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All the Single Ladies: Christina of Markyate and the Importance of Spiritual Guidance in Medieval England

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All the Single Ladies: Christina of Markyate and the Importance of Spiritual Guidance in Medieval England

Courtney Weaver

Thesis submitted
to the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

All the Single Ladies: Christina of Markyate and the Importance of Spiritual Guidance in Medieval England
Courtney Weaver

This thesis analyzes the Life of Christina of Markyate to illustrate how the pages of Christina’s manuscript contain keys to a better understanding of issues of sex, gender, and religion in the Middle Ages, especially in regards of how space, enclosure, and spiritual guidance were used by medieval religious people to further their devotional practices. By explicating the nature of Christina’s enclosure experiences, we see how her life serves as an example of the importance of spiritual guidance in medieval lives. Christina’s recorded experience of enclosure can help us grasp the significant role that space played in helping advance opportunities for spiritual guidance. By studying Christina’s vita, we can further our knowledge about the experiences of twelfth-century religious women.
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Chapter 1 - Introduction

The virgin of God lay prostrate in the old man’s chapel, with her face turned to the ground. The man of God stepped over her with his face averted in order not to see her. But as he passed by he looked over his shoulder to see how modestly the handmaid of Christ had composed herself for prayer, as this was one of the things which he thought those who pray ought to observe. Yet she, at the same instant, glanced upwards to appraise the bearing and deportment of the old man, for in these she considered that some trace of his great holiness was apparent. And so they saw each other, not by design and yet not by chance, but, as afterwards became clear, by the divine will. For if they had not had a glimpse of each other, neither would have presumed to live with the other in the confined space of the cell: they would not have dwelt together: they would not have been stimulated by such heavenly desire, nor would they have attained such a lofty place in heaven. *The Life of Christina of Markyate: A Twelfth Century Recluse*¹

The story of Christina of Markyate is a remarkable story of religious devotion, enclosure, spiritual mentors, and of a woman who possessed great perseverance as she overcame obstacles in order to pursue her dream of living a religious life. Christina was a twelfth-century teenager who ran away from her parents’ home in order to pursue a reclusive, religious lifestyle. She encountered many difficulties along her path to enlightenment, but successfully overcame them with the assistance provided by God and a few spiritual guides. As seen in the opening quotation, through divine will, Christina enjoyed a close, spiritual relationship with one of her mentors, Roger the hermit. Their shared devotion to Christ enabled them to dwell together in peace and learn from one another. Leading a religious life was not easy for twelfth-century women, especially since religious men often avoided socializing with women because of contemporary concerns for ritual purity. Nevertheless, as seen in the above quotation, Christina received assistance and spiritual guidance from religious men, as well as religious women. Christina’s life and religious experience were fundamentally shaped through residing with and receiving guidance from the various religious people she encountered in her hunt for inner peace.

Background to the *Vita* and Its Manuscript Tradition:

The *Life of Christina of Markyate* comes to us through a *vita* that was written during the later years of Christina’s life (1096-1155). Christina was born to Auti and Beatrix in the English town of Huntingdon, sometime between 1096 and 1098.\(^2\) As wealthy Anglo-Saxon merchants, Christina’s parents probably sought to maintain and strengthen their social position through various means, including the arrangement of an advantageous marriage between their daughter and the wealthy young nobleman, Burthred. This union was suggested by the Norman bishop, Ralph of Durham, who was justiciar of all of England and second only to the king.\(^3\) In all likelihood, at the time of Christina’s birth, her parents probably feared the stability of their social status. During the eleventh century, England was taken over by Norman forces who threatened to invalidate the social standing of the established Anglo-Saxon nobility. Thirty years before Christina’s birth, the Norman invasion redefined political, economic, and religious hierarchies. Therefore, Christina’s parents may have welcomed this suggestion from the bishop and delighted in the favor it bestowed upon them.

Hugh Thomas maintains that the conquest diminished the authority of the native ruling class and redistributed many of their landholdings, giving them to the recently immigrated Norman aristocracy. The invasion signaled a new era in English history, defined by distinct changes in language and culture that eventually created a closer link between England and continental Europe. However, most of the Anglo-Saxon nobility did not welcome the linguistic and cultural invasion; they resented the Norman king, who dissolved English control over the church and eliminated the old Anglo-Saxon aristocracy. As the decades of Norman rule progressed, fewer and fewer Englishmen and women held positions of authority in the church.

\(^2\) Talbot, 13.
\(^3\) Talbot, 41.
and in the monasteries. It is interesting to point out that in Christina’s *vita* all of the bishops and official church men are of Norman descent; this included Bishops Ralph, Robert, and Archbishop Thurstan. However, the monastic men such as the canon Sueno and the hermit Roger were both native Englishmen. At one point, the author records Roger exclaiming to Christina “‘Rejoice with me, myn sunendaeg dohter’” which is the only English phrase sprinkled among the Latin of the *vita*’s manuscript.

This seems to support scholars’ claim that by the eleventh century most of England’s clergy was supplanted with people of Norman heritage. It is likely that Christina’s family attempted to adjust to Norman influences in an effort to maintain their social status and wealth. Christina’s father, Auti, was supposedly a wealthy, highly respected man who held a certain degree of influence with the clergy and many members of the community. Thus, when Christina expressed her desire to lead a celibate, religious life, her parents saw this as detrimental to their social standing and did everything in their power to suppress Christina’s religious fervor. However, as the story progresses, Christina’s passion to live devoted to Christ supersedes her loyalty to her parents, so she runs away in search of a safe place where she can live each day in complete devotion to God.

The author who composed this story of Christina’s spiritual journey is an unknown monk of St. Alban’s monastery which Christina was closely associated with during the later period of her life. Presently, there are no extant, contemporary manuscript copies of her life. The closest existing documentation that we have is preserved in one fourteenth-century manuscript, the MS Cotton Tiberius E. i., and in two summaries compiled in the fourteenth and the seventeenth

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5 Talbot, 107.
centuries. The fact that there are so few remaining copies of her life is interesting and leaves several unanswered questions about the history and longevity of this vita. The lack of extant manuscripts could perhaps point to the debate surrounding the provision of spiritual guidance in twelfth-century England. This is speculation, for we do not know exactly why Christina’s life was recorded, nor can we be certain of why it survives in such a limited form. However, if it was recorded as a witness to the benefits of providing spiritual guidance to both men and women, the manuscripts might have been destroyed by church officials or clerics who considered it inappropriate for male clerics to provide women with spiritual guidance, or the paucity of surviving copies may stand testament to the debate surrounding the provision of such spiritual guidance. Regardless of why so few copies of the story exist, I am grateful that a few editions survived, for Christina’s life is interesting and sheds light on asceticism, piety, and religious life in twelfth-century England.

The Tiberius manuscript is the longest extant manuscript of Christina’s life. This is the version which was first translated and edited by C. H. Talbot in 1959. The Tiberius manuscript was found appended to the end of the earliest known copy of John of Tynemouth’s Sanctilogium Angliae, Walliae, Scotiae, et Hiberniae. John was a monk at St. Albans, who collected and recorded the lives of native English saints during the first half of the fourteenth century. The second version, which is an abridged version of Christina’s life, is attached to the end of the Gesta abbatum monasterii Sancti Albani, which is a chronicle of St. Albans monastery. This chronicle was begun by Matthew Paris in the 1240s, and continued in the fourteenth century by Thomas Walsingham, a monk at St. Albans. Rachel Koopmans, in her seminal article on the

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7 Koopmans, 669.
textual remains of Christina’s Life, demonstrated that the extracts found in Walsingham’s continuation of the *Gesta* did not derive from the version of the *Life* found in John’s *Sanctilogium*. Rather they seem to have been taken from another copy of the *Life*, one that may have been preserved at the Benedictine priory that Christina had founded at Markyate, for the *Gesta* itself twice attests to the existence of a copy there, though this copy has never been found.\(^8\)

The last known existing copy of Christina’s life is another summary which was recorded around 1600 by Nicholas Roscarrock in his *Lives of the English Saints*.\(^9\)

However, none of the versions of Christina’s *Life* provide a complete witness to the twelfth-century original. The Tiberius version offers the fullest narrative account: it details her birth; her spiritual advancement and initial vow of virginity; the attempts made by her parents, various clerics, and suitors to ensnare her in marriage; her years of enclosure; her official consecration as a virgin; and her friendship with Abbott Geoffrey. But this version breaks off well before her death and before the founding of Markyate as a priory in 1145.\(^10\) It is unknown if the author left his work unfinished on purpose, or if pages of the folio are simply missing. We do know that the manuscript was severely damaged in 1731 in a fire at the Ashburnham House, where this manuscript along with other documents in the Cotton collection were being temporarily housed.\(^11\) Due to the fire damage, the manuscript was deemed too damaged to decipher for over two centuries until Talbot assumed the task. Some scholars, including Talbot, are of the impression that the other folio pages are missing because they must have been destroyed in the 1731 fire.

\(^8\) Koopmans, 696
\(^9\) Koopmans, 666.
\(^10\) Koopmans, 663.
\(^11\) Talbot, 2.
While Rachel Koopmans agrees that at least one leaf is missing from the text of Christina’s *Life*, she argues that “evidence strongly suggests that we have nearly all of the text of Christina’s *Vita* that there ever was.”\(^{12}\) She relies on the scholarship of Nicholas Roscarrock and his abridgement of Christina’s *Life* to support her argument. Roscarrock viewed the Tiberius manuscript sometime in the early seventeenth century, a century before the damaging fire occurred, and in his abstract of the Tiberius version of Christina’s *Life*, the final events that he recorded conclude about where the translations of the Tiberius manuscript currently end. Detecting this abrupt conclusion led Roscarrock to wonder: “whether theyre bee anie perfitt Coppie, or whither the writer dyed before he perfitted it; or whither shee removed to anie other place, where the writer had noe intelligence of her.”\(^{13}\) Notably, as Koopmans observes, Roscarrock makes no mention of the manuscript which he was viewing and copying from for his digest as being damaged. Thus, according to this information, it would seem that the version of Christina’s *Life* found in the Tiberius manuscript is nearly complete, which led Koopmans to believe that the original, twelfth-century *Life* was left unfinished.

Regardless of whether the manuscript was finished or not, the part which exists is still important, as it provides insights into the religious sentiments of twelfth-century England. However, until the twentieth century, the manuscript remained untouched since it was deemed impossible to decipher. However, Dr. C.H. Talbot found the manuscript, saw worth in it, and painstakingly translated it from its original Latin by using ultra-violet technology to help illuminate and clarify the blurry text. Talbot’s translation is the only existing English translation

\(^{12}\) Koopmans, 665.  
of the *Life of Christina of Markyate* and it was published in 1959. In his translation, Talbot is convinced that the Tiberius manuscript must have lost several folios, which supposedly depict the remainder of Christina’s life. Whether Talbot’s argument or Koopmans’s is correct is irrelevant to my discussion of Christina’s life, so I will omit discussing it further. The existing portions of the *vita* reveal interesting ideas of what life might have looked like for women in twelfth-century England, especially for women who desired to live an enclosed, religious life.

Enclosure is an important part of Christina of Markyate’s spiritual journey. During the central Middle Ages one of the most significant ways of devoting oneself entirely to God was through enclosure. According to Liz McAvoy, religious enclosure began in the second century as a means of protection. She says that “the first followers of Christ – men, women, and their children – fled into the safer caves and hills on the fringes of the Egyptian desert where they could live out their lives and their faith without the dangers of persecution.” However, as Christianity became more accepted in the fourth and fifth centuries, Christians no longer had to hide for fear of persecution. A few zealous Christians continued to embrace lives of individual solitude, living out ascetic, contemplative lives as holy men and women in the desert wilderness. These first Christian hermits who saw and embraced the benefits of solitude were the precursors of the medieval anchoritic tradition. In a similar manner, medieval religious people thought that enclosure would protect them from worldly influences that could cause them to stray into sin, and that solitude would also be beneficial by allowing them to devote all of their attention to magnifying Christ. Therefore, in the Middle Ages, various types of enclosed religious people

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14 Talbot, vii-ix.
15 Talbot, 5.
17 McAvoy, 7.
developed or reemerged; these included, but were not limited to, monks, nuns, hermits, recluses, and anchorites.

Christina’s *vita* was written to epitomize the twelfth-century drive for deeper spirituality and closeness with God, which was often achieved through religious enclosure. This type of religious lifestyle was appealing to both men and women, but here I will focus on the female religious recluses, specifically those called “anchoresses.” Medieval enclosure functioned to isolate the religious person from worldly temptations and many opportunities to indulge in sinful behavior, as it helped eliminate the other people and daily activities which might have distracted the anchoress from her devotions. These distractions could occur in the outside world as well as in a monastery, therefore, the only true way to remove oneself from most temptations was solitary enclosure. Enclosure also permitted the anchoress to determine the direction her spiritual journey would take.

Christina explicitly chose a life of active enclosure to further her religiosity, and she experienced this enclosure in a variety of situations. Therefore, we can use her *vita* to study how space was used as a vehicle to achieve closer union with God. However, a close analysis of Christina’s *vita* reveals that not every enclosed situation was conducive for spiritual growth. According to the author of her *vita*, Christina resided in several different enclosed spaces, and whenever she was unhappy with a location, due not to physical discomfort, but rather spiritual agitation, she would run away to find spiritual solace. Through a close examination of Christina’s experiences of enclosure, we can see that it is not just the enclosing space itself and the physical suffering which her confinement induced that was crucial to Christina’s spiritual growth. Instead, the people at each enclosure location and the spiritual guidance which they provided, or did not provide, were decisive in shaping Christina’s religious experience. Seen in
this way, enclosed space is important as the vehicle through which spiritual guidance takes place, but the spiritual guidance itself, which is provided by her religious mentors, is what was pivotal in shaping Christina’s religiosity.

**Ideas of Wilderness and Enclosure in Christian Tradition:**

Christina’s experiences reflect a theme also found in the *vita* of the “Desert Father,” St. Antony, in terms of his desire for solitude, but depart markedly from his disdain of people. According to his *vita*, Antony most enjoyed the time he spent “alone in the inner mountain devoting his time and energy to prayers and discipline,” thus, when he was overwhelmed by the world, he would run away to his fortress of solitude in the wilderness of the inner mountain. Reading his *vita*, it seems that St. Antony would have much preferred living a life in total isolation. Athanasius, the author of Antony’s *Life*, remarks that Antony was “disconsolate at being annoyed by so many visitors,” so at the last years of his life he tried to find more and more secluded spots to reside. When Antony was on his deathbed, Athanasius mentions that he had “two men who had also remained within and assisted him on account of his old age,” however, they are not deemed important enough to be attributed names or more than just a few lines in passing.

In contrast, although Christina does run away into the “wilderness” in her *vita*, it is more of a metaphorical wilderness, rather than an actual, physical wilderness. Also, Christina is rarely alone in her *vita*. Although the author mentions her enclosure, her solitude, and her running into the wilderness, she almost always has a companion with her, and in most cases the companion is important enough to her story that they are mentioned by name and described in detail.

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19 Athanasius, 73.
20 Athanasius, 78.
Therefore, in Christina’s story of enclosure, which occurred seven centuries after St. Antony lived, other people, and the guidance they offer (or deny), play an important role. In her story, enclosure does not function as a refuge or as an escape from people, but rather, the surrounding people are necessary for Christina to live an enclosed lifestyle. Christina, like the strictly enclosed anchoresses of her time period, was dependent on other people to provide her with sustenance and to provide her with spiritual direction, and this in turn allowed her to grow spiritually to a place at the end of her vita where she provides what she once hungrily sought. The story of Christina of Markyate would have been much less interesting and edifying if it had not discussed her spiritual interactions with other people. Her vita is instrumental in helping us understand the spiritual ideas of the twelfth century and the historical context helps us comprehend Christina’s need for this guidance and the role people played in her vita. To better understand the medieval concepts of religious devotion and asceticism, it is important to understand how medieval religious people might have viewed the world around them and actively participated in shaping their physical location to better fit their devotional desires.

*Negotiating the Landscape: Environment and Monastic Identity in the Medieval Ardennes*\(^\text{21}\) by Ellen Arnold is helpful in explaining how medieval religious people understood the concept of “the wilderness” and shaped it in various ways to fit their religious needs. This book addresses the relationship that the Benedictine monks of Stavelot-Malmedy monasteries had with their local environment from the seventh to the twelfth century. This study emphasizes how fluid, and yet important, the idea of “wilderness” was in medieval religious life and how medieval religious people often used their imagination to shape the world around them to fulfill

their religious desires. In Christina’s *vita*, the author shows how Christina and her companions shaped their circumstances to help achieve the goal of asceticism. In a similar vein, Arnold argues that the monks, who lived in a bountiful, pastoral landscape, used their “environmental imagination” to transform the pastoral landscape into a wild, dangerous wilderness. The monks enjoyed the bounty that the pastoral land provided, but they also embraced the isolation that the trees’ thick foliage seemingly provided and the dangers, such as wolves, that were inherent in the surrounding forests. The monks created their own religious landscape and narratives about them for their own ends.

Monasteries present an interesting case study because although they were supposedly isolated locations, they were also often located near urban centers and held prominent positions in the surrounding communities. Like monasteries, anchorages also possessed this complexity of location: they were supposed to be in isolated settings, but were often located in the center of towns. Arnold argues that “Stavelot-Malmedy’s relationship with nature was full of contradictions, many related to the inherent problem of a monastic community dealing with the conflict between ideals and realities… because of this, the monks of the Ardennes developed multiple, coexisting ideas about the nonhuman world.” Although the surrounding community was relatively domesticated and peaceful, the monks reshaped it to connect with the images of the monastic “desert.” Therefore, they often portrayed their surroundings as an isolated wilderness. This imagined landscape allowed them to feel connected with the tradition of religious seclusion as established by the Desert Fathers without venturing too far from their local

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22 Arnold, 3.  
23 Arnold, 7.  
24 Arnold, 35.  
25 Arnold, 6.  
26 Arnold, 8.
community. Perhaps this connection to the Desert Fathers also helped further their spiritual practices. These differing views of nature permitted the monastic communities to better understand and actively shape their religious identity. This study of monasteries provides useful information about how medieval monks actively participated in shaping their surroundings, and this in turn helps clarify the role of enclosed space in Christina’s *vita*. In her life, both Christina and other people actively participated in shaping enclosed spaces to better fit their religious expectations.

