

THE TOADS ON THE TEXT:
THE SPIRITUALITY OF PSALTER READING
IN THE *LIFE OF CHRISTINA OF MARKYATE*

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The *St. Albans Psalter* is a twelfth-century heavily illuminated manuscript. Its major contents, respectively, include the following elements: a saints' calendar and computistical tables, forty full-page framed miniatures, an Anglo-Norman verse version of the *Life of St. Alexis*, an excerpt of a letter by Gregory in both Anglo-Norman and Latin regarding the didactic use of religious pictures, a Gallican Psalter, Canticles, various prayers, and two full-page miniatures of the martyrdom of St. Alban. The initials are highly elaborate and historiated, though the subject of the initials is Christ as often as it is David. The Psalter is believed to have been produced at the St. Albans Abbey based on the localizable contents of the calendar and obits as well as the consistency of the hands. The latest date possible for the completed manuscript is c.1123. It remained at St. Albans until after c.1155. Based on the calendar, obits, and the inclusion of the *Life of St. Alexis*, most scholars agree that the Psalter was made for Christina of Markyate. Her own *Life* details her long stay with Roger, an anchorite attached to St. Albans Abbey. One of the obits in the Psalter appears to be his, *Obitus Rogeri heremit[ae] monaci sancti Albani apud quemcumque fuerit hoc psalterium fiat eius memoria maxime hac die*, "The death of Roger, hermit monk of Saint Albans. Among whomsoever this Psalter will come, let his memory be most highly kept on this day."¹

A facsimile or photographic reproduction of the whole Psalter has never been published, to my knowledge. J. H. Bodeker did publish, however, a photographic reproduction of the *Life of St. Alexis* by E. M. Stengel as part of an edition. The most notable study of the Psalter was published in 1960 by Otto Pächt, C. R. Dodwell, and Francis Wormald. Though they reproduce the decorations of the manuscript quite thoroughly, rarely do they reproduce a full text. When they do so, it seems for the sake of attached illuminations or initials.² Other compilation studies also include reproductions of portions from the Psalter and brief studies of it.³

The version of the *Life of St. Alexis* from the Psalter has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. It has been edited ever since W. Muller, discoverer of the Hildesheim manuscript, first published it in 1845. In 1872 Gaston Paris came out with a genetic, critical edition of the text, for the first time applying Lachmannian

techniques to an Old French text. C. Storey's 1968 edition of the *Vie de St. Alexis* (following almost exclusively ms. L "Lamspringe," the *St Albans Psalter* version) lists twenty-three previous editions. Debate has continued throughout the history of editing the *Vie de St. Alexis*. Most scholars agree, however, that the version of the legend in the *St. Albans Psalter* is the earliest Anglo-Norman version. Much of the scholarly work done on the legend attempts to sketch a genetic tree going back to its Latin origins. Such genetic trees, beyond their importance in positing a literary origin for the legend, also were used in recreating the grammar of Old French.

However, despite the large amount of work done on the *St. Albans Psalter* and the *Life of St. Alexis*, both art scholars and philologists have ignored the bulk of the text of the *St. Albans Psalter*. Rather, they pursue forms of scholarship which particularize the Psalter. They seem to prefer to show how their dissection of the manuscript relates to dissections of other manuscripts, or to place it within a larger linguistic or hagiographic context, than to show how the various elements of the manuscript interact with each other. The irony of the scholarship is this: although the particularizing tendency of scholarship might be caused in this case by the lack of an author to unify interpretation of the whole, the *St. Albans Psalter* itself gives very clear evidence of a single reader for whom the manuscript was made, Christina of Markyate. I will argue that positing Christina as *the* reader of the Psalter would not only fill the spot in interpretive systems usually filled by a literary author but at the same time avoid the sense of authorial control over the text which can lead to naively totalizing readings. My acknowledgment that the spot of the author must be filled in order to enable interpretation is simply a concession to intuitive processes. It is not meant to valorize Christina's interpretation of the Psalter over any other, as so often results from studies of authorial intent. A more contemporary-minded critic might rightly criticize this study for individualizing the treatment of reader response to the point where it reincarnates the once dead author in the form of the reader. For what it is worth, this is not my intent. Rather, I prefer to see this study as an effort to refocus on a manuscript that has been particularized beyond recognition. In the simplest terms, this study is about reading. Modern scholars do not read the *St. Albans Psalter* in the same manner as Christina of Markyate did. Without devaluing contemporary readings, I would like to suggest that a valuable perspective on the Psalter is lost if readers ignore Christina.

