lasting effect on Jewish populations throughout Europe. It gave Christian populations an enemy in the Jewish minority that would be subject to prejudice and growing hostility in the centuries that followed Monmouth's account.

ENDNOTES:

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3. Wilfrid Bosner, "The Cult of Relics in the Middle Ages," *Folklore*, 73, no. 4 (1962): 235.
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5. Thomas of Monmouth, *The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich*, trans. Augustus Jessopp, and M.R. James (Cambridge: University Press, 1896), ixix.
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7. Gregory Mitchell, "Hagiography: Current and Prospective Contributions," *Journal of Psychology in Africa* 25, no. 5 (2015): 390.
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11. *Ibid.*, 15.
12. *Ibid.*, 19.
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14. Gillian Bennett, "Towards a Revelation of the Legend of "Saint" William of Norwich and its Place in the Blood Libel Legend," *Folklore* 116, no. 2 (2005): 120.
15. Monmouth, 32.
16. *Ibid.*, 30.
17. *Ibid.*, 16.
18. *Ibid.*, 18.
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20. *Ibid.* lxvi.
21. Bennett, "Towards a Revelation of the Legend of "Saint" William of Norwich and its Place in the Blood Libel Legend," 129.
22. Monmouth., 25.
23. *Ibid.*, 28.
24. *Ibid.*, 30.

25. *Ibid.*, 31.
26. *Ibid.*, 31-32.
27. *Ibid.*, 34
28. Karen Barley and Ira Katznelson, "States, Regimes and Decisions: Why Jews Were Expelled from Medieval England and France," *Theory and Society* 40, no. 5 (2011): 482.
29. Gillian Bennett, "William of Norwich and the Expulsion of Jews," *Folklore* 166, no. 3 (2005): 311.
30. *Ibid.*, 313.
31. Eva Haverkamp, "Martyrs in Rivalry: The 1096 Jewish Martyrs and the Thebean Legion," *Jewish History* 23, no. 4 (2009): 319-20.
32. Daniel J. Lackster, "The Impact of the Crusades on the Jewish-Christian Debate," *Jewish History* 13, no. 2 (1999): 26.
33. Simon J. Bronner, "The Ritual Murder or Blood Libel Legend: A Study of Anti-Semitic Victimization through Projective Inversion," in *The Analytical Essays of Alan Dundes*, (University Press of Colorado and Utah State University Press, 2007): 392.
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