

**"Swete May, Soulis Leche":**  
The Winifred Carol of John Audelay

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Ella Keats Whiting, editor of the first complete edition of the poems of John Audelay, admits that his work is distinguished more by its earnestness than by its originality.<sup>1</sup> While this seems the faintest of praise, Whiting is quick to credit Audelay for his fondness for metrical experimentation, particularly in his use of the carol, of which he is the earliest named writer in English.<sup>2</sup> The varied content of Audelay's carols illustrates the versatility of the genre and underscores R. L. Greene's pronouncement that "the carol [is] distinguished by its form rather than by its subject."<sup>3</sup> Hagiography, on the other hand, is defined strictly by subject, but varies in its structure. The flexibility of its presentation is demonstrated by Audelay's poems, in which the lives and deeds of the saints frequently intersect with his favorite metrical form. Of the fourteen or so poems on saintly subjects found throughout Audelay's work, half are composed as carols. The most notable of these depicts the martyrdom and miracles of St Winifred.<sup>4</sup> Her significance warrants three appearances in Audelay's manuscript: along with her carol, she is hailed in an extensive salutary poem, and is mentioned briefly in another carol which extols the virtue of chastity. Audelay's preference for Winifred was certainly in part due to what Michael Bennett describes as "local patriotism" for a saint whose shrine lay in a nearby district.<sup>5</sup> However, the illuminating historical and personal factors which Bennett uncovers in his examination of Audelay's life and poetry may also explain Audelay's marked devotion to the saint.

The complete corpus of Audelay's verses is contained within a single manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Douce 302 (SC 21876). Written primarily in a fifteenth-century Shropshire dialect with interspersed Latin passages, the manuscript contains three separate scribal hands: a first copied the total collection of Audelay's poems; a second supplied corrections, notations, and other insertions; and a third copied a Latin poem into the text. The presence of a single main copyist, along with frequent self-references and other biographical evidence revealed within the text, suggests that Audelay closely supervised the compilation of the Volume.<sup>6</sup> He could not have written it himself, since the manuscript repeatedly claims that the poet was "[d]eeff, siek, [and] blynd."<sup>7</sup> Most likely it was written at his dictation during the earlier half of the fifteenth century: a biographical note in Latin at the end of no. 18 states that the poems to that point were written by 1426. Those which follow were presumably written later.

Bennett asserts that Audelay did not simply compile Douce 302 as a random assortment of religious verse, but intended the Volume as "an anthology of spiritual counsel."<sup>8</sup> Audelay's attention to the arrangement of the poems is manifested in the self-contained collections which appear within the manuscript. Nos. 23 through 27 comprise a conspicuously hagiographic group. The first, a long poem which combines narrative and salutation, honors St Bridget of Sweden and commemorates the founding of a convent in her name at Sheen in 1415. Next comes the Winifred carol, followed by her salutation; the last two poems of the group are salutations as well, directed at Sts Anne and Veronica respectively. Audelay highlights the aspects of each: Bridget was both "mayden and wyfe," Winifred is commended for her purity, St Anne is most noted as the "moder of Mari," Veronica is remembered for her compassion towards the suffering Christ. Each saint exemplifies a different model of feminine virtue, and the poems collectively create a miniature catalogue of Holy Women. Another self-contained unit within the manuscript is the collection of twenty-five carols which are grouped together in the latter part of the book, headed by a couplet which explicitly identifies their form and purpose: "I pray 3/ow, syrus, boothe moore and las, / Syng þese caroles in Cristemas."<sup>9</sup> The holiday is not necessarily the focus of the carols which follow. No. 34 might be construed as relative to the season, since its subject is Stephen the Protomartyr, whose feast day is 26 December. The other saints' carols feature John (no. 35), Thomas à Becket (no. 37), and Anne (no. 43). Winifred makes her third appearance in no. 47 where, along with "Saynt Kateryn and Marget," she is honored for having "louyd ful wel here maydhed." The final carol is dedicated to

St Francis of Assisi, creator of the vernacular Christian song, in whom the carol-composing Audelay must have held particular esteem.