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Medieval manuscripts would often begin with an *accessus ad auctores* giving a short *vita* of the author. In this study it is ironically more fitting to give a short *vita* of the reader before continuing the study of the *St. Albans Psalter*. Christina of Markyate was born to noble Anglo-Saxon parents in Huntington, c. 1097. Her father was a guild merchant there. When she was about fifteen years old, c. 1112, she made a vow of virginity at the St. Albans Abbey. Her parents and Ralph Flambard, a bishop thwarted in his efforts to seduce her, arranged for Christina to marry Burhtred. The bishop of Lincoln, after being bribed by Christina's parents, reversed his decision to support Christina in her vow of virginity and instead attempted to force the marriage. About a year after the forced betrothal, Christina escaped her parents' house with her virginity intact. She hid with Alfwen, another anchoress, for about two years before moving to Markyate and residing with the elderly recluse, Roger. She remained there for most of her life. Because of her popularity, a regular priory for nuns eventually was opened in the vicinity. She has been described as, "a well-balanced and able person, highly strung but not hysterical, who experienced visions on occasion, but was not given to excessive mortifications."⁴

Christina's role as a reader was informed, thus, by a unique personal experience, her exile, and the larger tradition of monastic/anchoritic ideas of meditative readings into which her mentors no doubt wanted to inculcate her. Traces of her nobility, race, and gender are also found in the *Psalter* itself. By reconstructing Christina's life, particularly her life as a reader, one can also begin to reconstruct a composite reading of the *Psalter*. However, caution must be taken in this task. Scholars of Christina and the *St. Albans Psalter* have in practice, if not explicitly, attempted some of this mutual reconstruction. But they seldom acknowledge the possibility of fictive elements in the *Life* of Christina. Even more rarely do they discuss the potential benefits of Christina's sanctification for the hagiographer and his (her?) community. The resulting scholarship of Christina is complicit with the intentions of the hagiographer (as noble as they may be). Such a reading of her life, therefore, only admits an understanding of Christina's relationship to the *Psalter* that can be found in the monochromatic, typological world of the hagiographic topoi; the *Psalter*'s inclusion of the *Life of St. Alexis* justifies Christina's actions according to the action of earlier saints. Thus, Talbot claims,

What makes it almost certain that the Psalter belonged to Christina is the appearance in it of the *Life of St. Alexis*, a text which is quite irrelevant to a purely liturgical book. This is an obvious addition to the volume and, considering that it is written in French, an incongruous intruder on the Latin psalms: but when one realizes that its story mirrors exactly the experiences of Christina, that it is a kind of *pièce justificative* of her action in leaving her husband and retiring to the hermitage, its presence there far from being puzzling, becomes intelligible.⁵

But certainly, Christina's view of the *whole* Psalter was more complex than that. Her *Life* relates an event which humorously clarifies the physical presence and constant use of a Psalter (but not the *St. Albans Psalter*) in Christina's life. While in hiding at Flamstead, giant toads invade her cell:

Ap[pare]bant subito teterima. terribili[bus] ac spaciosis orbibus oculorum. se[debant] hinc et hinc: spalterio vendicantes medium locum in gremio virgi[nis] quod propemodum omnibus horis iacebat expansum in usum sponse Christi. At cum illa nec se moveret nec psalmodiam dimitteret: iterum a[bibant]. Unde magis credendum [est eos] fuisse demones.

Their sudden appearance, with their big and terrible eyes, was most frightening, for they squatted here and there, arrogating the middle of the Psalter which lay open on her lap at all hours of the day for her use. But when she refused to move and would not give up her singing of the psalms, they went away, which makes one think that they were devils.⁶

If the *St. Albans Psalter* was designed as a response to Christina's social and familial troubles, its design was dependent on the coexistence of the *Life of Alexis* and the Psalter proper. Talbot may be accurate in his description of the function of the *Life of Alexis* in the Psalter. However, he ignores the important fact that most of Christina's saintly life is lived after the events paralleled in the Alexis story. Indeed, Christina had lived for seven years as an anchoress before the best possible date for the creation of the Psalter, c. 1123.