Similar to the ideas of landscape possessed by the monks of Stavelot-Malmedy, the medieval anchorage can be seen as more of a symbolic space than a clearly delineated physical location. It was the devotional practices of the recluse which transformed a regular space into a religious one. Like the monks at Stavelot-Malmedy monasteries, religious people often used what spaces were available to them, and imbued the spaces with meaning through their devotional practices. Space, like nature, was a fluid concept to medieval religious people. However, not all spaces were equal or suitable for helping advance a person’s sanctity. Although Christina was enclosed in various places, only certain locations increased her faith or helped further her devotional practices. The idea of having an isolated religious space was crucial to the full embodiment of pious expectations. However, the definition of this term “space” and the freedoms that it might have brought, are convoluted. The concepts of literal and figurative space are both extremely important in the study of medieval devotional practices. With St. Antony, the more literally isolated space that he had, in the wilderness away from people, the more satisfied he was with his devotional practices.

With Christina, the concepts of space and enclosure seem to be fluid, yet interconnected. Where Christina was located during each of her enclosure experiences directly influenced her
spiritual growth and happiness. However, more importantly, Christina’s enclosure experiences were shaped not only by her physical location, but also by the people associated with each place and how they helped or hindered her in her spiritual growth. When Christina was enclosed in locations where she was provided with spiritual guidance, she experienced the triumph and liberation of her soul over her body, and she was the most content, regardless of the physical limitations that these locations might have imposed upon her. In these locations where Christina was surrounded by people who encouraged her in her walk with Christ, she was able to fully embrace her spiritual freedom, despite her bodily confinement. When Christina was in locations where she was given no spiritual guidance, it seems as though God was distant from her, she was tempted by sin, and her spirituality was repressed. Though her enclosing space might have been more physically comfortable in these places, Christina experienced misery and it was from these enclosures which lacked spiritual direction that she fled into deeper isolation to quiet and restore her spirit back to its previous autonomy. This shows that the author was aware that spiritual guidance played a crucial role in Christina’s spiritual development. Perhaps the author described Christina’s spiritual journey in this way to help promote the benefits of spiritual guidance and mentoring others. During the twelfth century, male clerics were leery of providing women with spiritual counsel due to sexual temptation; this account of Christina’s life offers evidence that male and female religious people could socialize and learn from each other when their relationship is based wholly on Christ and centered on providing spiritual guidance.

By reading Christina’s vita through this lens, we can see that while enclosure was an important ideal for expressing religious devotion, it was Christina’s experience of spiritual guidance that infused the spaces she inhabited with meaning. This guidance was crucial to Christina blossoming into the woman of God whose life story the author thought was worthy of
recording during a time when very few vitas of women were being written. Christina is a remarkable twelfth-century woman; like religiously devoted men and women before her, she overcame barriers to her spiritual journey and used the religious landscape available to her to shape her own religious setting. Christina embraced previous religious ideals, such as the seclusion of the Desert Fathers and the spiritual traits of the virgin martyrs, to shape her spirituality. Therefore, finding an enclosed religious space was an important component to Christina’s ideal religious experience and what she actively sought, but it was the people she encountered in her enclosed spaces that significantly shaped her experience. Whether being mentored by the hermit Roger, experiencing no spiritual guidance while living with the unnamed cleric, or acting as a mentor herself, Christina’s spiritual experience is directly shaped by both the presence and absence of spiritual guidance. Through her vita, we see Christina’s spirituality develop as she transforms from an impressionable girl, young in her faith, into a respected woman of faith who provides spiritual counsel to the abbot of St. Albans. Christina’s vita exposes the importance of providing all Christians with access to spiritual guidance.

This idea of spiritual guidance is an important thread to tease out of Christina’s vita. Spiritual guidance could be hard to come by for women in twelfth-century England. Many male clerics were often wary of counseling women due to the inherent sensuality which women were alleged to possess, thus women were seen as a potential threat to clerical chastity. Due to the strict ritual purity restrictions that clerics were supposed to adhere to in order to handle the Eucharist, writings cautioned clerics in ministering to women in order to protect their chastity, ritual purity, and reputation. Against this backdrop, it is significant that the monk who authored Christina’s vita placed such a strong emphasis on the mentors Christina had at each enclosure location and the spiritual guidance, or lack thereof, which was provided for her. The author could
have successfully discussed Christina’s physical suffering and enclosure experiences without mentioning the spiritual guidance she received or the people she resided with, other than just briefly mentioning them by name. Yet, as indicated by the opening quotation, he spends a significant amount of time discussing the impact that the hermit, Roger, had on her life and spiritual direction and how Christina’s piety was directly shaped by the people she associated with during each enclosure. This shows that the author realized that Christina’s experience of spiritual guidance was significant, especially for a woman during the twelfth century. The author recognized that religious women were not the “great threat” that the after-effects of the Gregorian Reform movement claimed they were. Rather, women were a crucial aspect of the church and when provided with wholesome spiritual guidance, they could become productive members of the religious community whose advice was gladly welcomed by prominent abbots.

A close reading of Christina’s *vita* will help illuminate why the various spaces and the people residing at each spot are important to the story of Christina’s quest for deeper spirituality and freedom of devotion. Each space described in Christina’s *vita* is accompanied by a companion who shared that space with Christina. These companions were deeply influential in Christina’s life and her religious experience. In Christina’s life, the spiritual guidance provided by some of her companions led to the triumph and liberation of her soul over her earthly body, while the lack of guidance brought her more anguish and discomfort than being enclosed in a tiny, dark cell did. As we look at what these spaces, the enclosure process, and the presence and lack of spiritual guidance tell us about Christina own life, they will also help shed light on the broader topics of religion and expressions of piety in twelfth-century England. In this analysis, I will focus specifically on the way that the author uses space in Christina’s *vita* as a vehicle for spiritual guidance and deeper religious experiences.
Historiography:

Most scholarship on the *Life* of Christina of Markyate has focused on select parts of this twelfth-century holy woman’s life. This thesis takes a step back, to look at and analyze the story of Christina’s life in its entirety, situated against the backdrop of twelfth-century developments in pious expression. Christina’s *vita* was relatively unknown in the modern era, and therefore not written about, until Talbot published his English translation in the mid-twentieth century. Talbot’s translation brought her *Life* into the medieval scholarship on subjects including family, marriage, sexuality, and religious life. The current collection of scholarly work on Christina includes a few chapters which provide a general overview of her life in conjunction with the religious movements of the twelfth-century or grouped together with the lives of other religious women, and journal articles which delve deeper into various aspects of Christina’s life. These articles tend to focus on three distinct topics: Christina’s visions, the relation between Christina and the St. Albans Psalter, and Christina’s sexuality and her relationship with men. This scholarship has also provided a clearer window into medieval women’s spirituality.

The earliest work which uses Talbot’s translation of Christina’s life began appearing in the late 1970s. In 1978, Christopher Holdsworth wrote a short chapter entitled “Christina of Markyte”\(^\text{27}\) that touches on all of the above-mentioned themes: Christina’s struggle to maintain her chastity, her visions, the friendship between the recluse and the abbot, and the St. Albans Psalter. This chapter is brief yet provides useful information. Holdsworth, perhaps in the vein of second-wave feminism, addresses how recluses could gain power by fleeing the pressures of society and rejecting the control of others. Through this means, the recluse had “taken on a status on sacred ‘outsiderhood’ and it was this that partly gave him or her a status to be felt full of

power which could flow out into the world.”\textsuperscript{28} Sharon Elkins’ book \textit{Holy Women of Twelfth-Century England}\textsuperscript{29} has twelve pages in a chapter called “The Eremitic Life” devoted to Christina. These pages dwell on friendship and virginity in Christina’s life. Like Holdsworth, Elkins sees Christina’s vow of virginity as an important aspect of Christina’s life. However, she argues that Christina’s virginity had a pragmatic value and was the only thing that could save her from her family’s plans for her future. In 1988, Ruth Karras published an article\textsuperscript{30} that revolved around the friends that Christina had and argues that these were more than just “friendships” but were deep and exclusive bonds of “spiritual love.” This love provided a channel for holy people to express emotions of ‘erotic love’ without harming their chastity. Also published in 1988 was Shari Horner’s \textit{Discourse of Enclosure}.\textsuperscript{31} Her final chapter revolves around Christina and she analyzes how Christina’s body was subjugated to real or threatened violence. She concludes that the literal body of the saint acted as the vehicle for her spiritual triumph. In 2011, Rachel Koopmans published a seminal article\textsuperscript{32} that discusses the abrupt end of the manuscript. She argues that it was not demolished in the fire, but rather the ending never existed. She convincingly dates the composition of Christina’s \textit{vita} to the 1140s, during Geoffrey’s tenure as Abbott of St. Albans. She suggests that after Geoffrey’s death, there was infighting among the monks of St. Albans about the benefit of Christina’s reputation to the St. Albans’ community, and so the monks simply allowed the memory of Christina to disappear and she had little-to-no impact on her contemporaries. The only book that had been published regarding Christina’s life

\begin{itemize}
  \item\textsuperscript{28} Holdsworth, 204.
\end{itemize}
is a compilation of fourteen articles, published in 2005.³³ For the most part, the articles deal with issues of romance and sexuality present in the vita. Though some of them, such as Dyan Elliott’s “Alternative Intimacies: Men, Women, and Spiritual Direction in the Twelfth Century” shed light on Christina’s relations with her various mentors.³⁴ This chapter was instrumental in showing me how important mentors were in Christina’s life and opened me up to exploring how these relationships effected Christina’s life and spiritual growth. However, Elliott analyzes spiritual direction as an “alternative intimacy to marriage,”³⁵ and she looks at how Christina’s experience of spiritual guidance compares to that given and received by other sets of unmarried, opposite-gendered spiritual companions, such as Paphnutius and Thais. In contrast, this thesis analyzes how gaining, or lacking, spiritual guidance affected Christina’s spirituality, and how the receipt of spiritual guidance was an important factor in medieval English women’s religiosity. Taken together, these works noted above help illuminate the life of this twelfth-century holy woman and reshape how we view women’s religiosity in medieval England.

As seen above, the scholarly works on Christina’s life show how useful her vita is for exploring several topics surrounding medieval women and religiosity. Her vita is especially useful for exploring venues of medieval women’s spiritual involvement outside of the convent. The twelfth century marked a new emphasis on the individual religious experience, the rise of affective piety, and a drastic increase in the number of women involved in religious life. In chapter two I come back to these ideas and discuss the relevant historiography surrounding them, but for now I will focus on the impact these changes had on Christina’s life.

³⁵ Elliott, 161.
Christina stands at this site of change in expectations for religious women and her vita shows how women were becoming more involved in their own religious experience and were becoming able to influence others’ religious experiences as well. This thesis explores the contested ideas of female religiosity at a time when faith was undergoing a change to affective piety and considers the position of women within this change. The main focus however, is the impact that spiritual guidance had on Christina’s life. I argue that the spiritual guidance Christina received during her enclosure experiences was formative to her religious experience and helped her gain deeper devotional insights. Her enclosure and the guidance she received permitted her to have an active role in the direction of her religious devotions. If it had not been for the guidance Christina received, she might not have gained her deeply respected and renown spirituality which contributed to this vita being written.

Chapter Previews:

This analysis is divided into three additional chapters following this introduction and a short epilogue. The second chapter addresses the religious reforms occurring in the central Middle Ages and the impact these changes had on the experiences of religious women. The third chapter focuses on how Christina of Markyate epitomizes the twelfth-century holy woman and discusses her enclosure experiences. The fourth chapter flips the narrative as it provides a new reading of Christina’s vita which argues that when we focus solely on the suffering Christina experienced, we miss the attendant spiritual guidance which was crucial to her spiritual development, while the epilogue serves as the conclusion for this study.

Chapter two begins by discussing background information to religious developments and monasticism in eleventh-century England. Then, it transitions to discuss the new eremitical religious lifestyles developing in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The Gregorian Reform
which was solidified in the eleventh century had resounding effects on religious options for women. As clerical chastity became more important, women were seen as more of a threat and were therefore removed from religious positions which could compromise a cleric’s chastity. The anchoritic guides the *Ancrene Wisse* and Aelred’s *Guide for a Recluse* provide good examples of how women were discriminated against and seen as the root of lust. Chapter two also covers the expansion of religious expression in twelfth-century England and what options were available for women who wanted to lead a religious life. The twelfth century marked the rise of affective piety which was driven by medieval women. This chapter concludes by investigating the appeal of anchoritism for women who were blocked from pursuing other forms of religious devotion.

Chapter three looks at how Christina epitomizes the changes occurring in twelfth-century religious devotion. Her *vita* shows her pursuing a religious lifestyle outside of the cloister and using affective piety in her daily meditations. This chapter also compares the information found in Christina’s *vita* to that in the lives of the virgin martyrs: Katherine, Juliana, and Margaret, whose stories were popularly used as didactic tools in medieval spirituality. These women share many similarities in their pursuit of Christ. They were all devoted to maintaining their chastity, they possessed wisdom, they were renowned for their sanctity, they defied any authorities who stood in the way of them serving Christ, they endured physical suffering for Christ, and they all experienced confinement for their beliefs.

This chapter then transitions to compare Christina’s physical experience of enclosure with experiences recorded in anchoritic guidance manuals. Physical suffering for Christ was seen as the height of religiosity in the Middle Ages and exists in many saints’ lives. Against this
background I move to discuss how Christina was portrayed as a typical twelfth-century English holy woman and how the author used tropes in his writing to achieve this end.

The fourth chapter in this thesis covers the importance of spiritual guidance in Christina’s life. It discusses how Christina experienced enclosure at each location she resided. It then goes on to analyze the spiritual guidance Christina did or did not receive at each location and how it affected her spiritual journey. Spiritual guidance was beneficial in Christina’s life; when she received proper spiritual advice, Christina was content and joyful in her enclosure. When she received no spiritual guidance, she was disconsolate, experienced spiritual anguish, and tried to solve her problems by fleeing the enclosure. This shows that community and spiritual guidance was crucial in Christina’s life and helped form her into a religious woman who was renowned for her sanctity. This tradition of community can also be seen in the life of St. Antony. While he preferred to live in solitude, he decided to live close enough to a community so he could visit occasionally and offer spiritual guidance to the nearby monks.

Finally, the epilogue acts as a short summary of the findings in this thesis and the implications that these findings have on the study of spiritual guidance and enclosure for the spiritual experience of medieval women. This summary contains a quick recapitulation of Christina’s experience of spiritual guidance and the benefits it brought her. It also touches upon other possible reasons why the author might have written Christina’s vita as he did, but then goes on to discuss how these variations do not negate my reading of Christina’s vita. The epilogue concludes by discussing potential possibilities for future analyses of the existence and importance of providing spiritual guidance for medieval women.
Chapter 2: Medieval Religious Reforms and the Impact on Women

Impact of Norman Invasion on English Religion:

The twelfth century was a time of social, political, and religious transformation in England. This dramatic period of change began in the eleventh century with the arrival of the Normans. In 1066 William the Conqueror and his Norman knights had invaded and introduced a new system of governance to the Anglo-Saxons who resided on the island. The Norman invasion and integration also had resounding effects on the religiosity of the English people and society as a whole. In compensation for Pope Alexander II’s support in his claim to the English throne, William of Normandy promised that he would reform the English church. After the Conquest, canon law was increasingly codified and given universal validity in medieval England, especially through Gratian’s *Decretum* in 1140. This was not a phenomenon specific to England though, canon law was being increasingly codified throughout Europe during the eleventh to twelfth centuries. Twelfth-century England also experienced a revival of asceticism and monastic practices which is often attributed to the arrival of the Normans.

Monasticism in England Prior to 1066:

Prior to the Norman invasion, Christianity was an important part of many Anglo-Saxon people’s lives. To renounce the world was viewed as the highest expression of lay piety across Christendom and many Christian princes saw it as their duty to found monasteries and advance the spread of Christian asceticism. Although people supported and respected monasticism in pre-Norman England, Doris Stenton remarks that:

> The revival of religious life and order in the tenth century had been the work of monks influenced...by the rebirth of monastic enthusiasm on the continent. But political

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disunion and the unwillingness of great landlords to accept monastic rivals had prevented any general restoration throughout the land of religious foundations in which men could lead the monastic life.\textsuperscript{37}

Thus, although monasticism took root in England in 597 with the arrival of St. Augustine who had been sent by Pope Gregory the Great, both of whom were Benedictines, to convert the Saxons, prior to 1066, English monasticism was very limited compared with the continent, which experienced a flourishing of various monastic houses during the tenth and eleventh centuries. Brian Goulding notes that at the turn of the eleventh-century in England there were “only some thirty-five communities for men, fewer than ten for women.”\textsuperscript{38} There was also little diversity among these monastic communities. All were Benedictine, most were located in Wessex, and their members were largely aristocratic, especially in the nunneries. Across the channel in Normandy, monasteries were developing and flourishing under the governance of William who was concerned with every aspect of his duchy’s life. When William arrived in England, he became involved in governing every facet of his new realm, including the monastic life. After 1066, when William established his rule in England, many “competent abbots were drawn from Norman houses to bring the old English abbeys into the new order of the Conqueror.”\textsuperscript{39} This establishment of Norman bishops in the English monasteries helped bring them up to date with the diversity and growth of monasteries on the continent.

Twelfth-century England flourished with religious expression, manifest in various forms. The range of monastic options for men broadened dramatically during the dawn of the twelfth century, deriving from the renewed religious enthusiasm taking place on the continent. New monastic orders such as the Premonstratensians and the Cistercians surfaced in the years


\textsuperscript{38} Golding, 150.

\textsuperscript{39} Stenton, 231.
following the Norman Conquest. By 1200, hundreds of monastic houses were established in England (see Figure I). Although these religious communities espoused varying devotional practices, they had one thing in common, they were all influenced by the eremitical tradition. Goulding explains that these monastic communities “brought a new emphasis on asceticism, manual labor, and withdrawal from lay society.”\(^{40}\) The ascetic movement grew rapidly as people desired to live a simple life of self-denial and devotion to God. They wanted to remove themselves from the trials and temptations of the world and thereby gain a closer relationship with God. However, these new orders did not entirely satisfy the needs of some Englishmen who craved a life of solitude, prayer, and devotion entirely to God.\(^{41}\) Therefore, new, more personal eremitical experiences became widespread during the mid-twelfth century.