The Winifred carol is the only carol that does not appear within the set of verses designated as carols in the manuscript, but it is a carol nevertheless, and Audelay calls it so in its final stanza. Its structure is similar to others in the manuscript: a quatrain terminating in a tail-rhyme that cues the burden, "Winifred, †ou swete may, / Thow pray for vs boƿe ny3/t and day."<sup>10</sup> In the manuscript this appears as the first two lines, written in red ink by the "corrector's" hand which, along with the poem's placement outside of the carol section, probably led some readers to believe that these lines were not the burden, but the title. "The burden makes and marks the carol," informs Greene,<sup>11</sup> who regards the Winifred "a true carol," despite its thirty verses which, according to J. Copley, renders it "not too suitable for musical performance," since it contains "far too many stanzas."<sup>12</sup> Greene suggests that Audelay may have consciously intended the Winifred carol as a literary narrative to be read, and not as a song to be sung to a melody, since the final stanza commands that one should "[r]ed[e] this carol reuerently."<sup>13</sup>

Audelay's injunction supports a process which evolved steadily throughout the age, in which formerly oral modes such as the carol and the saint's life became more firmly entrenched as written genres. Evelyn Birge Vitz traces the shift in medieval hagiography from the non-literate, vernacular practice of storytelling or singing to the more formal method of composing written saints' lives for personal devotions. Thus, explains Vitz, hagiography moved from an entertaining and informal oral/aural mode, which called for reciting or some other form of public performance, to a more consciously literary style with an increasing concern for historical accuracy, produced for silent consumption by a solitary reader.<sup>14</sup> The same shift occurred in the carol as it was increasingly included in manuscripts during the later medieval era.<sup>15</sup> The transference from the informal oral arena to the formalized permanence of the written page assisted in transforming the carol and the saint's legend from their popular pre-Christian origins to a more literary Christian style. With its concluding insistence upon being read rather than sung, Audelay's hagiographic carol lends a tandem contribution to these paradigmatic shifts.

Audelay succeeds in incorporating several hagiographic modes within a single carol. In classifying types of hagiography, scholars have minimized differences between poetry and prose in favor of distinctions based upon the actions of the saint; thus, a hagiographic narrative may be categorized as a *vita*, *passio*, or *miraculum*, depending on whether the saint's contemplative life, martyred death, or miracle-workings are emphasized within the text.<sup>16</sup> These terms apply to verse as well as to prose legends and prove an appropriate fit to Audelay's hagiographic narrative poems; the Stephen carol, for instance, is a *passio* in verse. The Winifred carol recounts the full extent of her legend: martyred for refusing to submit her chastity, she is marvelously resurrected, becomes an abbess, and generously intervenes to provide miracles through the water of her holy well. The carol therefore embodies elements of all three types: *passio*, *vita*, and *miraculum*, which underscores her importance to Audelay and bolsters her saintly prestige.

Winifred's martyrdom differs from most in that her death does not conclude her story, but begins it. "Marter and mayd clene," Audelay calls her in the first line of the carol, noting that, had she deferred to a prince's love, she might have been a "lady of ryal aray."<sup>17</sup> Audelay repeats the tale with the same condensed swiftness found in ballads. Local familiarity with Winifred's legend permits Audelay to dispense with introductory details found in the more expansive prose accounts: that she was a seventh-century Welsh maiden who was moved to religious devotion by the preaching of her uncle, St Beuno; that she was languishing ill at home on the Sunday morning on which she was lustfully approached by Caradoc, the ardent son of a chieftain; and that she escaped through the rear door of the house in hopes of reaching the safety of her uncle's church. Instead, Audelay cuts straight to the scene of the martyrdom, describing how Caradoc, who was "ful cursid and cruel, / And dred not God ne no parel; / Smot of [her] hede" while the resistant maiden knelt pleadingly. In Audelay's carol, the head rolls into a "dry valay," instead of into the doorway of Beuno's church as other versions tell; but the saint nevertheless is cognizant of the beheading, for immediately in the next verse, he sets the head upon the body "with gret pete." Winifred instantly revives, with no apparent effects from the episode, save for a "†red of perle" about her throat which, Audelay assures Winifred, "besemyd †e wel, so†le to say." This is no mere flattery, for "Winifred" means "white thread," and becomes the post-martyrdom name of the maiden previously known as Brewafour. Audelay wraps up the brief *passio* portion of the carol with one more stanza in which Caradoc for "†is cursid dede" is swallowed up by the earth, "†er-in to be fore euer and ay."