Pächt did acknowledge that the later part of the *Life of Alexis* is not as appropriate as the earlier part:

The parallelism exclusively concerns the early stages of the legend, the dramatic turn on the wedding night, Alexis' rejection of the marriage and his flight from home ("*intactum sponsam relinquens*"). It is this enactment of the ideal of ascetic life which is the *tertium comparationis*. What has been chosen for illustration are thus the very scenes which were of topical interest in a book destined for Christina, scenes which could be understood as allegories of her own actions. (140)

But what was Christina to do with the rest of her life? By framing the Alexis/Christina allegory in the Psalter, Christina was enabled not only to justify her past but also literally to turn the page to the structure of her new life, the Psalms; that is, the *Life of Alexis*, as a devotional text, could have evoked a catharsis of Christina's worldly troubles while simultaneously being contained in and reinforced by the Christian perspective. As Christina *purged* her past worldly life (erased it) through reading the *Life of Alexis* in the Psalter, she insured that she, herself, would be inscribed in the Christian hagiographic tradition. Furthermore, the more intensely she became a *reader* of the cyclical and liturgical psalms, and the more intensely she became a reader of the hagiographic typology of the *Life of Alexis*, the more she lived through these readings and, therefore, suited her life to be *written* in those same traditions. This process might be elaborated as a dialectic of narrative form seen in her *Life*. In the early part of her *Life*, as a lay girl, time is generally tracked in a chronological form. After her profession, however, liturgical time dominates. Most of the miracles, visitations, and visions are described as taking place on a feast day or in relation to an hour of prayer.⁷ The *Life* synthesizes both of these understandings of time in a single narrative. In sum, Christina's reading of the Psalter transforms her life into one that can be written in standard hagiographic form. The cyclical, typological, and liturgical natures of the Psalter are rewritten, or translated through her *Life*—thoroughly spread out in its whole narrative structure.

Because such theorizing about the complementary narrative structures of the *Life of Alexis* and the Psalter seems to depend on Christina's ability to read (though not necessarily thoroughly to

understand such structures), it is essential to question her literacy. But the Psalter and Christina's *Life* give only ambiguous evidence of her ability to read. One could claim that Christina spoke English and Anglo-Norman and read Latin and Old French. On the other hand, the inclusion of the full page miniatures in the Psalter and the letter of Gregory justifying pictures in general suggest that Christina was illiterate. Gregory's letter states that pictures might be justified because *in ipsa ignorantes vident quod sequi debeant, in ipsa legunt qui litteras nesciunt*, "in them ignorant people see what they ought to follow, in them they who do not know letters read."⁶ Curiously, this letter is also translated into French. For whom, then, was it included in the Psalter? If it were included for Christina, either she would not be able to read it, or be able to read what she ought, instead of looking at pictures. Here, speculation is as tempting as it is dangerous. Perhaps the letter was included because the Psalter was intended to be read by Christina with the aid of someone more fluent in Latin. The letter might calm a more austere and experienced monk about the value of the lavish pictures. Roger would be a likely candidate in this case. He was older, and well experienced in the monastic readings which make up the bulk of the Psalter. Christina and he were known to have spent much time together. But the only evidence that we have of Roger's vernacular suggests that it was English. Shortly before his death, in a poignant situation, he refers to Christina as his "*sunendaegē dohter*" (*Life* 106). Why would Gregory's letter have been translated into French for Roger? He very likely would have been more fluent in Latin than French. The inclusion of the letter might be explained in several ways. First, Christina was fluent in French, but not Latin, and the translations of the letter and the *Life of Alexis* were therefore meant for her own reading. Second, the French and Latin were used as primer texts. If Christina were fluent in French she might learn Latin through the translation. If her fellow reader were fluent in Latin, but not French, he might have learned inversely. Ultimately, however, one cannot depend so heavily on the manuscript maker's awareness of his readers. Very possibly the manuscript maker included the French translation of Gregory's letter on a whim. The inclusion of Gregory's letter cannot prove anything about Christina's ability to read. But it does raise important doubts about the literacy which one would otherwise assume based on evidence from her *Life* and the existence of the texts of the Psalter. If Christina were not reading when she had a Psalter constantly in her lap, what was she doing with the manuscript?