\(^{40}\) Goulding, 152.
\(^{41}\) Stenton, 236.
These new eremitical experiences often involved lives of solitude. Hermits, religious recluses, and anchoresses/anchorites formed a new level of religious society that endeavored to mimic the ascetic, isolated conduct of the Desert Fathers. Herbert Grundmann remarks that this ecclesiastical revival began in the mid-eleventh century and lasted through the twelfth. He claims that the revival occurred because a new consciousness, which was incited by the Gregorian Reforms, arose which sought to realize Christianity as a religious way of life immediately binding upon every genuine Christian. As Herbert Grundmann explains, this commitment was considered “more essential to the salvation of his soul than his position in the hierarchal ordo of the Church… the demand for Christian, evangelical poverty, as well as for apostolic life and

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work, became the foci of a new conception of the essence of Christianity…supplying a new standard for evaluating the truly Christian life.”\textsuperscript{43} The individuals who decided to participate in this ascetic lifestyle were not restricted to aristocrats. Rather, their social status varied considerably and they were recruited from both rural and urban environments. Goulding says that most hermits that we have record of were “of native, non-Norman stock and often functioned as intermediaries between the colonizers and the colonized.”\textsuperscript{44}

While men often elected to become hermits, the life of an anchoress was one route whereby a woman desirous of leading a religious life could find fulfillment. The lifestyle of an anchoress came about because there were women who wanted to live the solitary lifestyle but were not able to live alone in the wild. The life of a hermit was often nomadic, and hermits were often responsible for acquiring their own sustenance, and thus it was viewed as unsuited for a woman in the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{45} Anchoresses were often provided for by others, they were dependent on others for a place of abode, food, and clothing by a patron, and so it was seen as a more suitable lifestyle for women. It provided women with safety and security that a hermit’s hut would not.

The anchoress was enclosed within the confines of her cell. Most often the cell was attached to the parish church. Thus, the anchoress was not cut off from the world, but rather she was anchored in it, though she was in isolation from it. Stenton points out one reason why the life of an anchoress might be appealing to women in the Middle Ages. She says that the anchoritic lifestyle must have been an appealing alternative to arranged marriages, explaining,

\textsuperscript{44} Goulding, 153.
“there must have been many girls like Christina of Huntingdon, who, forced into a distasteful marriage, left home to lie in a cell beside an anchorite on the Dunstable road.” However, many women also chose this vocation out of religious fervor and a desire to devote themselves entirely to God.

**Background to the Gregorian Reform:**

Amid this monastic revival, the Gregorian Reform was also taking place. This was a series of reforms which dealt with the moral reform of the church and clergy; and considering this reform helps us understand the presentation of Christina’s options for pursuing a religious life and the role played by spiritual guidance in her *vita*. The Reform included topics such as simony, clerical marriage, and freedom of the church from lay influence. The increasing prevalence of simony in the ninth century led to increased secular control over church authority and a perceived moral decline in the people who held church offices. In order to rescue the church from its moral depravity and reclaim some of the lost ecclesiastical power, church officials under Pope Leo IX (1049-1054) began a series of reform efforts that would later be referred to as the Gregorian Reform. These reform efforts initially began when Pope Leo ordered the clergy to renounce their wives and dismissed the church officials who had purchased their offices. Named for Pope Leo’s successor, Pope Gregory VII (1073-1085), the Gregorian Reform represents a continuation of Pope Leo’s earlier reform work. Building off of Pope Leo’s ideological foundations, Pope Gregory advocated for church reform and the expansion of papal powers by expelling secular influence from ecclesiastical institutions.

The most well-known components of the Gregorian Reform are the dispensation of simony and the Investiture Controversy, which involved determining who possessed more

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46 Stenton, 236.
authority, the secular king or the pope who was a liaison for God. Although these were both issues that had a widespread resonance through medieval society, the reform measures concerning clerical chastity and marriage had a lasting effect on people outside of the clerical fold. While the Gregorian Reform was not aimed directly at nuns, it had a lasting impact on them and on women desirous of living a religious life in general, such as Christina of Markyate.

After the Reform was established with its emphasis placed on clerical chastity, clerical and religious men’s opinion of women changed significantly. Clerical celibacy had been canon law for centuries, yet it was often ignored and many priests were either married, secretly married, or living with a concubine. While purity and holiness were held as aims of all Christians as they thought about their salvation, it was especially important for the priests and church officials to strive after cleanliness, for unchaste behavior undercut the clergy’s claim to moral authority and did not present a virtuous pattern for their parishioners to follow. Constance Berman suggests that the doctrine of transubstantiation contributed to Gregory VII’s desire to limit clerical marriages and preserve clerical chastity. With the bread becoming Christ’s true flesh, it would become sullied if it was consecrated by a sinful cleric, therefore only those considered “pure” were qualified to handle the body of Christ. 47 According to Grundmann, Gregory VII held that “only worthy priests had the power to carry out their religious functions, so that he branded...married and unchaste priests, to be illegitimate, ineffectual usurpers of the priestly office. He also had such simoniac and unchaste priests as dared perform the mass or other duties of ecclesiastical office prosecuted as heretics.” 48 With the possible desecration of the Host and the impending threat from the Pope, clerics began insisting on their own celibacy and began

48 Grundmann, 7.
considering the potential threats to it. Celibacy was enjoined upon the clergy because of the threat that sin posed to their salvation, because of the concern that the purity of priests might affect the validity of sacraments, and it also helped reduce the economic burdens that the church claimed were being placed on it by clerical marriage and giving inheritance to the priests’ children. Priests received their compensation from the church, therefore, before the reform, when priests married and reproduced, they needed a larger amount of money from the church to care for their wives and children.49 After the Reform, women and marriage were seen not only as pollutants for clerics, but also as a burden on the church’s time and resources. Thus, the elimination of clerical marriage would help preserve the sanctity of the clerics, and also help remove some financial obligations on the church’s coffers.

In her introduction to the chapters discussing clerical reform, Berman suggests that “the rhetoric of the clerical and monastic orders began to place barriers between clerics and all women, even nuns.” 50 In her chapter, Jo Ann McNamara argues that through the Gregorian Reform, the male clergy attempted to “ungender” themselves by ending clerical marriage and excluding women from participating in church affairs. This successfully recreated the public sphere and restricted it to men only.51 As the ban on clerical marriage was enforced, priests’ wives were demonized and women began losing an important sphere of influence in the church.

Although Gregory VII began the movement for clerical celibacy in the 1080s, it took a few decades for it to be strictly enforced. The twelfth century saw the greatest movement toward clerical chastity, as Ruth Karras says “from the twelfth century on priests could not be

49 Grundmann, 6.
50 Berman, 97.
considered fully married under any circumstance.” The Second Lateran Council of 1139 was an important determiner in the issue of clerical marriage. This council declared that clerical unions were invalid and clerics who married or kept concubines could be stripped of their benefices. The council deemed that clergy should be “temples of God” which are kept undefiled by sin and carnal pleasure. After this council, clerical marriage was considered not just sinful, but was also forbidden.

McNamara makes the argument that prior to the Gregorian Reform, women, both nuns and priests’ wives, occupied important positions in the church and held a significant amount of authority. She says that, “until the tenth century, the system [of monasticism] was a model of near equality between women and men. The chanting of the offices was not gender specific, and monks and nuns shared the same Benedictine and Augustinian rites…monastic confession was made to both male and female heads of communities.” Priest’s wives performed services within their community akin to later Protestant clergy’s wives. They were highly involved in the community surrounding their husband’s church and sometimes even served in roles inside the church itself. Priests’ wives served as acolytes and could even read prayers throughout the Mass, although they could not consecrate the sacraments.

However, as the emphasis on ritual purity, especially that of clerics, increased during the eleventh century, religious women were relegated to the shadows as symbols of lust to be avoided at all costs, which had a direct impact on the avenues available for women to express their religiosity. McNamara remarks that “the incontrovertible truths of the Catholic religion

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53 Karras, “Priests” 119.
54 Karras, “Priests” 120.
55 McNamara, 105.
56 McNamara, 105.
provided theoretical support for a woman-free space, and the ordained clergy had already formed a solid core from which it could expand.” In the fifth century, the biblical traditions of sexuality and marriage from the Jewish legacy were reframed by St. Augustine’s concept that the fall of man was caused by the discovery of sexual desire. According to McNamera, if it was not for the woman Eve, mankind would not have been corrupted. Sin was linked to sexuality and sexuality was linked to women. Thus, Eve alone bore the burden of human sexuality and its associated pollution, which is the fundamental cause of sin and death. As clerics and monks became more concerned with ritual purity, many embraced this view of women causing the downfall of mankind. Clerical wives were scorned as potential pollutants and all women were to be approached carefully because they could cause men to fall into sin. McNamera asserts that “religious men’s fear and misogynist hatred were driving religious women to the margins of the monastic order (and asserting that such margins were corrupt) at the same time they drove women, in a larger sense, to the margins of humanity itself.”

As McNamara explains, the tenth-century abbot of Cluny monastery agreed with the earlier ideas of St. Augustine. Odo (abbot, 910-42) thought that “lust represented a lack of control that threatened to unman its victim, to reduce him to irrationality that subjected him to women.” A century later, the emphasis on clerical morality in the Gregorian Reform led both monastic and secular clergy to argue that the presence of women presented an inherent danger to male chastity and virtue. McNamara suggests that “women’s exclusion from the clergy restored the condition of Eden” where men were not tempted to sin and could therefore abide in an

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57 McNamara, 110.
58 McNamara, 112.
59 McNamara, 111.
60 McNamara, 112.
intimate closeness with God.\(^{61}\) The Reform thus purported to fix the breaches through which women threatened the institutional integrity of the church, and bring men back into close communion with God.

From the eleventh century on, though they were still accepted members of the church, women were removed from their religious roles in the public sphere. The loss of clerical marriage and the new powers of the ordained monastic orders severely limited the religious roles that women could partake in. Previously, male monks and female nuns possessed similar religious activities, praying and chanting the offices were the main activities of these religious groups. But in the eleventh century, when monks began adopting clerical orders so that they could perform the sacraments and sacred rites, they gained powers that were not available for women to pursue. This effectively widened the gap between monks and nuns. With the emphasis on religious men’s ritual purity, women were increasingly limited from having contact with men and were eventually secluded through strict active cloistering by the end of the thirteenth century. Although this evidence points to women being left out of a significant part of the religious sphere, this context is important to understand the options available to Christina and other twelfth-century women who wanted to live a life devoted to God. It is also interesting to point out that the emphasis on spiritual guidance prevalent in Christina’s \textit{vita} is a bit surprising given that at this historical moment women were supposed to be threatening and thus avoided.

**Later Anchoritic Guidance Manuals:**

This fear of contact with women for religious men can be seen in the enclosure of anchoresses in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, the form of religious life that Christina chose for herself. An exploration of the guides for anchoresses can help further

\(^{61}\) McNamara, 110.
demonstrate the concern about women having direct contact with men. These guides are very clear that the priest or anchoress’ male spiritual mentor should not spend much time with her, even if it is for purely devotional and instructional reasons. This shows that the Gregorian Reform movements for purity standards were taken seriously and some clergy actively tried to enforce them. However, despite the threat of women outlined in these prescriptive sources, Christina’s vita stands in contrast to the guidance manuals, as it suggests the value of providing spiritual guidance to and for women.

The anchoresses were typically secluded in a cell and were to have little to no contact with men. The anchoritic guides such as the Ancrene Wisse (c. 1224) and Aelred’s Guide for a Recluse (c. 1160) strongly suggest that the anchoress should be confined exclusively to her cell and that she should have no social interaction with men beyond that of a priest hearing her confession and even in that instance it should be brief and the priest should not see her. It is unknown whether these measures were to protect the anchoress from being seduced by men or vice versa. However, with the growing concern for male chastity and the increased cloistering of nuns during the twelfth century, it seems to hint that these measures were taken to protect male clerics from coming into too direct of contact with inherently alluring women, regardless of the women being steadfast in their devotion to virginity as brides of Christ.

Aelred of Rievaulx wrote his guidance manual at the behest of his sister who desired to live as an anchoress, and also for any other woman who might be desirous of living as a religious recluse. Aelred’s manual warns against an anchoress being too friendly with men lest her cell become a brothel,62 he also reminds her that “happy is the recluse who is unwilling to see or

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speak with a man.” However, since it is impossible for her to ban all conversation with men, she may speak to a priest who must be “an elderly man of mature character and good reputation. To him she may speak infrequently and for the sole purpose of confession and spiritual direction, receiving advice from him when in doubt and encouragement when depressed.” Aelred warns his sister that she must never allow the priest to touch her or stroke her hand for her presence and touch might awaken the lust in the priest for “the evil within our very bodies is always to be feared; it can so often arouse and unman even the oldest.” Here we see that Aelred expresses a fear common among eleventh-century religious men of being “unmanned” by looking at or being in the company of a woman.

Aelred admonishes his sister about men several more times in his guide. He tells her that if a man held in high esteem, such as an abbot or a prior, should wish to speak with her, he should only do so in the presence of a third person. She should not allow one particular man to visit her often, lest she get attached. When conversing with a man, the anchoress should “always have her face veiled…she should avoid looking at him, and only listen to him with fearful reserve.” She should be careful to avoid all conversation with young men and men of doubtful character. She should not send or accept letters or gifts from men, for this “fosters illicit affections.” All of these admonitions are recorded in the “Outer Man” section which is to guide how the anchoress behaves in her interaction with other people. In this section it seems that one of Aelred’s primary concerns is in regard to the anchoress’ interactions with men. However, in this section he never warns her about guarding her virginity; he mentions protecting her

63 Macpherson, 51.
64 Macpherson, 51-52.
65 Macpherson, 52.
66 Macpherson, 52.
67 Macpherson, 53.
reputation, but never her chastity. Perhaps he is most concerned about excluding her from men in order to prevent her from acting as an unwary seductress. It is only in the “Inner Man” section where Aelred cautions his sister to “guard with the utmost care and the utmost trepidation the priceless treasure of virginity” which “once lost cannot be recovered.” In this section, he is most concerned about her being tempted or “inflamed” with lust when she is alone. He warns that “virginity is often lost and chastity outraged without any commerce with another if the flesh is set on fire by a strong heat which subdues the will and takes the members by surprise.”

Therefore, it seems through reading this as though Aelred realizes that the seclusion of women is best for the chastity of men. As long as the anchoress remains veiled and does not touch or converse long with men, the men will not be tempted by fornication. However, the very seclusion of the anchoress could present a potential threat to her own chastity, but this seems to be a risk the religious men are willing to take as long as their own chastity is safeguarded.

The *Ancrene Wisse* or “Guide for Anchoresses” was written by an unknown cleric in the early thirteenth century for a group of sisters who decided to live an enclosed lifestyle devoted to Christ. Like Aelred, this author was concerned about isolating these women from having direct contact with men. He commends these sisters for not “using enticing looks and behavior” for some anchoresses use these means to dote on special people in the world and “go mad with them through sin.” This clearly shows that the cleric is aware of the “power” of seduction that women have and commands his charges to “love their windows as little as possible” so that they do not ensnare any men passing by with coquettish female glances. The author says that sin entered the world through Eve’s eyes. She looked at the forbidden apple and desired it. He

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68 Macpherson, 63.
69 Macpherson, 64.
cautions the anchoresses, “when you look at a man, you are in Eve’s situation: you look at the apple.”\textsuperscript{71} Eve quickly went from looking, to desiring, to tasting and if the anchoress does not carefully guard her eyes, she could follow in Eve’s footsteps.

In a similar vein, the author recounts the biblical stories of Dinah and Bathsheba as examples of women who led men into sin and their nation into disaster by simply letting men look at them. In Dinah’s example, because a man saw and desired her “the pledges of high patriarchs were broken and a great city was burned, and the king, his son and the citizens were slain, the women led away. Her father and her brothers were made outlaws, noble princes though they were. This is what came of her looking…and letting him lay eyes on her.”\textsuperscript{72} The cleric goes so far as to compare women to a dangerous pit which must be covered constantly lest someone fall into it and get injured. He also says that the blame should not rest on the person (the man) who falls in, but rather on the person who left it uncovered (the woman). The cleric is very adamant about this point and further states, “you who uncover this pit, you who do anything by which a man is carnally tempted through you, even if you do not know it, fear this judgement greatly.”\textsuperscript{73} The cleric quotes St. Augustine, saying “the eyes are the arrows of lechery’s pricking.”\textsuperscript{74} This is why the anchoress should always wear a thick veil, have heavy black curtains on her windows, and look out the window as little as possible because, as the cleric remarks, “an anchoress who shows herself to a man should not be trusted.”\textsuperscript{75}

This author is not as discreet as Aelred in his presentation of women as the root of lust who should be held responsible for tempting men to fall into sin. In his depiction, it is quite

\textsuperscript{71} Savage and Watson, 67.
\textsuperscript{72} Savage and Watson, 68.
\textsuperscript{73} Savage and Watson, 69.
\textsuperscript{74} Savage and Watson, 70.
\textsuperscript{75} Savage and Watson, 71.
evident that the anchoress is not secluded for her own protection, but rather she is hidden in a cell, behind thick curtains and a veil, to prevent men from seeing her and thus being inflamed with desire for her. The enclosure of these anchoresses was paramount to protecting men from falling into carnal sin, and if he did fall into the sin of lust, it was considered the anchoress’ fault alone. The ideas presented in the guidebook writings were prevalent throughout medieval England and had serious repercussions on the religious lifestyles that women could lead. Yet, Christina of Markyate proves to be a counterpoint to these ideas. Her *vita* deals with the topic of lust, and even says that Christina herself was inflamed with lust at one point in her life, but the main emphasis of her *vita* is spiritual guidance. This seems to suggest that despite the dangers that women supposedly posed, they could receive spiritual guidance from men without violating the purity of either party.

**Options for Religious Women in the Eleventh-Twelfth Centuries:**

It has been argued that the twelfth century is when women’s religious movements began flourishing. In 1935 Herbert Grundmann published a book, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, in which he argues that the twelfth and thirteenth centuries gave rise to a growing pressure from women of all social strata for active participation in religious life on the continent. He traces the origins of this pressure to the influence of wandering lay ministers, such as Robert of Arbrissel, who preached apostolic poverty and evangelism. Thus inspired by the ideal of the apostolic life, lay people began to turn away from the world, to embrace poverty and asceticism in the tradition of early Christians and the Desert Fathers.