Despite its drama, Audelay confines the story of Winifred's martyrdom to less than a quarter-length of the poem. The brevity with which he treats her beheading is in keeping with prose accounts of the legend, which efficiently summarize the story as a prelude for the marvels which follow. These seem to be Audelay's main concern also, as he devotes the largest part of his work to describing Winifred's miraculum. As though over-eager to relate the wonders worked in Winifred's name, he interrupts the narrative of her life to explain that a well, "[s]eche on se neuer Cristyn mon," sprang from the spot where her severed head hit the earth, in which her "blod was sparpild on euere stone; / No water my<sup>3</sup>/t wasche hit away." As if this spontaneous spring with its indelible bloodstains is not wondrous enough, it also provokes multiple miracles, although the first few which Audelay relates fail to impress the modern reader. In the first, a child borne away by the flow of the water escapes harm from the dangerous mill-wheel located in the stream, and survives to "lo<sup>3</sup>/ and mad gomun and play."<sup>18</sup> In the second, a man drops a goat down Winifred's well and recovers it later, apparently in a different well; the sketchiness of this incident suggests a more complete story which a contemporary audience might know. Audelay provides a lengthier account of the next "gret maruel," a series of incidents typical of hagiographic miracula. Winifred's well suddenly and mysteriously ceases to flow when a quantity of wine is stored in her chapel. The water begins to flow again when the wine, which turns out to be poisoned, is cast into the street, and a man taken ill by drinking it is divinely cured. The well provides additional cures for the faithful who suffer various afflictions.

Further examples of miracles embellish the remainder of the carol, which turns to depicting the rest of Winifred's vita. At the point where Audelay again picks up the narrative, Winifred has apparently taken holy vows, and her obvious virtue and grace inspire her election as abbess. Her uncle Beuno takes leave of her in order to return to his abbey overseas. Before his departure, he blesses Winifred and bids her to send him a token: "Ouer †e se schal swem a stone / To bryng vestementis, †er ys noo nay." Eventually, the floating stone ceases its miraculous dispatches and remains with Winifred, indicating Beuno's death. Soon afterwards Winifred herself dies, and her shrine is dedicated at Shrewsbury. She continues after her death to perform miracles for "dyuers pepul in fer cuntre," and Audelay cites Shrewsbury as a place of reverence and pilgrimage. He concludes his carol by appealing to Winifred as the "soulis leche," and prays that she may assist all in escaping sin so "†at †ai be neuer chamyd ne chent." Audelay reiterates much of the same material in the salutation which follows the Winifred carol. "Hayle! Wenefryd, †at worchipful with †i vergenete, / Hayl! meruelus marter and merceful may," he commences, then proceeds to tell of Winifred's temporary martyrdom, Beuno's swimming stone, and other such familiar items in similar laudatory phrases.<sup>19</sup> Whiting might pinpoint such repetition as an example of Audelay's lack of originality, but it equally proves the sincerity she perceives in his work. Audelay, consistently fervid about matters of faith throughout his poetry, expresses an authentic appreciation for Winifred's chastity and healing powers, and the double treatment of her legend emphasizes the intensity of his devotion.

Audelay was hardly alone in his reverence for Winifred. Her enduring status is noted in Butler's Lives, which states that she is "venerated outside her own country more than any other of the numerous Welsh saints." Butler's entry summarizes the perpetuation of the Winifred cult: her relics were transferred to Shrewsbury in 1138, the observance of her feast was ordered by Canterbury in 1398, and Holywell, the location of the miraculous spring, has been venerated as a place of pilgrimage into the twentieth century. The origin of her legend is somewhat harder to discern. Butler's Lives scolds those who have "gone too far who assert that Saint Winifred never existed at all," but most likely the story emanated from one of the numerous well-maiden myths common to Celtic folklore.<sup>20</sup>

Written accounts of the Winifred legend form the basis for the Audelay carol. The version commonly cited as Audelay's main source is a life of St Winifred written in the twelfth century by Prior John of Shrewsbury in commemoration of the transference of the saint's relics to that location.<sup>21</sup> John of Shrewsbury's account also serves as the source for two other versions of the Winifred legend: the sermon found in Mirk's Festial and the version included in Caxton's Golden Legend. Both Mirk and Caxton tell the same story of the virgin saint's refusal of Caradoc and her subsequent beheading; both also tell of miracles that are associated with her. The earlier of the two, Mirk's sermon, provides a thorough telling of Winifred's martyrdom, describes the arrival of her relics at Shrewsbury, and enumerates various healing miracles which took place in the wake of her death and in the translation of her relics: among other wonders, she is credited with healing the "fallyng-euyl," sores, and speechlessness.<sup>22</sup> Mirk's sermon varies