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The question of Christina's level of understanding of Scripture is brought up early in the *Life* in a debate with Fredebertus. He is trying to convince Christina to obey her parents and consummate her marriage, thus breaking her childhood vow of virginity. He cites the authority of the Gospel of Mark, "For this a man will leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife. And they shall be two in one flesh" (10: 7-9). He also quotes the notorious passage of I Corinthians 7: 3-4, 10-11, about a husband's control over his wife's body. Finally, Fredebertus supports his argument by mentioning the Hebrew Testament commandment to honor and obey one's parents: *Hec precepta. id (est) de observando coniugio et obediendo parentibus magna quidem sunt: et in Veteri et Novo Testamento magnopere commendata*, "These two commandments, about obedience to parents and faithfulness in marriage, are great, much commended in the Old and New Testaments" (*Life* 60/61). Fredebertus's praise of the Old Testament commandments is certainly a tactical error. It allows Christina to frame herself with a moral upper hand in contrast to him. He exhibited two characteristics which she simply inverts, knowledge of Scripture, and faith in the Law rather than the (sense of the) spirit:

Hiis perhoratis; Christina respond[it]. Nescio scripturas quas nominasti. ex sensu vero desuper [intellec]to domine prior respondebo tibi . . . hoc quantum (et) quam iniquum sit. vos iudicate qui videmini reliquos homines in sciencia scripturarum precellere. . . . Quod ecce ipso invitante nunc facio. cuius dictis istam esse vocem in evangelio: Omnis qui reliquerit domum vel fratres. aut sorores. aut patrem aut matrem. aut uxorem aut filios aut agros. propter nomen meum centuplum accipiet. et vitam eternam possidebit.

To these exhortations Christina replied: "I am ignorant of the scriptures which you have quoted, father prior. But from their sense I will give my answers thereto. . . . I leave you, who are supposed to excel other men in the knowledge of scriptures, to judge how wicked a thing this is What I do, I do on the invitation of Him whose voice, as you say, is heard in the Gospel: Every one who leaves house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or possessions for My name's sake shall receive a hundredfold and possess eternal life." (*Life* 60/61-62/63. Christina is

quoting Matt. 19:29.)

A Robertsonian reading of this passage would suggest that Christina moved beyond the letters (*litteras*) of the Scriptural quotations directly to their sense (*sensus*). But Christina's response by quoting Matthew suggests that not only does she *know* her Scripture but more important she trusts her interpretation of Scripture above a priest who is "supposed to excel other men in the knowledge of scriptures." Understanding Scripture, for Christina, is not merely a matter of knowledge (*scientia*).

Christina's hagiographer brings in the issue of reading more explicitly on the crucial day of her escape. The whole passage of the escape is full of inversions and contrasts. Her guide in the escape questions her delay in mounting the getaway horse: *Quid fugitiva m[ora]ris? Quid sexum feminei vereris? [Vi]rilem animum indue. et more viri [in] equum ascende*, "Why delay, fugitive? Why do you respect your feminine sex? Put on manly courage and mount the horse like a man" (*Life* 92/93). Not only does she mount the horse as a man would, but quite admirably she rides thirty miles in only six hours. Once in Flamstead, her first hiding place, another inversion takes place. The anchoress Alfwen greets her with joy. In her cell, Christina *eadem die pro religionis ha[bitu] asperam indueba]tur tunicam que sericis ves[timentis et] delicatis variarum pelliciarum [delic]iis in patris domo consu[everat u]ti*, "on the same day put on the religious habit, and she who had been accustomed to wearing silk dresses and luxurious furs in her father's house was now covered with a rough garment" (*Life* 92/93). The final description we have of Christina's escape day is of what reading she chose:

Statimque eadem die cepit de tricesimo psalmo septimo leccionem quinque versus, quorum primus est: Domine ante te omne desiderium meum. Apta quidem lectio conveniensque fortune legentis, et qua sepius eadem repetendo.

And on that very day she took for her reading five verses from the thirty-seventh psalm, of which the first runs: "Lord, all my desire is before thee." A very suitable passage and one that described the situation of the reader; this she repeated often. (*Life* 92/93)