In England, the transformation of religious life and attitudes and the proliferation of new forms that marked c.1100 to 1160 was so dramatic that historian Giles Constable refers to it as

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76 Grundmann, 77.
the “reformation of the twelfth century.” He says that “the years between about 1040-1160, were a period of intense, rapid, and to a high degree self-conscious change in almost all aspects of human thought and activity.”77 This change was especially apparent in religious institutions and attitudes as people began to shape their religion to suit their new spiritual needs and social conditions. As the church tried to “monasticize” the clergy, the influence of monasticism began to permeate society and acetic devotional practices flourished.78 The ‘reformation’ brought together existing Christian/monastic themes of solitude, poverty, following Rules, imitating Christ, and the apostolic life with a new fervor. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the monastic life did not represent an easy “escape from reality;” rather, it was a “call to a more difficult and demanding life, and one that excited almost universal admiration.”79

As religious orders flourished in the eleventh century, new religious orders developed in addition to the Benedictines. The development of these new religious orders was led by individuals who desired to further their personal devotional experiences, outside of the church authorities and encompassing different religious customs than the Benedictine Rule. The reformation of the twelfth century briefly gave new opportunities for women in religious life, especially as religious devotion became a more personal, private affair, although this was curtailed by the Gregorian Reform movement which withdrew sacred authority into its predominantly male hierarchy. During the end of the twelfth century, popular worship, often regarded as ‘heretical’ by the church, was increasingly brought under control and suppressed.

While some of the new orders like the Premonstratensians allowed women in their orders, the “reformed orders of monks” were less receptive of women. Constable suggests that this could

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77 Constable, 4.
78 Constable, 6.
79 Constable, 23.
have been because the demand for “a fully enclosed life was met by independent houses of nuns and canonesses.”\textsuperscript{80} He notes that the Grandmontines never admitted women, the Cistercians refused to admit women to their houses or to establish nunneries, and there was only one recorded Carthusian house for women and one Cluniac house in the twelfth century. During the twelfth century, Peter the Venerable “decreed that nuns and conversae must live at least two leagues away from the houses of monks.”\textsuperscript{81} Therefore, as the male religious orders shied away from providing housing and spiritual guidance for religious women, the main option for women wanting to live a religious life in twelfth-century England was to join a Benedictine convent.

Margaret Schaus argues that before the twelfth century, papal policy towards women’s monasticism was largely reactive. She says that “early medieval popes typically responded to requests from bishops, abbots, lay donors, or nuns themselves, but did not try to impress a particular stamp upon women’s monasticism. Papal initiatives could have consequences for female religious, as in the case of the Gregorian Reform, but those consequences do not appear to be the result of conscious design.”\textsuperscript{82} However, starting in the twelfth century, a “reinvigorated papacy buttressed by rationalized canon law and more clearly defined doctrine” sought to assert greater control over religious practice.\textsuperscript{83}

In the religiously-enthusiastic twelfth century, since women could no longer participate in the church as priests’ wives, they pursued various avenues to put their particular visions of the apostolic life into regular practice. This concerned the papacy which sought to standardize monastic life. Schaus suggests that “the enclosed contemplative life represented the ideal

\textsuperscript{80} Constable, 71.
\textsuperscript{81} Constable, 71.
\textsuperscript{82} Margaret Schaus, \textit{Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia} (New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 588.
\textsuperscript{83} Schaus, 588.
safeguard for orthodox practice in an age of increasing informality, and even heterodoxy."\textsuperscript{84} Therefore, the papacy sought to enclose all female religious in order to filter what doctrines the women were taught. The papacy tried to ensure that the large numbers of women who had been drawn to the new orders would have their spiritual and temporal needs met. However, as Schaus points out, “given that reform-minded male members in these orders often viewed women as occasions of sin, and that they consequently avoided service of them, that aim was not always satisfactorily achieved.”\textsuperscript{85} Therefore, women who entered convents were indeed secluded and often restricted in their religious learning and devotion.

By the late thirteenth century, nuns were strictly enclosed and had no access to outsiders or men except the priest who came to hear their confessions and perform the sacrament. In 1298 Pope Boniface VIII issued the decree \textit{Periculoso}.\textsuperscript{86} Henceforth, all nuns, regardless of the order they lived under, were to live strictly enclosed lives, leaving their monasteries only in the event of manifest necessity, and allowing no outsider to enter the cloister without license of the bishop. This severely restricted the religious influence of women in their communities, while supposedly helping to preserve the chastity of religious men.

However, alongside the established houses living under the Benedictine Rule, a range of vocational options flourished in England which did not clearly differentiate between gendered lifestyles and levels of enclosure as they would by the later Middle Ages. Constable says that “an awakening to the variety of individual religious needs and temperaments and an acceptance of a diversity of forms of religious life lay at the heart of the twelfth-century movement of religious

\textsuperscript{84} Schaus, 589.
\textsuperscript{85} Schaus, 588.
\textsuperscript{86} Schaus, 589.
reform." In this transitional context of the early twelfth century, informal hermit-like arrangements were undertaken by women such as Christina of Markyate. The life of a recluse was particularly attractive for women because it allowed them more freedom and informality than joining a convent and following a Rule would have. Twelfth-century recluses could structure their lives and devotional practices as they wished.

Sharon Elkins further clarifies this shift in options for religious women during the mid-twelfth century. Elkins notes that in 1130 a woman in England had few options to choose from if she wanted to lead a religious life. In all of England in 1130, there were only about twenty religious communities that accepted women, and there was little variation, as almost all of these communities followed the Benedictine Rule. She remarks that it was also difficult for just any woman to gain admission to one of these communities, “only a woman from a well-to-do or influential family enjoyed even these limited options; lower-class women were virtually excluded from religious life.” However, during the next few decades, religious options for women began to expand rapidly. By 1165 there were over a hundred Benedictine houses for religious women in England, and several other houses from different religious sects.

Not only did the number of houses increase during the years 1130-1165, but so did the types of religious options for women. Elkins says that “although most religious women in 1165 still followed the Benedictine Rule, they interpreted this rule in varying ways; some followed the elaborate customs of new religious orders like the Cistercians, the Gilbertines, or the Order of Fontevrault.” Also, by 1165 the monastic life was no longer restricted to just women with sources of financial backing, for “even the poorest of women could become “lay sisters,”

87 Constable, 87.
89 Elkins, xiii.
servants fully incorporated in religious life.”  

The number of communities for religious women in England continued to expand through the twelfth century. Elkins says that “approximately 120 new communities for religious women were established…and by 1200, the religious houses of England could accommodate more than three thousand women.” Elkins maintains that both coenobitic and eremitical forms of religious life flourished for women in twelfth-century England. This includes expanded opportunities for religious women as nuns, anchoresses, and small groups of religious women which resembled heritages. With the Norman leadership busy organizing the male monasteries and figuring out how to get the most revenue, religious women were mostly overlooked, and in this instance, it worked in their favor.

England, in the twelfth century, saw an increase in women conducting religious lives outside of monastery walls. Elkins says that “some of these women who began religious life without institutional support were called inclusa; others were labeled anachoreta, and still others were styled reclusa or simply virgo.” As Elkins points out, in the twelfth century these terms were often interchangeable and were a bit vague in their exact meaning. She says that the word “anachoreta” probably did not contain the connotations of a “strict enclosure ceremony and permanent vows that set apart later anchoresses.” Regardless, these twelfth-century women desired to live a life which was set apart for God, and yet not as restricted as life in a monastery. The life of an inclusa or anchoress provided a religious life that was flexible: the woman herself was in charge of deciding if she followed a religious rule, how much time she spent in prayer and

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90 Elkins, xiii.
91 Elkins, xiii.
92 Elkins, xix.
93 Elkins, 4.
94 Elkins, 19.
95 Elkins, 19.
devotions, and how much contact she might have with other people and the outside world. Elkins says that “without question, the twelfth century was the apex of enthusiasm for women’s religious life in England.” However, when the twelfth century ended, so did this expansion. From the thirteenth century on, all religious groups were increasingly brought under the church’s control and institutionalized.

Interestingly, while many secular clergy avoided women after the Gregorian Reform, Constable notes that during this same time “religious women were accorded high prestige” and that women played an important role in the twelfth-century reform movement. According to Constable, this regard for religious women stemmed from “admiration for qualities that were regarded as distinctively feminine, such as piety, mercy, and tenderness,” and these feminine qualities became a fundamental part of the later medieval devotional practices.

Sarah McNamer focuses in particular on this admiration of medieval religious women and sees these women as the catalyst for changes in devotional practices in the central Middle Ages. The feminine emotions which Constable identifies transformed devotional practices into something more personal and compassionate and led to the rise of affective piety. McNamer traces this rise and advances a new framework for understanding why women engaged in affective devotion with remarkable zeal. She explains that this trend was especially visible in the thirteenth century, but it had its origin in the twelfth. McNamer uses and expands on the arguments first put forth by Caroline Bynum in her seminal book, Holy Feast Holy Fast. In her book, Bynum argues that the “flesh, physicality, and the corporality of Christ were considered

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96 Elkins, 20.
97 Elkins, xiv.
98 Constable, 65.
99 Constable, 66.
100 Sarah McNamer, Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 15.
symbolically feminine by the thirteenth century; thus, women—who had interiorized the notion that they were more carnal than men—had a symbolic advantage: because of their ostensibly carnal nature, they could identify more fully than men with the incarnate Christ, feeling his suffering as their own.”  

McNamer’s study expands on this idea by asking the question “what could women gain by performing compassion so assiduously that men could not?” She answers this question by stating that religious women could marry Christ and become his brides on earth, an option which was not available for male clerics.

This revolutionary idea led to religious women feeling that it was necessary to love Christ “rightly” with a compassionate love, which would parallel the love that he showed through the Passion. McNamer points out that by cultivating this marital affection, the religious women “aided in the enactment of a valid marriage to Christ” and through these marital bonds, religious women were seen as having a more intimate relationship with Christ. This intimacy, in turn, helped boost the authority and influence of religious women. As “His beloveds,” Christ might be more receptive of hearing and granting their prayers and intercession. This life of affective piety, with its increase in religious authority and new, unorganized devotional practices, was especially suited to the life of an anchoress. Affective piety called for long periods of prayer and meditation on Christ’s suffering. Relatively speaking, the life of a regular nun was already structured in a way that left very little free time to spend in contemplating Christ. McNamer remarks that moments of leisure time “would not be hard to come by for an anchoress, perpetually enclosed in her cell, freed as she was from the liturgical rounds and domestic duties of the convent; indeed,

101 McNamer, 15.
102 McNamer, 15.
103 McNamer, 16.
104 McNamer, 16.
gaining more private time for prayer appears to have been a major reason why nuns became anchoresses.”

For these women, simply preserving their virginity was not enough to warrant their bridegroom’s affection. They felt that the truest expression of love was in deeply felt compassion for the torn figure of Christ, hanging on the cross; compassion so deep that they themselves understood and partook of the suffering he endured and were willing to be crucified with Christ. Only meditating on the Passion would make them worthy of having Christ as their spouse. McNamer points out that suffering as a method for marriage with Christ is often found in the stories of virgin martyrs. She uses the vitae of Margaret, Juliana, and Katherine to show how “exemplary martyrdoms have been transformed, deliberately and systematically, into exemplary marriages: it is pain—pain experienced affectively as love—that makes these marriages ‘true.’” As one example of this, McNamer points out how Juliana says to her tormentors, “I’ll be so much the dearer to him…the more bitter the things I suffer for his love.” These stories were used to encourage women to see the willingness to participate actively in suffering for Christ as proof of their worthiness to be accepted as true brides of Christ. In Christina’s vita, the author describes in detail the suffering that Christina endured during her enclosure experience, yet he says that she happily endured it because the enclosure and the suffering it brought enabled her to live a life in deeper devotion and closer communion with Christ. Christina, like the virgin martyrs, partook in affective piety when she happily suffered for Christ.

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105 McNamer, 26.
106 McNamer, 50.
107 McNamer, 51.
108 McNamer, 51.
The Appeal of Anchoritism:

The life of an anchoress could have great appeal to medieval women who desired to live in isolation away from the opinions and demands of monastic reformers. Further, the life of an anchoress provided women with a religious experience that they could control and the opportunity to practice affective piety. And although anchoresses were formally dedicated to strict enclosure, they often acted as counselors and were important figures in their communities. Thus, by the end of the twelfth century there was a large number of female anchoresses in England. They were more numerous than male hermits or anchorites and during the thirteenth century the number of female anchoresses grew significantly. It is possible that some of the women who became anchoresses internalized the medieval rhetoric about women’s lustful nature and sought lifelong enclosure to control their body. However, another reason they might have become anchoresses was because they sought to develop a personal relationship with Christ and saw enclosure as the perfect opportunity to advance their piety. In this paper, I pose new questions about embodied spirituality and enclosure from a medieval perspective, and offer a different perspective on a period of English history in which women recluses set the standard for holiness and sanctity. Enclosure by itself functioned in a variety of roles for medieval religious women, but for Christina of Markyate, I argue that enclosure functioned as a vehicle for spiritual guidance to occur; and this spiritual guidance was formative for Christina’s religious experience.

This chapter began by discussing the Gregorian Reform and how it led to an emphasis on purity and holiness in the lives of all Christians, and especially for clerics. A downside of this concern for ritual purity was that it strictly limited the religious options that were available for women in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. A parallel occurrence during these centuries was a

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109 Goulding, 153.
surge in the revival of acetic religious devotion. This revival involved the rise of affective piety and a return to the ideals of the monastic “desert” retreat, and women were often seen as the driving force behind these movements. Thus, although the traditional routes for women to enter the religious life were constricting, the revival of asceticism opened new religious venues, such as anchoritism, for women to pursue. Spiritual guidance played an important role in providing the women with the assistance and support that enabled them to grow in their spirituality.
Chapter 3 - Enclosure and Suffering: Christina’s Life and Twelfth Century Religious Women

The *Life* of Christina of Markyate epitomizes these changes in women’s twelfth-century religious devotion, both in form and function. Christina desired to lead a religious life from a young age, she devoted herself to virginity as a ‘bride of Christ,’ suffered actively in this role, and she was able to lead a life devoted to Christ outside of the confines of a monastery. Women (and men) who wanted to lead religious lives were more than likely exposed to the *vitae* of the virgin martyrs, which represented ideals of sanctity and piety. The virgin martyrs were important Christian role models for women in the twelfth century and Christina’s piety can be seen as echoing themes that are apparent in the martyrs’ stories.

Experience of the Saints Who Have Gone Before:

Some aspects of Christina’s life mirror the lives of the virgin martyrs whose stories were popular in the central Middle Ages. The stories of the virgin martyrs were written to provide edifying spiritual examples and they circulated throughout England for many centuries. Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson believe that the stories of Margaret and Juliana “may be the earliest of the anchoritic works” and were followed later by the passion of St. Katherine.\(^{110}\) It is unknown when these stories originated, but Savage and Watson say that “Katherine of Alexandria, reputed to have been martyred in the early fourth century, almost certainly never existed in fact, yet has still been a powerful force in the imagination of Western Christendom since at least the ninth century.”\(^{111}\) Throughout the Middle Ages, the passions of Katherine, Margaret, and Juliana were extremely popular and many manuscripts of their stories survive today, in both English and Latin translations. Savage and Watson say that “sometime around

\(^{110}\) Savage and Watson, 285.  
\(^{111}\) Savage and Watson, 260.
1200, one or two men—perhaps Wigmore canons—began to translate Latin saints’ passions into a vigorous and dramatic English prose,” which was soon circulated throughout England.\textsuperscript{112}

Whether they heard the stories orally or read an earlier Latin version, we know that the people around Christina were at least familiar with the story of St. Margaret. The author of Christina’s \textit{vita} mentions that a woman with “the falling sickness” had a vision where “the blessed martyr and virgin Margaret” appeared to her and told her to go visit Christina of Markyate to seek healing from her illness.\textsuperscript{113} By the thirteenth century, the martyrs’ stories were being compiled and used by clerics to provide “a coherent program of spiritual reading for a number of anchoresses in their charge, in English prose.”\textsuperscript{114} The stories of the virgin martyrs were held to represent the paramount of virtues that every Christian woman should strive after.

In addition to these religious women sharing a devotion for God, Christina and the martyrs, specifically St. Margaret, St. Katherine, and St. Juliana, also share a passionate commitment to preserving their maidenhood. This, however, is easier said than done. All of these women are described as comely and are pursued by suitors. St. Margaret was seen and desired by a pagan man who imprisoned her for her beliefs, St. Juliana’s father betrothed her against her will to a young noble man, and Christina even succumbed to her parents’ will and was betrothed, though she later had it annulled. These women choose to defy conventional practices and parental advice rather than sacrifice their virginity. Despite being beaten and threatened, they forgo conjugal relations in lieu of a spiritual marriage with Christ as their bridegroom.

\textsuperscript{112} Savage and Watson, 11.
\textsuperscript{113} Talbot, 119.
\textsuperscript{114} Savage and Watson, 9.
A devotion to virginity was a trait often shared by religious women and men alike, so it is not surprising that Christina and these martyrs held it in common. However, Christina, Katherine, Margaret, and Juliana also shared other, more surprising features, such as being described as “wise” or appearing to be well-educated. In addition, despite being described as meek and humble, all of these religious women were willing to stand alone and defy the authorities and were capable of defending their beliefs although it often led to their persecution. Katherine, who “tended to keep to herself” heard pagan sacrifices occurring outside of her window and felt compelled to go and confront the pagan worshippers.\(^{115}\) In a loud voice, she denounced the event to the emperor and all the participants. Margaret, who is described as the “gentlest and meekest of all maidens”\(^{116}\) defied the pagan sheriff, Olibrius, who wanted to take her as his wife. He promised her everything he has “because of her pretty face,”\(^{117}\) if she would only turn away from Christ and worship his idols. She passionately rejected his offer and said that she would rather suffer death than oblige this request. When Juliana was engaged against her will to a pagan nobleman named Eleusius, she coyly attempted to prolong their engagement through various methods so she would not have to consummate the marriage. At first she told him she would not marry anyone who was below the second most powerful person in Rome. When Eleusius had accomplished this feat by becoming the high sheriff of Rome, Juliana again stalled by telling him she would only marry him if he converted to Christianity. When her father heard of this, he commanded that she abandon Christianity and marry Eleusius or else she would

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\(^{115}\) Savage and Watson, 263.

\(^{116}\) Savage and Watson, 290.

\(^{117}\) Savage and Watson, 289.
be beaten with birch rods. Juliana remained defiant, holding that Christ was the only bridegroom whom she desired.\textsuperscript{118} Christina also defied her parents when they wanted her to marry.

