

a local study of Champagne, *The Medieval Economy of Salvation* provides a much-needed framework within which to understand the charitable revolution of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries throughout Europe. In a vein similar to Lester K. Little's *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy*, Davis's compelling study establishes a clear relationship between expressions of caritative giving and commercialization.

Caley McCarthy
University of Waterloo
doi:10.1017/S0009640723001804

***Inventing William of Norwich: Thomas of Monmouth, Antisemitism, and Literary Culture, 1150–1200.* By Heather Blurton. The Middle Ages Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022. 237 pp. \$59.95 hardcover.**

In March 1144, the body of a twelve-year-old boy was found in Thorpe Wood, outside Norwich. The child, an apprentice leather worker named William, had been missing from his home, and his body seems to have borne signs of violence. He was quickly buried, and his death might have been equally quickly lost to history but for a chain of events involving crusade debts, a second murder and trial, the arrival of a determined hagiographer, animus toward members of a minority religion, and the opportunity to claim a potentially lucrative local saint and martyr. With this chain in place, the death of William became instead the earliest example of the blood-libel canard—the claim that Jews re-enact the death of Jesus by murdering Christian children.

The death of this child did not occasion much immediate stir, even in the community, despite his family having some important local connections. Outrage would emerge only retroactively, after the death of the child was invoked as a defense in the 1149 murder of a Jewish money lender. The accused, Sir Simon de Novers, heavily indebted to the victim, argued that his trial should not occur unless the Jews of Norwich, including the victim, were cleared of William's death. The commissioning of the project to chronicle William's sanctity appears to have occurred at about the same time as the trial, which resulted in a postponement: neither death appears to have been investigated further.

Thomas, a Benedictine monk living in the Norwich Cathedral priory but styled *Monumentis*—of Monmouth—seems to have begun work on what would eventually be *The Life and Miracles of William of Norwich* in about 1150, in the aftermath of the trial, and in apparent conjunction with the translation of William's body into the cathedral. The earliest book is largely a description of the life and death of William, as imagined by Thomas, and later revisions incorporate his rhetorical defense of William's holiness and document the miracles attributed to William.

This is the background required to understand Heather Blurton's *Inventing William of Norwich: Thomas of Monmouth, Antisemitism, and Literary Culture, 1150–1200*. Blurton, a professor of English and comparative literature at UC Santa Barbara, explores Thomas's hagiography from a literary perspective, arguing that an understanding of the text depends as much on its literariness as on its sociohistorical context: "This study

attempts to redirect critical attention from the origins and development of the ritual murder accusation to the literary genres and tastes that shaped its forms and themes as well as provided its immediate context of reception” (3). Indeed, it is this concept of the literariness of the text—the ways in which it draws from liturgy, from hagiography, from allegory, and from rhetoric—that helps resolve some of the difficulties of the text for the modern reader. To modern eyes, Thomas’s work is a resistant one: it is ambiguous, implausible, contradictory, and frustrating. Blurton’s book, particularly in the fourth chapter, begins to suggest alternative ways to wrestle with this extremely problematic work.

Perhaps the first half of the book details the manuscript context of *The Life and Miracles*, which survives in a single manuscript, anthologized with two other works of religious commentary and bound with two additional lives of contemporary English saints, Wulfric of Haselbury and Godric of Finchale, both hermits. In her first chapter, Blurton argues that the juxtaposition of the *Life and Miracles* with two texts that are explicitly sacramental points toward an allegorical reading of William’s torture and death as representing one of the three discourses on the Eucharist. Thus the account should be read as engaged with “a rhetoric of persuasion grounded in the selfsame typological associations made by the liturgy” (27). Her second chapter, arguing for linking William with Wulfric and Godric through manuscript proximity, is learned and interesting but less convincing, and in her third, she moves away from a purely literary perspective to explore the cultural construction of the child William in the context of affective piety.

However, it is in the fourth chapter that Blurton articulates how notions of literariness might be extremely useful ways to think about *The Life and Miracles*, discussing the emergence of fictionality at precisely the moment when Thomas is attempting to create a boy saint. She points to Thomas’s repeated use of the term “argumentum” in his second book as an explicit reference to classical rhetorical theory, in which his audience might be expected to be imbued, indicating that the events *might* have taken place as described, not that they did: “Although the series of proofs that Thomas offers in book 2 in support of his contention that William of Norwich was ritually murdered by Jews and that this made him a saint are not, by his own admission, factual, they were nevertheless—by 12th century standards—good history” (124). While the doubt in his contemporaries with which Thomas is still struggling in the later books suggests that “good history” may be something of an overstatement, careful thought about how the twelfth century may have viewed the emerging concept of fictionality is tremendously helpful in thinking through William’s story.

In short, this book is a valuable and even important contribution to literary scholarship. The book does not make admission easy: anyone unfamiliar with William’s story will not find any shortcuts to understanding. The occasional untranslated Latin phrase does not help. And Blurton’s afterword aside, I worry that in her focus on the page, the profound real-world consequences of the story also seem, perhaps inevitably, two-dimensional. These concerns may mean that the book, though learned, tight, and very persuasive, does not get the exposure it deserves.

Merrall Llewelyn Price
Western Kentucky University
doi:10.1017/S0009640723001993