This passage presents several important issues but also raises crucial questions. Coming as it does at the end of a series of inversions, ought the description of her reading also be taken as an inversion? Of what? The hagiographer pointed out the appropriateness of the reading. Indeed, the verses following the one quoted have even more relevance to Christina's situation: "My heart is troubled. My friends and my neighbours have drawn near, and stood against me. And they that were near me stood far off. And they that sought my soul used violence. And they that sought evils to me spoke vain things, and studied deceits all day long."⁹ Her reaction to the reading is equally suited to the situation. She laments the violence and guile of her parents. The passage describing Christina's choosing a reading does fit, however, into a larger pattern of inversions. The first inversion Christina undergoes on her escape day, jumping onto the horse like a man, focuses on the immediacy of her actions. The servant asks her why she delays and she responds by acting swiftly. Likewise, Christina's first action after greeting Alfwen is to change her rich clothing for a coarse religious habit. The passage about her reading selection bears out this pattern, even repeating the key phrase from the passage about her clothing, "*eadem die*." The inversion is not to be found in the content of Christina's reading. Rather, the act of reading is, itself, an inversion of Christina's past life. The interpretation of this passage hinges on two possible meanings of the term "*cepit*." Talbot translates it as "took," thus: "And on that very day she took for her reading, etc." This translation implies that Christina could read Latin to some degree, and that reading was a habitual, daily activity. If so, there would have been a continuity with, rather than an inversion of, her past life through the reading of Latin. But, according to Lewis and Short's *Latin Dictionary*, "*cepit*" may also mean "understood," thus: "And on that very day she understood a reading (of five verses), etc." This translation implies that Christina's ability to read Latin is a contrast or inversion of her past life. It also continues the motif of immediate action: on the very first day that Christina read Latin, she was able to understand it. But why only five verses? This question, too, is better answered by translating "*cepit*" as "understood". If Christina had never studied Latin before, five verses would be about all she could learn between her late afternoon arrival and sunset. One could take Christina's repetition of the verses as a meditative action. However, it could equally be taken as a necessary step in learning to read Latin. In either case, the most striking aspect of this passage of inversion is the

conflation between her escape, her reading, and the verse quoted in the *Life*: "Lord, all my desire is before thee." It is unclear whether this passage is appropriate because it expresses Christina's motivation for the escape or because it explains her eagerness to read.¹⁰ Both escape from the world and reading were understood as monastic expressions of desire for God. The difficulty here—in determining whether the reading is a response to Christina's past actions or whether it is concerned with what will happen in her future—is paralleled by questions about the place of the *Life of St. Alexis* in the *St. Albans Psalter*.

The appropriateness of the passage is put into a different light if one questions how it was chosen. Was that reading simply the one that occurred on the liturgical calendar on the day of Christina's escape? Since we do not know the exact day of her escape, this question can serve only to check the assumption that the passage was deliberately chosen. But if it were deliberately chosen, by whom? How? Christina, Alfwen, or some other reader present must have had a very good knowledge of Latin and the Scriptures to choose such a suitable passage. And recall that Christina had admitted that she was ignorant of some Scriptures. The reading may otherwise have been chosen in the way that St. Augustine lighted upon the passage that was so appropriate for him in his *Confessions*. All these questions, however, assume that there was a Psalter present from which Christina could have read. One cannot trust the narrative at this point. Perhaps Alfwen the anchoress did possess a Psalter. Or, more likely, the association between Christina and the *St. Albans Psalter* was so strong that it was read backwards onto the narrative. Medieval readers and writers were seemingly untroubled with forms of historical anachronism, so it is doubtful that this would have troubled the hagiographer.

The next passage that describes Christina reading further elaborates the concept of reading as an inversion and as an expression of desire for God. After some days of hiding with Alfwen, but while her parents are still searching for her, Christina has a vision of bulls threatening to attack her. In the vision, she hears a voice which claims, *Si in loco tuo solide steteris omnem istarum beluarum feritatem frustra [time]bis. Sin autem abieris retrorsum eadem hora cades in potestatem earum*, "If you take a firm stand in the place where you are, you will have no cause to fear the ferocity of those beasts. But if you retreat one step, at that same moment you will fall into their power" (*Life* 98/99). Christina, upon waking from the

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vision, interprets the bulls to be “devils and wicked men.” The immediacy of action that marked the pattern of inversions on the day of her escape is itself inverted here. Rather, Christina is advised that stasis will promote her holiness and help her evade the wicked men. Later, the hagiographer explains that for Christina, maintaining a stasis was equivalent to constant reading of the psalms:

Conceptaque grande fiducia magis sese in amore sanctitatis accendi. minas vero querentium se moder [acius] timuit. Interim latebre sue vita[que] tranquilla diabolum exacerbabant. [lec]ciones ac psalmodia die noctuque [cru]ciabant.