In addition to their defiance of authority figures, Christina and the martyrs also shared strong self-assurance and determination, they possessed lasting reputations, and they all experienced enclosure at some point in their lives, most often imprisonment. The virgin martyrs’ stories were often seen as the epitome of Christian life, and thus served as didactic blueprints for medieval religious women to follow. Christina followed closely in the virgin martyrs’ footsteps and possessed many of their revered traits, thus according to this viewpoint, Christina’s life epitomized what a religious woman’s life should look like in twelfth-century England. However, something significant is missing from all of the virgin martyrs’ stories that is emphasized in Christina’s: none of these stories mention spiritual guidance.

**Christina’s Life Against the Martyrs’ Blueprint of Holiness:**

From a young age, like the martyrs, Christina knew she wanted to devote her life to Christ and maintain her maidenhood. Her parents had other ideas however and thought that their lovely daughter should secure an affluent marriage. They found a young nobleman named Burthred and attempted to coerce Christina into marrying him. At first Christina steadfastly refused to even listen to talk about marriage preparations, saying “I wish to remain single, for I have made a vow of virginity.”\textsuperscript{119} After spending a year of being pressed to marry, Christina consented, but was still determined to resist all physical embraces from men. Christina’s parents tried to thwart her plan by sending Burthred into her bedroom alone to force conjugal relations on her. This occurred on three separate occasions, and each time Christina resisted their plans. The first time Burthred entered her chamber, Christina told him the story of St. Cecilia and

\textsuperscript{118} Savage and Watson, 308.
\textsuperscript{119} Talbot, 45.
Valerian to convince him that they should have a chaste marriage so that they too could “receive crowns of unsullied chastity from the hands of an angel.”¹²⁰ The second time Burthred attempted to deflower Christina, she heard him coming and hid behind a curtain on the wall. Unable to find her, Burthred left in frustration, but came back a third time to force consummation of the union. This time Christina escaped by running out and jumping over a fence which Burthred was unable to scale. Christina’s insubordination towards her parents and betrothed led them to seek higher authorities, thinking that perhaps churchmen could convince Christina to accept marriage and consummation.¹²¹

Christina’s father brought her before the reverend prior, Fredebert, for resisting his authority. Fredebert tried to convince Christina that the right thing to do was to obey her parents and marry Burthred. He quoted scripture and told her that married women could go to heaven, just the same as virgins. However, Christina refuted his arguments, similar to how Katherine wielded authority against her contemporary sages, with other scripture and the commonsense of her answers led the reverend prior to seek a higher authority to judge her case.¹²² The Norman bishop, Robert, was passing through town, so Christina’s case was presented to him. The bishop listened to Christina’s desire for perpetual virginity and approved of her plan. Christina’s father had to accept the bishop’s decision and conceded her authority by saying, “you are even made mistress over me.”¹²³ Here, in contrast to the virgin martyr stories, it appears that Christina’s initial defiance of the authorities resulted not in her punishment, but in her gaining the support of the authorities and her own authority by proxy. However, later Christina’s father went back to the bishop with a bribe and the bishop recanted; he told Christina that she should obey her

¹²⁰ Talbot, 51.
¹²¹ Talbot, 53.
¹²² Talbot, 61.
¹²³ Talbot, 65.
parents and get married. After the bishop received the bribe and overturned his initial ruling on her marriage status, Christina decided to take matters into her own hands and defied everyone who had authority over her by running away. Like the virgin martyrs, Christina was willing to defy the authorities who possessed great power over her and her family, and abandon everything this world had to offer in order to support her religious convictions. However, adhering to their convictions was not a simple matter for these young women who were devoted to serving Christ.

Along with standing up for their faith and proclaiming their devotion to God, came physical and mental anguish for Katherine, Margaret, Juliana, and Christina. These women bore sickness, torture, loneliness, imprisonment, and much more for the sake of Christ. All of these women battled hideous demons, and suffered mental anguish. Nonetheless, they happily withstood all discomfort since it was at the expense of serving their “Bridegroom.” Christina and the martyrs stood unwaveringly in their faith and during their trials and tribulations God protected them and offered comfort to “His beloved.”

Like these virgin martyrs who had supposedly gone before her, Christina too faced severe trials and temptations in her pursuit of a life devoted to God. The virgin martyrs experienced physical discomfort, bodily harm, attacks of demons, and eventual death because of their faith in Christ. However, they did so willingly to preserve their chastity and be faithful “brides of Christ.” While Christina did not face the physical torture that the martyrs endured, her suffering was just as painful physically and was more typical of the human experience. From an early age, Christina knew she wanted to be set apart for Christ and she did everything in her power to successfully achieve a pious, spiritual life. The one thing which stands out in all of their stories

124 Talbot, 71.
as being formative to their religious experiences is confinement. Through being confined, these women were strengthened in their faith, developed deeper love and trust for Christ, and were able to act as spiritual examples for those who witnessed their enclosure.

Christina’s parents did not approve of her plan to live a holy life, they wanted her to participate in all of the earthy traditions such as marriage and childbearing, thus Christina’s parents presented her first set of challenges and tribulations that she had to overcome. Her decision to not marry Burthred, whom her parents had chosen for her, resulted in their anger and determination to break her resistance in whatever way necessary. They first imprisoned her in her room and “prevented any religious god-fearing man from having any conversation with her,” but rather, surrounded her with worldly people. They also forbade her from visiting the neighborhood monastery and would not let her go to the chapel; in this way they hoped to weaken her religious resolve, so that she would take part in the pleasures of the world. This removal from godly people and places was hard for Christina to bear, but she trusted in God to preserve her and keep her steadfast in her faith.

As mentioned earlier, Christina’s parents were determined to have her married to Burthred. They went so far as to send Burthred into Christina’s bedroom at night and Christina had to bear this trial and think of ways to resist Burthred’s advances. When Christina finally got Burthred to renounce their betrothal, her father became so angry that he threw her out of the house in nothing but her shift. This can be seen as Christina’s first experience of real hardship or suffering, but she did not mind, for it meant that she was free from her parents’ influence and could now devote herself to Christ. However, it did not last long, for her father came and found

\[\text{Talbot, 47.}\]
her the next day and brought her back against her will.\textsuperscript{126} The author says that “from that day forward her mother, Beatrix… loosed all her fury on her own daughter, neglecting no sort of wicked artifice…she persecuted her with unheard-of cruelty, sometimes openly, at other times secretly.”\textsuperscript{127} At one point, Beatrix removed Christina from a banquet, pulled her hair and beat her, leaving “such weals from the blows as could never be removed as long as she lived.”\textsuperscript{128}

Then, she made Christina return to the banquet as an “object of derision” for the revelers. Although this is not as extreme as the torture which the virgin martyrs endured, we can trace similarities inherent in these experiences. Here, Christina is put on display before a crowd of people as an object of derision for her devotion to Christ and disobedience to her parents. She is beaten, and brought back into the banquet so people could view her wounds and chastise her for her “rebellious” behavior. In a similar vein, the virgin martyrs have their bodies bruised and torn and are presented as a spectacle in front of crowds of people. These martyrs’ only crime was refusing to deny their faith in Christ and submit to the pagan authorities’ will. All of these women were seen as “defiant” by the people in authoritative positions over them, and were subjected to public derision and bodily punishment for it.

Through all of these trials Christina clung to her faith to strengthen her. Similar to the martyrs noted above, Christ comforted His beloved. In this \textit{vita}, Christ sent the holy virgin Mary to Christina in a dream. Mary promised to deliver Christina from her parents and this thought of freedom filled her with immense joy.\textsuperscript{129} At the same time, however, Christina’s parents took increasingly severe measures to restrict her from gaining liberty. Christina bribed her keepers to let her talk with a holy man named Eadwin, and he arranged her escape and helped her find a

\textsuperscript{126} Talbot, 73.
\textsuperscript{127} Talbot, 73.
\textsuperscript{128} Talbot, 75.
\textsuperscript{129} Talbot, 79.
safe-haven. On the appointed day, Christina made her escape and was welcomed by Alfwen the anchoress at Flamstead.  

Despite being free from her parents, Christina’s troubles did not end when she left their household. They were intent on pursuing her and bringing her back in disgrace, so she had to stay well hidden. When she lived with Alfwen, her hiding place was barely large enough to house her, but she did not care and was joyful that she could now devote all her days to Christ. However, her “peaceful existence irritated the devil” and she could “never escape the notice of demons.” One day a bunch of ugly toads invaded her cell and since her cell was sealed and there was no way for the toads to get in, Christina was convinced that they had been sent by the devil to distract her from God. But she refused to give in and kept singing psalms until they disappeared.

When Christina left Flamstead to go to Markyate, her dwelling situation did not improve; in fact, her confinement grew more close and burdensome. In her new cell at Markyate she sat on a hard rock and did not have enough room to don warmer clothing when it was cold out. In addition to being cramped in her enclosure at Markyate, Christina also experienced physical ailments and hardships that made her experience even more uncomfortable. The author laments “what trials she had to bear of cold and heat, hunger and thirst, daily fasting!... through long fasting, her bowels became contracted and dried up. There was a time when her burning thirst caused little clots of blood to bubble up from her nostrils.” But, Christina patiently bore all of her suffering through prayer and by concentrating on the love of God. On the day of Our Lord’s

130 Talbot, 93.
131 Talbot, 93.
132 Talbot, 99.
133 Talbot, 103.
Annunciation, Christ appeared before Christina in her little cell to give her confidence and the Virgin Mary appeared to her several times to comfort her and give her peace.\textsuperscript{134}

After Roger, the hermit of Markyate, died, it was necessary for Christina to find another place to dwell. She was entrusted into the care of a clerical friend of the archbishop. Life went well at the beginning, and they were able to live together chastely, however, both Christina and the cleric soon experienced the devil’s temptation; they both had carnal lust for each other. In this confinement and faith experience, Christina is unlike the virgin martyrs. While the martyrs remained steadfast and never showed faintness of heart, Christina is tempted by the flesh and shows signs of human weakness: she was inwardly inflamed for this unnamed cleric.\textsuperscript{135} Through prayer, fasting, and intercession by the saints, the cleric was released from his passion, but Christina experience no respite. Therefore, she had to leave the place to flee the temptation. She escaped to Markyate, where her passion was finally cooled by a vision of Christ.

Back at Markyate, Christina was at peace, even though she continued to be afflicted with the ailments which she had received through the various trials she had endured.\textsuperscript{136} At one point, she was so afflicted with paralysis that at any moment she was “expected to breathe her last” but was healed by the will of God.\textsuperscript{137} Despite this physical healing, Christina continued to be plagued by mental anguish. She was constantly subjected to such horrible apparitions that “whenever she composed her wary limbs to rest, she dared not turn upon her side or look about her.”\textsuperscript{138} The more the devil barraged her with attacks and terrifying thoughts, the more Christina prayed and called upon Christ to act in her defense. The author says that “when put to flight, he

\textsuperscript{134} Talbot, 107.
\textsuperscript{135} Talbot, 117.
\textsuperscript{136} Talbot, 119.
\textsuperscript{137} Talbot, 123.
\textsuperscript{138} Talbot, 131.
would not disappear; when routed, he would not retreat. Taking new and more elaborate weapons of temptation, he assaulted the virgin all the more intensely, as his resentment grew to find a tender virgin more than a match for him.”\(^{139}\) Compared to Christina, the virgin martyrs had it easy when dealing with demons. The more they prayed, the weaker the demons grew. But with Christina, the more she prayed the more defensive the devil became, until Christina felt that God had abandoned her. However, one day when she was in prayer, God spoke to her and reaffirmed her faith in Him.\(^{140}\)

Christina continued to grow in her faith and learned ways to overcome the devil’s plots. Markyate developed as a priory, with Christina as the prioress, and a group of women came to learn from Christina and receive her spiritual counsel. During this time, Christina also developed a close friendship with Abbot Geoffrey from St. Albans monastery. However, Satan had not forgotten about Christina. He spread gossip about the relationship between the abbot and Christina and many people believed scandal about them.\(^{141}\) But Christina was incapable of succumbing to the devil, as she had already overcome him several times. One day, Christina and her ladies were headed to the chapel for Sunday Matins when the devil appeared outside of the chapel as a body without a head. At this sight, all of Christina’s ladies were terrified and cowered behind her. The author remarks that Christina was “somewhat afraid” but she had battled the devil many times before and so she began praying, and through her prayers she “thrust out the monstrous phantom.”\(^{142}\)

Throughout Christina’s life, she suffered from ailments, hunger, cold, slander, and had to battle many demons. She also dealt with self-doubt and doubt of God. She struggled with

\(^{139}\) Talbot, 131.  
\(^{140}\) Talbot, 133.  
\(^{141}\) Talbot, 173.  
\(^{142}\) Talbot, 179.
loneliness and depression, as well as sexual temptation. She might not have experienced the extreme tortures that the virgin martyrs experienced, but her suffering was great and was prolonged. Whereas the martyrs suffered for a few weeks, at most, before being carried to heaven by angels, Christina suffered and was afflicted for the greater portion of her life. Her struggles were also more relatable for the average Christian. The number of Christians who suffered by being torn apart by iron wheels or dipped in boiling pitch is very small compared to the number who suffered from bodily ailments and mental anguish. Nonetheless, just as Christ was watching over his martyrs and helped them in their greatest time of need, He was always there watching out for Christina and helped her live the life that she wanted – one of complete devotion to Him.

**Physical Parameters of Christina’s Enclosure versus Anchoritic Guides:**

After Christina left her childhood home in pursuit of a life completely devoted to God, her place of residence shifted four times until she found her permanent place of residence at Markyate priory. Each place was unique and had elements that made it physically and mentally uncomfortable for Christina. Yet, she chose to pursue this life of seclusion, even welcomed it, and endured the hardships by focusing on her devotion to Christ.

The first place where Christina resided after fleeing Huntingdon was at Flamstead with the venerable anchoress Alfwen. This living situation was devised by a holy man named Eadwin, who was instrumental in helping Christina escape from her parents. At Flamstead, Christina removed her garments of silk and fur and put on a rough garment in their place. Then she was “hidden out of sight in a very dark chamber hardly large enough, on account of its size, to house her.”

The author notes that Christina was concealed there for a long time, but was

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143 Talbot, 93.
joyful because she was finally free to devote every moment of her day to Christ. This confinement was beneficial for it brought her focus and allowed her to achieve her spiritual aspirations. Despite her cell being hidden from men and “closed and locked on all sides,” Christina still faced persecution from the devil. When the hideous toads invaded her cell, she was terrified. They sat in the middle of her psalter to distract her from Christ, but she kept singing her psalms, and the toads eventually vanished.\textsuperscript{144} Christina endured all of this discomfort with patience and joy. She spent two years concealed in this little, dark cell and the author explains that after this time, “it was necessary for her to go elsewhere.”\textsuperscript{145} We are given no explanation as to why she had to leave this cell.

After leaving Flamstead, Christina’s next place of dwelling was at Markyate with the hermit Roger. Since Christina’s family might still have been looking for her, it was necessary for her to remain hidden. They also kept her dwelling near Roger a secret so that it would not cause a scandal in the community. Even the other monks who lived with Roger were unaware of Christina’s presence.\textsuperscript{146} In the corner between where Roger’s cell met the chapel was a little room that measured a span and a half wide, which is approximately thirteen and a half inches. Into this small crevice Christina climbed and a plank of wood covered the opening, therefore, it seemed to anyone looking at it from the outside that “no one was present within.”\textsuperscript{147} Roger also rolled a large log in front of the door which was too heavy for Christina to move.

In this small cell, Christina passed her time by sitting on a rock, reading her psalter, and praying, for four years. Here, “the handmaiden of Christ” endured much suffering patiently.

Since Roger had placed a heavy log before the only entrance, Christina was not free to satisfy

\textsuperscript{144} Talbot, 99.
\textsuperscript{145} Talbot, 99.
\textsuperscript{146} Talbot, 103.
\textsuperscript{147} Talbot, 103.
her thirst or hunger or even the basic urges of nature. She had to wait till evening when Roger would come and move the log to bring her food and let her relieve herself. The author remarks that in addition to suffering through hunger and thirst, Christina also suffered from heat and cold, he says that “the confined space would not allow her to wear even the necessary clothing when she was cold” and “the airless little enclosure became stifling when she was hot.”\textsuperscript{148} These discomforts which she experienced during her time at Markyate led to her developing many physical ailments, yet she bore all these troubles calmly and was joyful because she had “moments at night when she was free to devote herself to prayer and contemplative meditation.”\textsuperscript{149} There were often moments when Roger would let her out to go into the chapel to pray with him. In fact, the author says that “no day passed without him taking her into the chapel for this purpose [to pray].”\textsuperscript{150} Although this time spent concealed with Roger caused Christina physical discomfort, it also brought her moments of heavenly joy which she would not have traded for anything. Roger was so impressed by Christina’s piety and devotion to Christ that he discussed leaving his hermitage to her.\textsuperscript{151} When the Virgin Mary appeared to Christina in a vision and ask her what she most desired, Christina replied that she wanted Roger’s hermitage to dwell in. Mary told her that it would certainly be given to her.\textsuperscript{152} From that moment on, Christina knew undoubtedly that she would be Roger’s successor. However, after four years of living thus concealed, Roger passed away, and Christina was forced to find a new place of refuge in order to avoid the anger of the bishop of Lincoln.\textsuperscript{153}

\textsuperscript{148} Talbot, 103.
\textsuperscript{149} Talbot, 105.
\textsuperscript{150} Talbot, 107.
\textsuperscript{151} Talbot, 109.
\textsuperscript{152} Talbot, 111.
\textsuperscript{153} Talbot, 113.
The author explains that Christina took “various hiding places” before Thurstan, Archbishop of York informed her about a clerical friend of his with whom she could reside. We are not given a physical description of what this place of residence looked like as we are with Markyate. The author spends most of his time in this portion of Christina’s life describing the relationship between her and the cleric. The author tells us that at first Christina and the cleric felt nothing but spiritual love for each other, but, as the vita’s author remarks, “the devil soon took advantage of their close companionship.” The devil overcame the man’s defenses, but Christina resolved to remain steadfast in her chastity, though she was tormented with impure thoughts and desires. The author says that “sometimes the wretched man, out of his senses with passion, came before her without any clothes on and behaved in a scandalous manner.”