And taking great confidence, she was inspired with a deeper desire for holiness, and had less fear of the threats of her persecutors. In the meantime her concealment and her peaceful existence irritated the devil: her reading and singing of the psalms by day and night were a torment to him. (*Life* 98/99)

Christina’s reading in this passage functions in two further manners. First, it is reiterated as an expression of her desire for holiness (and, therefore, metonymically God)—just as on the day of her escape when all her desire was “before God.” Second, it sets up a contrast between Christina and not only her parents and other “wicked men” trying to capture her, but also the devil himself. The devil’s torment in Christina’s reading highlights her joy. Coming as they do in vision, these functions seem to be merely elements of the metaphoric hagiographic topos of psychomachia at first reading. However, it is at this point that the devils in the form of toads invade her cell. The beasts in the vision become a physical reality, though in a somewhat different form: *Qui (demones) ad deterrendam [rever]endam ancillam Christi: bufones ir[rumpe]bant in carcerem: eo quod averterent virginis obtutum. specie(m) illa per deformitatum,* “And so to terrify the reverend handmaid of Christ toads invaded her cell to distract her attention by all kinds of ugliness from God’s beauty” (*Life* 98/99). When the toads arrogate the middle of the Psalter it becomes clear that the beauty of God from which they are attempting to distract Christina is associated with the Psalms. The conflict is centered on the book. The devil’s jealous response to Christina’s spiritual exercises is to become a physical obstacle to (or at least

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distraction from) the words on the page. Christina's response to this situation, if it were less ambiguous, could solve the puzzle of her literacy as well. Obviously, Christina is not distracted by the toads in the middle of her Psalter, for she does not give up her singing of the Psalms (*Life* 98/99). However, it is unclear whether she moved the toads to uncover the words on the page. More likely her singing, as opposed to her reading, was done by rote and would have required only an occasional check of the words.¹¹ The logic of the metaphor of the bulls and the toads (whether or not it was intended to be a logical metaphor), when broken down, suggests a remarkable understanding of reading. It is clear that Christina reacts to the toads in reality as she was advised to react to the bulls in her vision. In both cases she remains still in the presence of the "beasts." The locations of the animals, however, greatly differ. In her vision Christina

*Videbat se super solidam stare terram. et ante se campum
patere latum et lutosum plenum tauris cornibus ac vultu
minacibus. Qui cum niterentur pedes suos eruere de luto
quatinus illam impeterent. totamque minutatim discer-
perent: in eisdem semper locis ipsos pedes [ten]ebant.*

saw herself standing on firm ground before a large and swampy meadow full of bulls with threatening horns and glaring eyes. And as they tried to lift their hooves from the swampy ground to attack her and tear her to pieces their hooves were held fast in the ground so that they could not move. (*Life* 98/99)

The swampy meadow inhabited by bulls of the vision is exchanged for the physical pages of the open manuscript, this time inhabited by toads. One could argue that the firm ground on which Christina stood in the vision is likewise exchanged. There is an elaborate chain of associations here which must be traced: since Christina stands on firm ground in the vision and is advised to remain where she is, and since her heightened desire for holiness because of the vision manifests itself in the static activity of constant reading and singing of the Psalms, one would expect that that association would carry through when the toads invade her cell and clearly indicate that the firm ground on which she stood in the threat of the toad attack was on the physical manuscript. However, the opposite is the case. Christina's firm ground in the toad attack is her continued singing despite

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troubled access to the physical page. The physical page picks up the implications of the swampy field. It traps the toads and disables their attack. The devil misunderstood Christina's style of reading. She was not tied to the physical page.

Certainly, Christina's contemporaries would have understood these passages about reading in her *Life* simply to be describing a spiritual exercise. However, beyond this common understanding of spiritual reading, Christina was also a visionary and miracle worker. At one point in her *Life*, these roles become curiously linked with her role as a reader. An anonymous epileptic woman begs Christina to cure her by blessing water for her to drink. Reluctantly, Christina agrees to do so at a Mass:

Et factum est in canone misse. venit quidam inter eos decorus aspectu et venerabilis amictu. qui libellum gestans in manu. pergensque ad mulierem ante faciem eius stetit. et libellum aperuit. Intellexit itaque Christina que sola ex omnibus hoc [po]tuit videre. quia Christus misso apostolo [suo] sanaverit mulierem. et hoc ei [aperuit exp]leto officio.

And during the canon of the Mass, a handsome figure of venerable mien, bearing a book in his hands, came towards the woman and stood before her and opened the book. And Christina, who was the only one of those present to see it, realized that Christ, having sent His apostle, had cured the woman: and when Mass was over she told her so. (*Life* 120/121)

Christina's vision is not only of a book, but also of the author of a sacred book.¹² But what book is this? Is it the Gospel of John? "*Libellus*" has several possible connotations. It may mean "pamphlet," "petition" (as in a divorce petition), or a portion of a book (Lewis and Short). The final connotation could certainly support the reading that John is carrying his own gospel. However, John and Christina's intermediary roles in obtaining cures for other people suggest a legalistic context which would certainly support the reading of "*libellum*" as "petition." Nevertheless, the question of the nature of the "*libellum*" is ultimately undefinable. When the "*libellum*" is opened, no mention is made of its contents. Rather, Christina immediately understands that the woman is cured. But how,

exactly, is she made to understand? Apparently she does not read the book. In fact, the book was not opened in front of her, but in front of the sick woman. Furthermore, there is no temporal or logical linking statement to explain what happens between the time the book is opened and the moment of her understanding: *et libellum aperuit. Intellexit itaque Christina* (*Life* 120). It is worth noting that if one assumes that the book is the Gospel of John, this incident clearly suggests that the presence of an author brings instantaneous understanding of a text. But several other questions are raised by this incident. Why does Christina have to be assured *by a book* that the woman was cured? Why doesn't the apostle speak to her or make it clear by some other sign? Christina was the only person to see the apostle. It is safe to assume that if he spoke to her no one else would hear either. In any case, it was not Christina, actually, but "Christ having sent his apostle" who cured the woman. Therefore, notifying Christina of the cure only hours before it naturally becomes apparent seems superfluous. And, why is the miracle performed through two intermediaries? The apostle John is an unusual choice for such divine interaction. Does his opening of the book effect the cure? The cured woman does not see the book or John.

The final vision demonstrates that Christina's understanding of reading went beyond the physical manuscript, indeed, beyond the spiritual meaning of the text. For Christina, reading could also be a mystical experience in which sight of the book itself, rather than the text, was enough to convey the meaning intended—perhaps by an author, such as John, but ultimately by God. Such an understanding is significantly different than that which is presented through the type of scholarship of the *St. Albans Psalter* and the Alexis legend. I am not suggesting that we must adopt Christina's reading style in order truly to understand the Psalter. But neither was Christina transfixed by the toads, the physical obstacles between herself and the Psalter.

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Notes

1. *The St. Albans Psalter (Albani Psalter)*, ed. Otto Pächt et al. 29, my translation. See also Thompson, 1:119-120 and Talbot 22-27.
2. *St. Albans Psalter*, Plates 1-13, 36, 37, 40, 41, 77, 81, 95, 98.
3. Thomson; Kauffmann 29; Bateman; Oakeshott 57, 61, 129-132.
4. *Oxford Dictionary of Saints*. All the material in this summary of Christina's life can be found in her entry there. See also the chronological summary of her life in Talbot 14-15.
5. Talbot 26. See also similar claims by Pächt 135-40 and Holdsworth 191.
6. Talbot 98/99 (his facing page translation and emendations designated by brackets). All further references to the *Life* will be given in the text by page only. For a somewhat critical review of Talbot's edition see Grosjean.
7. Simply scanning the beginning of each chapter yields interesting results. The majority of chapters before Christina's escape begin with *inter, intera, or interim*. After her escape it is not used again. Also, note that the tracking of time according to the reign of King Stephen is always tied with some papal decree. Finally, Christina's mistreatment on the day of the Guild merchants' festival, and her joy in seeing the pilgrim near Christmas time nicely contrast her secular and religious lives. As Jean Leclercq claims, "The rhythm of the monk's life is also marked by the liturgy and its feasts" (306).
8. *St. Albans Psalter*, pl.37, my translation. Compare with the interesting variants in Hartmann 269 ff.
9. Verses 11-13, *Douay-Rheims*. Talbot uses the *Authorized Version*.
10. Cf. the use of the same verse earlier in her *Life* (Talbot 40/41).

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11. Note that it was both Christina's "reading and singing" which tormented the devil. The use of both terms may also have indicated a mnemonic difference in the activities.

12. Talbot notes, "The Apostle mentioned was probably St. John the Evangelist, who was invoked in cases of epilepsy, though St. John the Baptist was more commonly associated with it, hence the name *mal de Saint Jean*."

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