Though Christina herself was struggling with passion, she pretended not to be affected by it. She tried to purge the passion from her body by fasting, going without sleep, scourging herself, and she called upon God to strengthen her resistance. However, the temptation grew so strong that Christina felt the need to flee from this place of refuge. We are not told how long she lodged with the cleric, the author only says that “after a long time had been spent in constant warring against her tireless adversary, disgusted with that deadly lodging, she returned to the pleasant place in the wilderness bestowed on her by the queen of heaven.” Around the same time when Christina was dealing with this sexual temptation, her zealous persecutor, the bishop of Lincoln died, so she was now free to openly live wherever she wanted.

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154 Talbot, 115.
155 Kate Staples and Ruth Karras further discuss this mutual sexual temptation in their chapter “Christina’s Tempting: Sexual Desire and Women’s Sanctity” in Christina of Markyate: A Twelfth-Century Holy Woman (London: Routledge, 2005). They note that the twelfth century saw a shift in ideas about sexual temptation for women. Prior to this time, emphasis in religious texts was placed on the threat of sexual temptation for men.
156 Talbot, 115.
157 Talbot, 117.
Once back at Markyate, Christina “remained in her solitude free from care” and took advantage of the peace that surrounded her.\textsuperscript{158} We must assume that she now resided in Roger’s cell, which had been promised to her by both Roger and the Virgin Mary. Her residence was no longer a secret and her reputation for piety spread. Women who desired to live a holy life, including Christina’s sister Margaret, flocked to her to learn and people came to request healing or to receive advice from her. Abbots came and visited her, requesting that she join their monasteries as superior over their nuns specifically, at York, Marcigny, and Fontevrault.\textsuperscript{159} Christina considered traveling to a distant land to go off the beaten path and “find a hidden refuge” to dwell in alone, but she decided to stay at Markyate. Once she committed to staying at Markyate, she also decided that she would “make her profession in this monastery and would receive her consecration from the bishop.”\textsuperscript{160}

Christina took her vows at St Albans in 1131. After this time, she formed a close friendship with the abbot of St. Albans, Geoffrey and became his trusted advisor. Geoffrey enjoyed Christina’s companionship and guidance and became a benefactor of Christina’s cell. He “visited the place even more: he enjoyed the virgin’s company, provided for the house, and became the supervisor of its material affairs.”\textsuperscript{161} In 1145, Markyate Priory was officially established under the Benedictine rule.\textsuperscript{162} It was built under the patronage of Abbot Geoffrey. The priory was dedicated to the Holy Trinity, and the name most commonly given to it was 'Holy Trinity in the Wood.' It seems to have been destroyed by fire almost as soon as it was built;

\textsuperscript{158} Talbot, 119.
\textsuperscript{159} Talbot, 127.
\textsuperscript{160} Talbot, 127.
\textsuperscript{161} Talbot, 155.
for Matthew Paris asserts that Abbot Geoffrey built the house twice from the foundation.\textsuperscript{163}

Christina served as prioress of Markyate from its founding in 1145 until the time of her death in approximately 1155.

The author of Christina’s \textit{vita} was very detailed in his descriptions of Christina’s enclosure locations. He obviously thought that Christina’s enclosure was so harsh or deviated so far from the normal religious enclosure, that he should include it in such great detail. By comparing the description of Christina’s experience of enclosure to that described in the guidebooks for anchoresses, we see that Christina’s enclosure experience was indeed physically more uncomfortable than the typical anchoritic enclosure. We also see that her experience deviated from the norm in other ways as well.

\textbf{What the Typical Anchorage Looked Like:}

Religious women and men who wanted a more severely acetic and prayer-driven lifestyle could devote their lives to God and become anchorites. This was typically seen as a more devout and rigorous religious life than that of living in community as a monk or nun. Since anchorites usually lived alone, and unlike hermits, were required to take a vow of stability of place, opting for permanent enclosure in cells which were often attached to churches, they had to live disciplined and structured lives so they would not waste their days and fall into sin. Therefore, several rule books were written that outlined everything from how the anchorite should structure their day, how they should behave, what they should eat and wear, and what the parameters of their enclosure should be like.

Thinking about the material culture of the typical anchorage provides insight into what people would expect when deciding to devote their lives to becoming anchoresses. The life of an anchoress was supposed to be austere and lonely, but not uncomfortable. By reading the

\textsuperscript{163} \textit{British History Online}
information presented in the guidebooks for anchoresses about space, we see that Christina experienced suffering that went above and beyond that required to live a solitary life devoted to Christ. It makes one question why Christina stayed and patiently endured the physical discomfort she experienced at her various enclosed locations, and the import of describing such harsh confines.

In Aelred of Rievaulx’s twelfth-century guidebook, *The Rule of Life for a Recluse*, we get a glimpse as to what an anchoress’ living quarters might have consisted of. Aelred begins by explaining why someone might want to live as a solitary. He says that living in a crowd might cause ruin or injury. He goes on to inform the reader why the monks of old chose to live as solitaries: “to avoid ruin, to escape injury, to enjoy greater freedom in expressing their ardent longing for Christ’s embrace.”164 He goes on to mention that some of the solitaries who lived in the desert had their confidence “undermined by the very freedom inherent in the solitary life and the opportunity it affords for aimless wandering. They judged it more prudent to be completely enclosed in a cell with the entrance walled up.”165 This was the type of religious life that his sister chose to live.

Thus, Aelred affirms that the anchoress should be confined within the bounds of walls and suggests what items she might have in her cell. Several times in his guidebook Aelred mentions that the anchoress’ cell had a window to the outside. Most of his mention of the anchoress’ window involves words of caution. He scorns the recluse that has a “garrulous old gossip pouring idle tales into her ears” through her window. He cautions that the window must not be big enough to allow her or a paramour to pass through.166 The pious recluse must not

164 Macpherson, "A Rule of Life for a Recluse," 45.
165 Macpherson, "A Rule of Life for a Recluse," 45.
166 Macpherson, "A Rule of Life for a Recluse," 47.
spend too much time at her window, even with her sisters in religion. For with the good, virtuous
conversations these sisters might bring will also come “talk of worldly affairs, interspersed with
romance.”167 And she should not teach children through her window, lest she gets attached to
them and long for a worldly life and its sensual temptations.168

In Aelred’s guide, the recluse’s cell also has a door. However, he strongly suggests that
the recluse should get an elderly woman, who is virtuous and is not quarrelsome or a gossip, to
guard the door to the cell. This woman will decide to admit or refuse visitors as she deems right
and she should also be responsible for looking after the recluse’s provisions. In addition to this
woman, the recluse should also have a “strong girl who is capable of heavy work, to fetch wood
and water” and do the cooking.169 But he warns that this girl must be strictly disciplined, so she
does not act frivolously and so “desecrate your holy dwelling-place.”170 Therefore, although the
recluse’s dwelling should have a window and a door, the recluse must not use them frequently, if
at all.

Aelred also mentions that the recluse’s cell should have a table, a bed, and several books,
if the recluse can read. The books that he specifically mentions are Lives of the Fathers, a psalter,
the Rule of St. Benedict, and his own guide book. The recluse should use these to edify herself
and structure her conduct. The anchoress should rest on her bed at certain times throughout the
day and she “must take care to make it to bed before nightfall, otherwise she will be compelled
to sleep on when she ought to be watching.”171 This seems to suggest that it was important that
the anchoress not deprive herself of sleep, but rather get a good night’s sleep, so that during the

168 Macpherson, "A Rule of Life for a Recluse," 49.
169 Macpherson, "A Rule of Life for a Recluse," 49.
170 Macpherson, "A Rule of Life for a Recluse," 49.
171 Macpherson, "A Rule of Life for a Recluse," 57.
daytime she will be alert and diligent in her devotions. If the anchoress wakes up during the night and begins to be tempted by the devil, thinking about how hard her life is and how much she suffers, then she should call to mind the lives of “the blessed virgins who so often at an early age triumphed over their godless foe.” Here we can see how influential the virgin martyrs’ stories were in providing guidance and encouragement for anchoresses. The writers of the guidance manual used the martyrs’ lives to remind the anchoress that her suffering was nothing compared to the torture and harsh deaths which the martyrs experienced for the sake of Christ, therefore they should feel blessed to live their lives in peaceful devotion to Christ.

Aelred unfortunately does not give us an idea of how big he thinks the recluse’s cell should be or any other information about the items it should contain. He is more concerned with the anchoress’ conduct and her inner, spiritual life. He places a lot of emphasis on the “solitary” aspect of an anchoress’ life. The good, pious anchoress should consider herself to be “dead as it were to the world and buried with Christ in his tomb.” They should revel in the solitude and freedom that they have to spend their days with Christ.

The thirteenth-century *Ancrene Wisse* (A Guide for Anchoresses) provides more in-depth information about the living situation of anchoresses. Only Parts Two and Eight offer any substantial hints about the internal arrangements of the anchorage. Part Eight of this book is concerned explicitly with governing outward things. It provides instruction on how an anchoress should behave outwardly: how she should eat, drink, dress, sleep, and it provides information on the parameters of her daily life.

The anchorage as described in the *Ancrene Wisse* did not consist of a single room in which the solitary resided, but rather, the anchorage as described in Part Two could have had two

or three rooms. It says “do not talk to anyone through the church window, but hold it in honor because of the holy sacrament that you see through it. And use the house window for talking sometimes with your women; for others, the parlor window. You should not speak except at these two windows.”

From this we can know that this description of an anchorage is one which is indeed attached to a church, because the anchoress can see the sacraments through one of her windows. Then we can hypothesize that there were one or two other rooms attached to the anchoress’ dwelling. This passage quoted above mentions two other windows; one window appears to look into the servants’ quarters and the other into a room called a “parlor.”

The main part of the anchorage was of course the recluse's cell: it had the three windows as well as a private altar, a bed, and a crucifix. The church window commanded a view of the high altar in the church so that the anchoress could see the Mass being performed. The "house" window looked into the servants' quarters and was probably large enough to pass through food or a chamber pot. The "parlor" window, through which the anchoress spoke to visitors, faced either outside into the church courtyard or perhaps into a small room. The parlor window was to be the smallest of the three, since it provided dangerous contact with the outside world. The anchoress was instructed to “love your windows as little as you possibly can” and was told that all of her windows should be small and covered with thick, black cloth with white crosses. She also had to make sure that the parlor window’s covering should be “fastened on every side and well-attached” and she should not look there too often “in case [her] heart flies out and goes away.”

There is some question about what the word “parlor” may have meant. The Middle English Dictionary offers the two following appropriate descriptions “(a) A chamber in a

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174 Savage and Watson, 74.
175 Savage and Watson, 71, 72, 54.
176 Savage and Watson, 66.
177 Savage and Watson, 67.
religious house used for consultation or conversation, especially for conversation with persons outside the monastic community; (b) a grate or window through which the enclosed religious can make confession or communicate with persons outside the cloister."^{178} Whereas in Aelred’s Rule, it seems as though the “parlor” window was a window to the outside, for at one point he mentions how the anchoress should not let children gather on the porch outside of her window.\(^{179}\) The evidence in the Ancrene Wisse seems to suggest that this “parlor” was actually a separate room. Several times in Part Two it mentions “your parlor’s window.”\(^{180}\) Therefore, in this anchorage, there must have been a separate room called the parlor in which guests were admitted. The author recommends that anchoress have several female servants. One of their duties was to see who was at the parlor window before deciding whether the anchoress should open it or not or if it was necessary for her to “go out into the parlor” to meet with them.\(^ {181}\)

The servants' quarters mentioned in the Ancrene Wisse must have been reasonably large since the anchoress was encouraged to have guests entertained there, "if anyone has a loved guest, let her have her maid entertain her fairly as though in her place—and she will have leave to open her window once or twice and make signs toward them with a cheerful face."\(^{182}\) But the anchoress herself should not entertain guests for “there should be a great difference between an anchoress and the lady of a house.”\(^{183}\) There must have been a door or a way that the anchoress could easily access the parlor. In Part Eight, the anchoress is warned that she should not dine with guests at the same table, this is seen as “being too friendly…and is opposed to the anchoritic

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\(^{179}\) Macpherson, "A Rule of Life for a Recluse," 49.

\(^{180}\) Savage and Watson, 66, 72.

\(^{181}\) Savage and Watson, 72.

\(^{182}\) Savage and Watson, 74.

\(^{183}\) Savage and Watson, 74.
order, which is dead to all the world.” However, despite this admonition to not be too hospitable, the anchoress is advised to give food to women and children and to “the anchoress’ maidens who come and work for you…and invite them to stay with you.” They would presumably stay in the servants’ quarters, for the author also says to the anchoress, “let no one sleep in your house.”

The author recommends that the anchoress have two maidservants to attend to her needs. One should always stay in with the anchoress and the other should only venture out when necessary. The one who is allowed to go out should be younger and “very plain.” They both should not go anywhere without the anchoress’ permission and should be obedient to her in everything. There is strict description of what the maids should look like and how they should dress. For the anchoress however, the author remarks “because men do not see you nor you them, it does not matter if your clothes are white or black, so long as they are plain, warm, and well-made… whoever wants can wear a petticoat; whoever wants can go without.” All that matters is that the anchoress wears simple, well-made clothes and a head covering. However, the clothing of the maids is strictly delineated because they are out in the world, often within the sight of men.

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184 Savage and Watson, 200.
185 Savage and Watson, 201.
186 Savage and Watson, 201.
187 Savage and Watson, 204.
188 Savage and Watson, 202.
189 Savage and Watson, 205.
The anchoress, as described by the *Ancrene Wisse*, should live a simple, but comfortable lifestyle. She should not possess more food than she needs and she should not give feasts, but she should also not starve herself or live on a diet of bread and water. Her clothes were to be comfortable, warm in the winter and light in the summer. She could have as many blankets for her bed as she deems sufficient. In Christina’s *vita* there is a great emphasis on the physical discomfort and suffering that she endured. In this guidance manual, we read that these harsh conditions are not considered necessary requirements for living a life of devotion. Several times the author mentions that the anchoress should not impose harsh disciplines on herself. He says she should not wear “any iron or hair, or hedgehog skins; let her not beat herself with them, nor with a leaded scourge, with holly or briars, nor draw blood from herself without her confessor’s leave; let her not sting herself with nettles anywhere, nor beat or cut herself.” He would rather

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191 Savage and Watson, 202.
192 Savage and Watson, 202.
the anchoress “endure harsh words than harsh hairclothes.”\textsuperscript{193} The anchoress was to “have nothing which draws her heart outward,”\textsuperscript{194} therefore, she was not to form close friendships with people and was not allowed to keep animals for fear she would get too attached to them. She even had to distance herself from her family, for “family feeling is not proper for an anchoress.”\textsuperscript{195} However, she was allowed to occasionally talk with her maidservants, other anchoresses’ servants, and whomever stopped at her window and was deemed worthy of her conversation. The anchoress was also allowed to have a cat to keep her company.\textsuperscript{196} Thus, although she was locked in her cell and dead to the world, she should not live in suffering and need, but should rather be comfortable, though austere, so she is more joyful in her pursuit of God.

The details of these anchoritic enclosures seem to stand in stark contrast to the physical suffering that Christina endured during her enclosures. However, these anchoresses were supposed to talk to few people and saw the priest rarely, and then mostly to confess their sins and receive penance. Therefore, the “typical” anchoress did not benefit from spiritual guidance. Although Christina was physically uncomfortable, the spiritual guidance she received brought her great joy and comfort. Christina’s confinement allowed her to form close friendships and receive spiritual guidance that she might not have otherwise been given.

Although the anchoritic guidance manuals, which present suggestions for an ideal anchoritic life, show that anchoresses were to live in seclusion, away from all people, the research of Ann Warren provides insight into the actual lived experience of medieval anchoresses. For her book, \textit{Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England}, Warren uses a

\textsuperscript{193} Savage and Watson, 202.
\textsuperscript{194} Savage and Watson, 201.
\textsuperscript{195} Savage and Watson, 203.
\textsuperscript{196} Savage and Watson, 201.
variety of archival sources, including wills, rolls, and letters, to unearth what life was like for the
typical anchorite or anchoress in the Middle Ages. Warren’s study juxtaposes the complexity of
the anchoress’ existence. In Warren’s words, the anchoress was “enclosed and yet exposed,
hidden and yet visible”; although the anchoress lived in solitude, she was constantly surrounded
by, and interacting with people.\textsuperscript{197} The surrounding community was a network of people that
“enabled the anchorite to exist and persist.”\textsuperscript{198} Warren mentions that anchorites were often in
communication with each other, either through dwelling together, sending letters, or relaying
messages through their servants. In particular, Warren brings up the \textit{Life} of Christina of
Markyate to support her arguments. She mentions that Christina lived with the anchoress Alfwen
for a while\textsuperscript{199} and she notes that in the Christina’s \textit{vita}, “hermits traverse the roads of
Huntingdonshire, acting as human links between other hermits and anchorites locked in their
cells.”\textsuperscript{200} Therefore, although the rule books portray anchoresses as being solitary individuals, we
see that the idea of community was actually important to them and essential for their lifestyle to
function successfully. In line with Warren’s analysis, I argue that the spiritual guidance
emphasized in Christina’s \textit{vita} reveals the importance of religious women and their experiences –
despite the shifting opportunities for religious women and the emphasis on the dangers they
posed to secular clergy – in the landscape of twelfth-century England.

\textbf{How Christina was Portrayed as a Typical Twelfth-Century Religious Woman:}

As with other hagiographical sources, Christina’s \textit{vita} contains various tropes which the
author uses to further his narrative of Christina’s holiness. These tropes include the emphasis

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[197]{Ann K. Warren, \textit{Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 7.}
\footnotetext[198]{Warren, 15.}
\footnotetext[199]{Warren, 33.}
\footnotetext[200]{Warren, 41.}
\end{footnotes}
placed on the fierce defense of her virginity and the significance of her visions. The author of Christina’s *vita* is selective of what incidents he reports and he does this to shape a specific image of her. He emphasizes her spiritual and physical chastity, her holiness, God’s favor of her, and he goes into the greatest detail about her life when she is associated with St. Albans. The tropes the author uses and the events he includes are important signifiers of what he, and other religious people of the twelfth century, held to be important in the life of a standard, twelfth-century religious woman. These tropes were widely used in writing about and by religious people in the Middle Ages and showed that their subjects were worthy of being recorded for future generations. This practice of using tropes in vitae appears to have originated in the early-Middle Ages to “keep alive the memory of the saint and inspire among the faithful an expectation of the saint’s miraculous power.”

Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg discusses the characteristics of hagiography in the first chapter of *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, CA. 500-1100*. She notes that it is important to recognize that hagiographers were not necessarily historians or biographers. But rather, “their works were panegyrics, conscious programs of persuasion or propaganda, meant to prove the particular sanctity of their protagonist.” Hagiographers used tropes, which served figurative purposes to verify a saint’s sanctity. These tropes often appear in saint’s lives in the form of supernatural phenomena or miraculous happenings, which may or may not have actually occurred. Thus, while hagiography might not be completely historical or accurate, it is often based on the ideas that medieval people held and can provide us with contemporary evidence about what a particular group of people held to be important. Schulenburg mentions that saints’

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202 Schulenburg, 17.
lives were meant to be didactic and used to edify and set an example for Christians to follow.\textsuperscript{203} Christina’s \textit{vita} contains several tropes one would expect to find in a medieval woman’s life, and it is obvious that her vita was written for the dual purpose of venerating Christina’s sanctity and that of St. Albans monastery, while also edifying the faithful who read about the trials and exaltation of Christina’s spiritual journey.

As mentioned earlier, the first part of Christina’s life resembles that of a typical female religious recluse; from a young age she desires to live a religious life, she experiences trials and resistance from her parents in her pursuit of this lifestyle, and she adheres to her endeavor, and she is assisted by holy people and Christ until her desire is fulfilled. However, after she moves to Markyate, her story begins to flip the narrative. The \textit{vita} of Christina comes to us from Huntingdon, England where she was born sometime between 1086 and 1092.\textsuperscript{204} Her story begins in the manner characteristic of medieval female saints’ \textit{vitas}: a young girl visits a monastery, is impressed by the way the monks lived, and decides in that moment to devote her life entirely to God.\textsuperscript{205} In adherence to the \textit{vita} tradition, Christina also resolves to remain an untainted virgin regardless of her parents’ plans for her future. After her visit at the monastery, Christina goes to her priest, offers a penny, and makes this request of God "for to thee in surrender of myself I offer this penny. Deign to grant me, I beseech thee, purity and inviolable virginity."\textsuperscript{206} However, similar to the stories of previous female saints and martyrs, the authorities, in this case Christina’s parents, have different plans for her future and betroth her to a man from the

\textsuperscript{203} Schulenburg, 22.
\textsuperscript{204} Talbot, 35,
\textsuperscript{205} Talbot, 39.
\textsuperscript{206} Talbot, 41.
community named Burthred. This is the important starting point of various struggles that Christina would have in her life.

Because Christina was adamant about maintaining her virginity and therefore refused to consummate her marriage, her parents put her under house arrest. This became her first experience of enclosure, albeit unchosen by her. One day Christina bribed her keepers to secretly let her see Eadwin, who was "a devout follower of the solitary life” and he agreed to help her escape. When the appointed day for her escape came, Christina donned men’s clothing and “put on manly courage” to make her escape. This chapter of her life and the difficulties she encountered in her pursuit of a holy life closely resemble the experiences of other women who desired to live as religious recluses. Their stories often include a strong desire to remain chaste, conflict with their family, and their having to don masculine dress or summon manly courage in their pursuit of the cloister or a cell.

The next part of Christina’s life is when her religious vocation truly began. She fled to Flamstead, where she was taken in by the anchoress Alfwen. We are not told much about this time of her life, but it appears that Christina adhered to a fairly typical anchoritic lifestyle. As soon as she arrived at Alfwen’s, Christina traded her silk clothing for rough garments and was “hidden out of sight in a very dark chamber hardly large enough, on account of its size, to house her, she remained carefully concealed there for a long time, finding great joy in Christ.”

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207 Talbot, 45.
208 Talbot, 47.
209 Talbot, 81.
210 Talbot, 93.
211 Talbot, 93.
are told that during this time she remained in a cell which was “closed and locked on all sides” and she passed her time singing psalms and reading her psalter.\textsuperscript{212}

Seen from this perspective, Christina’s life appears to fit the standard mold of a medieval holy woman. From a young age, she knew she wanted to devote her life to Christ, and faced numerous obstacles in her pursuit of the religious lifestyle. Many women who desired to live a religious life at this time faced similar obstacles such as: parental objection, financial need, and the struggle to find a suitable place that was willing to accept them. Further, Christina experienced the trials of living an enclosed lifestyle, a well-established lifestyle for religious men and especially women by this period. She faced solitude, loneliness, and physical want. However, in adherence to tradition, Christina joyfully faced all of these trials as they brought her closer to living a life which was pleasing to Christ.

Although part of Christina’s life seems to adhere to the traditional format of a “medieval holy woman,” based on the information recorded in her \textit{vita}, we see that Christina of Markyate is a complex figure. As Christopher Holdsworth remarks, “[Christina] lived a life which…was very much on the edge of the permissible and the impermissible from the point of view of the church.”\textsuperscript{213} Her \textit{vita} portrays Christina as possessing several of the appropriate ideals for a religious woman: a devotion to chastity at the expense of estranging her family, the presence of threats to her body and her chastity, and the importance of visions in helping her remain steadfast in her devotion to God. However, her \textit{vita} is not a perfect depiction of the life of a typical medieval religious woman; in several ways her life and lived religious experiences were novel. Christina also goes against some of the normative expectations for twelfth-century holy women; her \textit{vita} shows Christina living with and forming close friendships with men and it depicts her as

\textsuperscript{212} Talbot, 99.
\textsuperscript{213} Holdsworth, 199.
an important provider of spiritual guidance. In addition to these unusual occurrences, the *vita*
shows how Christina experienced enclosure in a unique way; to her it was not constraining, but
rather liberating and joyful and she used it to her own benefit. Christina’s enclosure was
fundamental to her receiving spiritual guidance, and this in turn was essential for her spiritual
growth.
Chapter 4 – Space as an Important Vehicle for Spiritual Growth: A New Reading of the *Vita*

Based on the clerical restrictions imposed by the Gregorian Reform, one would think that anchoresses were enclosed and secluded out of necessity to protect the male clerics. As evinced by the later regulatory guidebooks for anchoresses, most clerics had their own understanding of why anchoresses were enclosed and it corresponded directly with their demand that anchoresses be enclosed to keep themselves (the male clerics) from falling into carnal sin. However, by reading through the *vita* of Christina of Markyate, one notices that for twelfth-century religious women, enclosure was not seen solely as involuntary drudgery imposed upon them by the delicate sensibilities of the male clerics’ chastity. But rather, some women actively sought out this kind of enclosed lifestyle in order to worship God and enjoy the freedom that it brought. This lifestyle reflects the mentality of the Desert Fathers, such as St. Antony, who enjoyed escaping into the wilderness with the benefits of seclusion and devotional freedom which it afforded them. It also echoes themes from McNamer’s work on affective piety, since these women actively sought enclosure because it was a means of bringing them into a closer relationship with Christ.

By physically enclosing herself and devoting her life to God, a religious woman could lead a life of greater freedom than she would have had if she were a wife or daughter. The confinement of an anchoress provided the woman with freedom from marital ties and duties, freedom from her body and the constraints of her gender, freedom from authority, freedom to structure her time as she wished, freedom from worldly worries, and freedom to choose how to perform her devotion to God. Viewed in this light, enclosure was a favorable option for the medieval religious women. As noted earlier, certain types of enclosure could also be beneficial
for the spiritual guidance it might provide. Where Christina was located during each of her enclosure experiences directly influenced her spiritual growth and happiness and this depended greatly on the people associated with each place and how they helped or hindered her in her spiritual growth. These companions were deeply influential in Christina’s life and her religious experience and infused the spaces she inhabited with meaning.

Although Christina never recorded her thoughts regarding the various cells she inhabited, through her vita we can glean bits of information about how the author wants us to view Christina’s experiences. Based on the information available in her vita, we can ask the questions: who enclosed Christina at each juncture of her life? Why was she enclosed? Did she seem to enjoy her enclosure? And what were the benefits and drawbacks of her being thus confined? What does the author focus on most during his descriptions of Christina’s enclosures?

**Confinement at Huntingdon by Her Parents:**

The first time that Christina experienced enclosure in her life, she did not choose it, but rather it was imposed upon her by her parents. Her parents used enclosure as a way to control and punish Christina for not acquiescing to their demands that she marry Burthred. Christina’s parents also used enclosure as a way to limit Christina’s religious fervor and prevent her from socializing with religious people. The author remarks, “putting her under strict and rigorous guard, [her parents] prevented any religious god-fearing man from having any conversation with her.”

During this enclosure experience Christina was very unhappy, as the author says, “it was very hard for her to bear.” Throughout the trials brought about by her parents, Christina was not allowed access to the monastery or the chapel, but the author tells us that she did say “Hail Marys” to help her stand steadfast and she prayed for God to help preserve her. One of her

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214 Talbot, 47.
215 Talbot, 47.
prayers which the author attributes to her, is said when she is hiding behind a curtain from
Burthred and her parents. The prayer is simple and goes “let them be turned backward, that
desire my hurt.”\textsuperscript{216} It appears that God granted Christina’s petition for “straightaway [her
assailants] departed in confusion, and from that moment she was safe.”\textsuperscript{217}

When Christina was thus enclosed by her parents, she had no one to discuss spiritual
matters with and no one to give her guidance. One would think that being locked in a room alone
would be similar to anchoritic enclosure and would thus provide the opportunity to devote one’s
days to prayer and meditating on God. However, Christina did not see it this way. The author
clearly states that Christina was very unhappy during this enclosure experience and the root of
her unhappiness was her lack of spiritual companionship. Christina missed going to the chapel
and receiving the spiritual guidance that Sueno provided. Here was see the first reference to
spiritual guidance in Christina’s \textit{vita} and how important having access to spiritual mentors was
for her. She did not want to socialize with just anyone, Christina openly scorned the worldly
people that her parents associated with, rather, she wanted to be with like-minded people who
lived their lives in devotion to Christ. Although Christ remained with Christina throughout this
enclosure experience and the Virgin Mary appeared to her in visions, Christina longed and
prayed to escape from the worldly fellowship of her parents’ house into the spiritual liberation
and deeper devotional practices that came from associating with devout religious people.

During this period of her enclosure, all of Christina’s prayers were devoted to her safety
and the preservation of her chastity, and it seems that Christ hears her prayers and granted her
petitions. Although Burthred and her parents continued to pressure her into marriage, in the
author’s words, “and yet, with Christ guarding the vow which his spouse had made, the wedding

\textsuperscript{216} Talbot, 53.
\textsuperscript{217} Talbot, 53.
could nohow be brought about.” Christina’s parents continued to scheme and plan the wedding, but one disaster after another occurred from the wedding items catching fire to Christina becoming too ill to marry. Though Christina had no human companion on her side, Christ never deserted her and “looked with pity on the lowliness of his handmaid.” At one point, Christina’s father became so angry with her that he stripped her of all her belongings except the shift she was wearing and sent her out of his house. The author says that “she on her part preferred to be sent away, both naked and at night, for the sake of getting her freedom to serve Christ.” But her father soon regretted it and brought Christina back against her will. Christina was terribly disheartened, she lamented “among those that suffer there is none like me. Hence I cannot stop crying and sobbing from morning till night.” Throughout the trials of this enclosure, Christ comforted Christina and sent the Virgin Mary to encourage her and reassure Christina that one day she would be delivered from these afflictions. After this reassurance, Christina was filled with joy at “the thought of her freedom.” Although the Virgin Mary had promised Christina her freedom, her parents took “increasingly stringent steps…to prevent her from gaining her liberty.” Christina grew tired of this containment and devised a plan to run away from her problems and escape to the freedom of her body and spirit.

Through bribing her guards and with the help of some local clerics, Christina fled from her parents’ household. She was given several options as to where she could take refuge, and Christina chose to go to Flamstead because it was near Roger the Hermit and the anchoress

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218 Talbot, 55.
219 Talbot, 57.
220 Talbot, 73.
221 Talbot, 77.
222 Talbot, 79.
223 Talbot, 81.
Alfwen who were both known for their holiness. On the day prepared for her journey Christina prayed this prayer: “if Thou deliver me not this day, I shall be left in the world, anxious about worldly things and how to please my husband. My one desire, as Thou knowest, is to please Thee alone and to be united with Thee for all time without end. But whether this is Thy decision will become clear if today Thou drive me from my father’s house and from my relatives, nevermore to return.” This shows her ardent desire to be completely united with Christ and live her life in devotion to Him. She would never be happy while she was in the world nor would she be happy living a secular life, even one where she would be the wife of a prominent member of the community and have all of the prestige and freedoms that it had to offer. She rejected all of her worldly connections, including her family, in order to pursue a religious life and spiritual companions.

Enclosure at Flamstead with the Anchoress, Alfwen:

Once Christina arrived at Flamstead, she was joyfully taken in by the anchoress, Alfwen. Christina was immediately stripped of her fine clothes, her luxurious silks and furs, and was dressed in the rough material that comprised the religious habit. This garment change can be seen as representing an outward change which symbolized Christina’s intended inner transformation—she was putting off the things of the world in her endeavor to live an austere life completely devoted to Christ. Then, she was placed in a dark, narrow chamber and there she was enclosed for the endurance of her residence at Flamstead. However, unlike the enclosure forced upon her by her parents, which she found oppressive, Christina gladly embraced this enclosure experience with joy and thanksgiving. Rather than pray for God to alleviate her discomfort or

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224 Talbot, 87.
225 Talbot, 90-91.
226 Talbot, 93.
rescue her from this situation, Christina’s devotions were filled with “great joy in Christ.”\textsuperscript{227} She continued to pray for her safety and that she would be delivered from “the guile of her parents,” for it was still her desire to devote her life to the Lord and to His service without fear, and she was worried that her parents would find her. However, one night she had a vision which filled her with “great confidence” and she had “less fear of her persecutors.”\textsuperscript{228}

From that point on, Christina enjoyed a happy, peaceful existence during her enclosure at Flamstead. She passed her days praying, singling psalms, and reading her psalter: though she could not leave her cell, each of her days was structured however she liked and it fulfilled her goal of living every day completely devoted to God. In fact, the author says that Christina’s life at Flamstead was so serene that it irritated the devil. Therefore, the devil sought to disrupt Christina’s peace by sending demons, in the shape of toads, to harass her and distract her from God. Although the toads filled her tiny cell and even sat on her psalter which she held on her lap, Christina remained unfazed and since she “refused to move and would not give up her singing of the psalms they went away.”\textsuperscript{229}

Although she was in a tiny, dark cell, the author never mentions Christina complaining about her physical enclosure at Flamstead. More importantly, perhaps, Christina enjoyed having spiritual conversations with Alfwen. When Christina had a vision about the young man who helped her escape, she trusted Alfwen’s spiritual guidance enough to discuss the vision with her and gain Alfwen’s spiritual insight.\textsuperscript{230} The author first emphasizes the role of spiritual guidance in this instance with Alfwen, Christina’s initial self-chosen enclosure, and picks up this thread

\textsuperscript{227} Talbot, 93.  
\textsuperscript{228} Talbot, 99.  
\textsuperscript{229} Talbot, 99.  
\textsuperscript{230} Talbot, 97.
later in the *vita*. However, we are told that “after two years at Flamstead, it was necessary for Christina to go elsewhere.”

Roger, the Hermit of Markyate, hears about Christina’s need for new lodging. The author says that Roger recalled “the discomfort that Christina suffered at Flamstead, not only with patience but with joy, and judging from these and her other qualities that she was deeply rooted and grounded in the love of God, he decided that he could no longer deny her assistance.”

Thus, although we do not hear Christina speak of her sufferings or read that Christina prayed for her sufferings to be alleviated, as she did when enclosed by her parents, we know through Roger’s words that Christina did suffer while at Flamstead. Christina’s enclosure at Flamstead had to be much more uncomfortable than the lifestyle she was used to living. Her family was very wealthy, she had her own bedroom in her parents’ house, which was doubtlessly larger than the cell she now resided in, she was used to wearing soft clothing and having copious amounts of food, yet she gave all of this up and did not complain about it. According to Roger, Christina’s enclosure at Flamstead was not completely peaceful and undisturbed, yet because this was enclosure which she actively chose and through it she was able to spend all of her days venerating Christ in the company of like-minded people, she was indifferent to her suffering and bore it gladly, without complaint, since it brought her closer to her “bridegroom.”

**Enclosure at Markyate with the Hermit, Roger:**

Christina left Flamstead and took up residence at Markyate with the hermit, Roger. However, Roger did not want anything to appear improper or give people reason to gossip, and Christina’s parents had not given up searching for her yet, therefore, Roger did not inform

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231 Talbot, 99.
232 Talbot, 101.
anyone that she was there and he concealed her in a tiny cell adjacent his. Based strictly on the
description of each enclosure where Christina dwelled, this one at Markyate appears to be the
most restrictive. The author goes into great detail explaining the various types of discomfort that
Christina experienced. The author says that this cell where Roger interred Christina was tiny, and
the entrance was perhaps no larger than “a span and a half.” In this enclosure, Christina
passed her days sitting on a hard rock. She could not let herself out of the room, for Roger
“rolled a large log of wood, the weight of which was actually so great that it could not be put in
place or taken away by the recluse.” The author says that for the four years that Christina was
interred in this cell she endured daily trials of “cold and heat, hunger and thirst, daily fasting!
The confined space would not allow her to wear even the necessary clothing when she was cold.
The airless little enclosure became stifling when she was hot…there was a time when her
burning thirst caused little clots of blood to bubble up from her nostrils.” Locked in her cell,
Christina was not able to get food when she was hungry, water when she was thirsty, nor was she
able to go to the bathroom when nature called; she had to wait, often all day, for Roger to come
and let her out so she could relieve herself. All of the discomfort and suffering that Christina
endured during these four years of enclosure led to her contracting various ailments which
eventually “became incurable.” Christina’s high level of discomfort stands in contrast to the
guides for enclosure elsewhere described. Most anchorages were big enough to include a bed for
the anchoress and she was to have adequate food, water, and clothing. However, in the vein of
St. Antony’s long ago asceticism, Christina patiently endured her suffering. The author does not

233 Talbot, 103.
234 Talbot, 103. “Ubi tamen amplitude plus palmo semis inesset. In hoc ergo carcere Rogerus ovantem sociam
posuit.”
235 Talbot, 103.
236 Talbot, 103-104.
237 Talbot, 105.
mention Christina complaining or crying out to God for His mercy, nor does she ask to be relieved from her suffering or removed from this uncomfortable abode. She happily endured this discomfort since her suffering brought her closer to Christ.

However, out of all the places where Christina was enclosed, this one, where she lived in the most discomfort, was the place where she seemed to be most happy, and this reveals that there is more to the story than physical discomfort. The author says that “in this prison, therefore, Roger placed his happy companion.” He also remarks that Roger and Christina’s dwelling together led them to encourage each other in their service of God and “the more fervently they yearned to contemplate the beauty of the creator, the more happily they reign with Him in supreme glory.” Despite being uncomfortable, the author tells us that Christina “bore all these daily anxieties and troubles with the calm sweetness of divine love; she prayed earnestly in those moments at night when she was free to devote herself to prayer and contemplative meditation, just as her friend Roger had trained her.” Christina endured the physical trials of the daytime, and in the evenings she was let out and enjoyed sharing evening devotions with Roger. Not a day passed without Roger taking Christina into his chapel to pray, and the author marvels at the “many tears of heavenly desire” they shed and the “rare delicacies of inward joy” on which they feasted. The author says that Christina and Roger’s dwelling together encouraged them both in their spiritual walks as Roger taught Christina how to pray and how to properly meditate on Christ, “first by word, then by example.” At Markyate, although subjected to extreme physical

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238 Talbot, 103.
239 Talbot, 103.
240 Talbot, 105.
241 Talbot, 107.
242 Talbot, 105.
discomfort, Christina could spend her days meditating on Christ and she enjoyed the companionship of a man who was able to instruct her in the ways of following Christ.

The time Christina spent with Roger was deeply influential in her life; residing with Roger provided with the spiritual guidance needed to pursue a serious religious life. He instructed Christina in devotional practices, such as how to pray and how to revere God, he showed her by example how to provide spiritual guidance and help others grow in their faith, and he provided her with the qualities necessary to branch out on her own, as both a recluse and a spiritual mentor for others. Roger so deeply influenced Christina’s life that she decided she wanted to follow in his footsteps and reside as a holy person at Markyate.

During her time with Roger, God was active in Christina’s life and she had two visions of heavenly visitors. The first was in response to her prayers. She was still concerned that Burthred would find her and demand she marry him, therefore, she prayed earnestly to be delivered from this threat. Christ soon appeared to her and gave her a golden cross, saying that He would soon return for it. Christina and Roger interpreted this as Christ saying that Christina had successfully borne her cross, and her trials would soon be over.243 Sure enough, a few days later Burthred acknowledged his guilt in persecuting “Christ’s beloved” and he publically released Christina from their betrothal. The second vision that Christina had was not in response to her suffering, but rather the “queen of heaven” appeared before Christina and told her that she would give Christina whatever she asked. Christina replied that she wanted Roger’s hermitage to dwell in. The “queen of heaven” was pleased with this request and promised Christina that one day she would inherit Roger’s hermitage.244 Despite the pain and suffering that she endured at Markyate, it was the one thing that Christina wanted. The “queen of heaven” would have gladly given

243 Talbot, 107.
244 Talbot, 111.
Christina anything she desired. Christina could have asked for her own anchorage and patron, she could have asked to join a community of nuns, she could have requested eternal safety from her persecutors, she could have asked to be healed from her bodily affliction, or numerous other things. Yet, the deepest desire of her heart and the thing she requested was to reside at Markyate and possess it as her own. She had so enjoyed her religious experience being enclosed at Markyate, that this was the life that she wanted to live for the rest of her life.

However, once Roger died, Christina did not immediately inherit his hermitage. She was afraid to stay there alone for she feared that the bishop of Lincoln would find her and force her to marry Burthred; although Burthred had released her, they had not gotten an official annulment yet. Therefore, Christina went to the Archbishop Thurstan of York, who had been previously informed of her situation by Roger, and asked his help in acquiring a new place of residence. The author tells us that “after she had first taken various hiding-places, the archbishop commended her to the charge of a certain cleric, a close friend of his, whose name, I am under obligation not to divulge.”

**Enclosure at Unknown Location with Unnamed Cleric:**

The author does not tell us what the living situation looked like when Christina was residing with the unnamed cleric, but he does tell us that the cleric was “a religious man and a man of position in the world: and relying on this twofold status Christina felt the more safe in staying with him.” At first everything went well, and there was nothing except chaste, spiritual love between Christina and the cleric, but we are told that the devil “took advantage of their close companionship and feeling of security to…loose his fiery darts.” The devil overcame the

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245 Talbot, 113-114.
246 Talbot, 115.
247 Talbot, 115.
man’s resistance and plagued him with feelings of lust. The unnamed cleric was so inflamed with passion that he came before Christina “without any clothes on and behaved in so scandalous a manner.” However, Christina showed the utmost restraint, the author says that “though she herself was struggling with this wretched passion, she wisely pretended that she was untouched by it.” Apparently, this mutual temptation went on for a while. Christina “manfully” resisted her temptation and tried various means to “tame her lascivious body.” She underwent long fasts, sleepless nights, harsh scourgings, and unceasingly called upon God to eliminate the lustful passion that surged within her. However, none of this helped and God did not acquiesce to her petition. We are told that the only thing that brought her respite was the presence of the unnamed cleric: in his presence her lust was tamed, but in his absence, she was “so inwardly inflamed that she thought the clothes which clung to her body might be set on fire.”

This is an interesting episode in Christina’s life. In most instances of temptation in the lives of other saints and holy women, they would pray or employ other devotional practices of extreme penance, such as fasting, sleep deprivation, and self-flagellation, until God intervened and their problems were resolved. We are not told for how long Christina endured this temptation of lust for the unnamed cleric, but we are told that she tried to resist the temptations of her flesh with “long fastings, little food…nights spent without sleep, harsh scourgings,” yet these were of no avail.

While describing Christina’s time residing with the unnamed cleric, the author does not mention the cleric providing Christina with spiritual guidance or them sharing in any type of religious conversation or devotional practice. In her two prior religious enclosures Christina

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248 Talbot, 115.  
249 Talbot, 115.  
250 Talbot, 117.  
251 Talbot, 115.
received visions from God and the author makes a point to mention that she discusses the importance of these visions with her spiritual mentors—Alfwen and Roger. However, in this section which discusses her cohabitation with the unnamed cleric, Christina does not experience any visions, so this element of their spiritual relationship is missing. The author also does not mention Christina singing, reading her psalter, or happily meditating on Christ during this period of her life. This could be because the cleric does not fulfil the role of spiritual guide, but rather causes Christina to stray into sinful thoughts. Christina is seemingly left to her own devices, unguided by the cleric and perhaps even disregarded by God. Christ does not appear in any visions to comfort Christina during this experience, nor does He answer her prayers to be released from the lust which threatened her virginity. Christina’s only respite during her residence with the cleric was that she did not burn with passion in the presence of the cleric, but only when he was away. This however, brought her little relief. Christina’s spirit was confused and overwhelmed, she had no one close by to turn to for guidance, and God was not answering her pleas for succor.

The cleric continued to succumb to his passions and harass Christina until one night when he was visited by three saints in his sleep. These saints, John the evangelist, Benedict the founder of monks, and Mary Magdalen, reproached the cleric for “his wicked persecution of the chosen spouse of the most high king” and threatened him with eternal damnation if he did not desist. This vision terrified the cleric and he asked for Christina’s forgiveness and he ceased harassing her. However, this did nothing to cool Christina’s passion. The author tells us that “after a long time had been spent in constant warring against her tireless adversary, disgusted with that deadly lodging, [Christina] returned to that pleasant place in the wilderness bestowed upon her by the

\[252\] Talbot, 117.
queen of heaven.” Like the first Christian recluses, Christina fled from persecution and into the supposedly “comforting” solace of the wilderness. While this part of Christina’s spiritual journey cannot be concretely categorized as “enclosed,” it seems to have been spent in seclusion. During this time, Christina was very much alone. Although she had removed herself from the presence of the unnamed cleric who was the root of her lust, she continued to be plagued by it, even here in the “wilderness,” Christina was disturbed by her burning passion. In her self-inflicted isolation, Christina had no one to turn to for guidance, both man and God seemed to be absent. The author says that Christina spent days and nights “knelt in prayer, weeping, and lamenting, and begging to be freed from temptation.” She employed the methods that Roger taught her and continuously cried out to God until He responded. We are not told how long Christina stayed thus isolated in the wilderness, but the author says that God finally had mercy on Christina and granted her consolation and “the fire of lust was so completely extinguished that never afterwards could it be revived.”

This section is interesting because it does not follow the standard set by the previous descriptions of Christina’s enclosures. There is no description of her physical surroundings and the discomfort that they elicited. But rather, the emphasis is on her inner well-being and her spiritual discomfort. Her spiritual peace was disrupted, so she could not devote her whole attention to serving Christ. At Flamstead and at Markyate Christina was physically uncomfortable, but she was happy and at peace because there were no impediments to her complete devotion to God. In these locations, Christina was in the company of people who encouraged her in her walk with God and provided her with spiritual guidance. In contrast, while

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253 Talbot, 117.  
254 Talbot, 117.  
255 Talbot, 119.
her time at home and her time spent with the unnamed cleric might have been physically more comfortable—we know that she came from a wealthy family and the author does not devote any attention at either place to describing her physical situation as he does when she was uncomfortable, so he might have thought that since they lacked physical discomfort, they were not worth discussing—they both presented impediments to her being able to devote her entire attention to Christ. At home in Huntingdon, Christina’s family presented obstacles which inhibited her spiritual devotion and tempted her to sin, likewise, the lust which developed between her and the unnamed cleric turned her thoughts away from meditating on Christ, caused her to burn with passion, and enticed her to fall into sin. In both circumstances, Christina responded the same way. When her spiritual liberation was disrupted or restricted, Christina reacted by running away. As the Desert Fathers had done, when Christina faced temptation and spiritual distress, she ran away into the liberating “wilderness” of greater isolation. The more Christina interacted with the world and secular people, the greater spiritual distress she experienced. However, when she was “outside of the world,” surrounded by a few godly mentors, she was free to devote all of her attention to godly matters and experienced sincere contentment.

The first-time Christina exerted her spiritual freedom and ran away from her family, she escaped into the company of caring, spiritual mentors. When planning her escape, Christina specifically chose to reside at Flamstead because it was near two renown religious people—Alfwen and Roger. From Alfwen and Roger, Christina learned how to be a successful religious person. She patiently endured the physical and mental suffering that came with religious enclosure, and she had them to consult and encourage her if she grew tired of suffering. Especially from Roger, Christina learned how to pray, how to earnestly yearn for God’s
presence, and the joy and power that came from devoting oneself entirely to God. The second-time Christina ran away, it was from the spiritual trials and temptations that sprang up while living with the unnamed cleric. This time, Christina did not run to anyone; instead, she decided to endure her trials alone. This experience was formative in Christina coming into her own as a religious person and as a spiritual guide herself. From Alfwen and Roger, Christina gained the preparation necessary to pray through and overcome the spiritual trials which now troubled her. Armed with the necessary skills, Christina successfully made it through this trial with God’s help and came out re-strengthened spiritually and transitioned from the position of spiritual mentee to that of spiritual mentor.

**Decision to Remain at Markyate**

While Christina was staying with the unnamed cleric, her most ardent persecutor, the bishop of Lincoln, died. Consequently, as the author says, “the maiden therefore remained in her solitude free from care: she took advantage of the peace which she had so long desired to meditate on the mercy with which Christ had delivered her from so many perils.”

Christina was once again at peace and enjoyed the seclusion that Markyate provided. The author remarks that “this them was her one joy, her only purpose, to spend her time in praising God and in giving thanks.”

Word slowly spread about Christina’s great piety and healing powers. One result was a group of maidens gathered around her to learn from her holiness. Here we see her step into the role that Roger had had played for her, that of spiritual guide, for these women. Christina’s talent for providing spiritual guidance became so renowned that she was visited by abbots of distant monasteries who wished to take her to their monasteries and therefore “add importance and

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256 Talbot, 119.
257 Talbot, 119.
prestige to their places.” Thus, Christina had several options to contemplate. She could stay at Markyate and lead the small group of women who had gathered around her, or she could travel to a prominent monastery such as York, Marcigny, or Fontevrault, and become the mother superior over the nuns there. However, Christina ultimately decided to remain at Markyate for several reasons: because the body of Alban rested there, because Roger the hermit had lived there, and “because there were in our community certain souls whom she cherished more than those of other monasteries, some of whom owed their monastic vocation to her.” This shows that nostalgia and personal relations meant more to Christina than worldly renown. Although she lived the life of a recluse, she was never in complete solitude. She was constantly surrounded by a companion or companions who she learned from, and who in turn learned from her. She cherished her companions and this, perhaps along with the greater autonomy that her reclusive lifestyle provided, prompted her to turn down the prestigious offers of these great monasteries.

In her introduction to Anchoritic Traditions of Medieval Europe, Liz Herbert McAvoy discusses early Christian solitude and the importance of community to these recluses. She says that the first followers of Christ moved into the wilderness for safety, they “fled into the safer caves and hills on the fringes of the Egyptian desert where they could live out their lives and their faith without the dangers of persecution.” She also says that over time, the most zealous individuals withdrew further into individual solitude, where they lived out ascetic, contemplative lives as holy men and women. She claims that “these were the first Christian hermits and precursors of the medieval anchoritic tradition.” The lives of these first “Desert Fathers and

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258 Talbot, 127.
259 Talbot, 127.
261 McAvoy, 7.
262 McAvoy, 7.
Mothers” provided an important example of chastity, poverty, and obedience which helped inspire medieval anchorites to pursue similar lifestyles.

However, as McAvoy points out, this early life of withdrawal was often ephemeral in nature, she says that “solitude was a condition practiced in close proximity to village and community rather than in complete isolation within the desert expanses.” To emphasize her point, McAvoy says that even St. Anthony, one of the very first ‘Desert Fathers’, did not retreat far into the desert, but rather lived close enough to his community to have sporadic interactions with them. In his *Life of St. Antony*, Athanasius traces Antony’s quest for solitude. The first time he ventured into the “wilderness,” Antony “went out to the tombs that were situated some distance from the village.” However, he was close enough to civilization for his friends to periodically bring him bread. After Antony felt that he had persevered in this place long enough, and being even more zealous in his devotion to God, he decided to venture further into isolation and ascended a nearby mountain. In this mountain, Antony found a deserted fortress and lived there alone for almost twenty years. However, Athanasius tells us that Antony’s friends visited him often, however, “since [Antony] did not allow them to enter, those of his acquaintance who came to him often spent days and nights outside.” His friends visited Antony to bring him bread and make sure he was alive, but he rarely let them see him. After a while, many of his friends desired to live an ascetic life under the instruction of Antony, so they broke down the door to his fortress and forced him to come out. When Antony came out, he performed miracles of healing, purged people of demons, and “through regular conversation he

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263 McAvoy, 8.
264 Athanasius, 1.
265 Athanasius, 12.
266 Athanasius, 16.
267 Athanasius, 17.
strengthened the resolve of those who were already monks and stirred most of the others to a desire for the discipline, and before long, by the attraction of his speech, a great many monasteries came into being, and like a father he guided them all.”268

Thus, from the beginning, the idea of reclusive solitude was more figurative and this is what was taken up and embraced by later anchorites. McAvoy remarks that “this liminal state of belonging and yet not belonging soon began to attract more followers, many of whom opted initially to live their spiritual lives in solitude, but who later went on to found communities of solitudes who grouped together to form the first cenobites.”269 In her work on anchorites, Warren also notes how there was a strong sense of community that bound together an area’s hermits and anchorites. They might have lived separately, yet they often communicated with each other through letters and servants.270 This seems to fit well with how the life of Christina of Markyate unfolded. She began her spiritual journey completely enclosed as an anchoress, then she became more of a recluse, and by the end of her life enough women had gathered around her to become the priory of Markyate, with Christina as the Prioress. Throughout her journey, Christina was blessed to receive spiritual guidance which made her enclosure more enjoyable and spiritually rewarding. This spiritual guidance shaped her experience of enclosure and brought her spiritual fulfillment. The insight Christina gained from dwelling with Alfwen and Roger prepared her to advance in her spiritual career from a young anchoress in need of direction to the renowned Prioress of Markyate. Christina’s spirituality advanced to the point where she developed a following of women who desired to learn sanctity from her, and Christina was able

268 Athanasius, 19.
269 McAvoy, 8.
270 Warren, 41.
to provide them with spiritual guidance along with the direction she provided for the Abbot of St. Albans.
Epilogue

My intention is to illustrate how the pages of Christina’s manuscript contain keys to a better understanding of issues of sex, gender, and religion in the Middle Ages, especially in regards of how space, enclosure, and spiritual guidance were used by medieval religious people to further their devotional practices. Talbot published his original translation of Christina’s life in 1959, decades before feminist and gender historians unraveled the complexities of women’s religious experiences. Since then, scholars have worked to dissect Christina’s life and show how it can be used to discuss medieval ideas of sanctity, gender and chastity, and religious friendships. I hope to join the conversation by contributing the idea of using enclosure as a vehicle for studying spiritual guidance in medieval religious lives.

This reading of Christina’s life does not serve to negate political overtones which may have contributed to the vita being written. While, I argue that the author realized that spiritual guidance would greatly benefit medieval women and that men should not be afraid to chastely counsel women, various motives for writing the vita could be occurring at the same time. The author might also have written the vita to protest Norman leadership as the author does portray the Normans in a negative light as corrupt. Further, it could very well be acting as a text to shore up concerns in the local St. Albans community. Despite these possible other readings, the author of Christina’s vita included his extremely detailed information about Christina’s enclosure experiences and the people she dwelled with for a reason. He seemed keen to show how enclosure functioned as a vehicle for spiritual guidance to take place, and this guidance is what molded Christina into a twelfth-century holy woman. Whether mentored by Roger, experiencing no spiritual guidance while living with the unnamed cleric, or acting as a mentor herself,
Christina’s spiritual development is directly shaped by both the presence and absence of spiritual guidance.

By studying Christina’s *vita* and her experiences of enclosure as written for an audience beyond St. Albans, we can obtain information on the experiences of twelfth-century religious women. We see the struggle that many women went through in order to find a way to channel their religious devotion. We also see how important spiritual guidance was for spiritual formation. Further analysis of the existence of spiritual guidance in the lives of medieval holy women and how it affected their religious experiences would serve to supplement our understanding of female religious spirituality and how medieval women gained spiritual knowledge.
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