considerably from Caxton's 1484 text, which emphasizes the martyrdom of the saint, her post-martyrdom life, and her relationship with Beuno. Aside from the miraculous spring and her resuscitation, the only other marvel associated with Winifred in the Caxton text is that of the silk chasuble, which she conveys to Beuno by way of the well-stream, without the assistance of the floating stone. The Mirk text lacks this episode. Mirk's Festial is derived in part from the Golden Legend. Caxton published both works within a year of each other, as well as a separate life of Winifred, also translated from Prior Robert's account. The original thirteenth-century *Legenda aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine bears no mention of Winifred. Caxton's inclusion of her story in his Golden Legend may have been motivated by his involvement with the Mirk text, or in the interest of nationalism: possibly he wished to tailor his text to an English audience by including an account of a British saint whose cult was widely observed. In her notes to the Winifred carol, Whiting cites the passages describing the well and the floating chasuble as proof of Audelay's familiarity with Caxton's source.<sup>23</sup> While this parallel creates a structural resemblance between Caxton's version and Audelay's, what might be termed a spiritual resemblance exists between Mirk's and Audelay's texts, since both emphasize the miraculous. The lost groat and the incidents caused by the poisoned wine are found only in Audelay's carol, and Greene attributes them to local tradition.<sup>24</sup> The episode of the child escaping the fatal mill-wheel is taken straight from Prior Robert's account, as are the healing miracles, in which the "blynd and crokid" and the "seke and sorouful" are cured by Winifred's well, and the "feters" of presumably-innocent "prisonars" are "ibroke a-two."

These lines contain suggestive evidence which may explain Audelay's particular interest in the power of St Winifred and her well. It has already been noted that the Audelay manuscript reveals the limited senses and the frail health of its author. Audelay's poems repeatedly insist that the Christian must repent and turn from sin, a message from which Audelay did not spare himself. If anything, Audelay's constant referrals to his own sinfulness and repentance indicate that he understood the need for redemption all too well. His early commentators, E. K. Chambers and F. Sidgwick, note that "his laments over his past life seem to have more than mere convention behind them," and conjecture that Audelay repents an earlier career as a Goliard.<sup>25</sup> Michael Bennett posits that the "guilt-ridden" voice of John Audelay arose from the poet's personal involvement in the 1417 incident in which Audelay's patron, Lord Lestrangle, attacked another knight during Easter Sunday services. The assault resulted in the wounding of the knight and the death of a bystander. As restitution for the crime, a series of such punishments as imprisonment, fines, and public penance was imposed upon Lestrangle and his retainers. Audelay was present during the attack and, as chaplain, would feel particularly responsible for the sins and the conduct of the family. Thus, according to Bennett, the overwhelming preoccupation with the acknowledgment of and repentance from sin which dominates the manuscript is Audelay's attempt to expiate himself and the Lestrangle household from the scandal of sacrilege.<sup>26</sup>

Bennett states that an awareness of the Lestrangle scandal provides additional insights into the poetry of John Audelay. By extension, these insights can be directly applied to Audelay's carol of St Winifred. The Lestrangle Easter incident eerily resonates of the Winifred narrative, since her assault took place on a Sunday morning near a church; her severed head was said to have rolled into the doorway as the Mass was being recited, thus alerting the congregation to the murderous event taking place outside. Audelay's regret in witnessing the Lestrangle assault may partly account for his fascination with Winifred, who had the power to free criminals from their shackles. In addition, his physical impairments may have spurred his interest in the saint whose marvelous well was the site of so many miraculous healings. "Blynd Awdlay," as he frequently calls himself, would feel special devotion for a saint with a reputation for curing sightlessness. Shrewsbury, the locus of her relics, is located a short distance of only four miles from Haughmond Abbey, where Audelay finished his last days, and Whiting speculates that the poet himself may have made a pilgrimage to Holywell.<sup>27</sup> It seems reasonable to assume so, given Audelay's apparent belief in Winifred's validity. Certainly his faith in her ability to perform miracles was powerful enough for him to grant her the privilege of appearing in three poems in his singular manuscript. "I hit mad with wepyng ye," Audelay proclaims in the conclusion of the Winifred carol. The line sounds a poignant note for the blind poet and penitent priest who may have personally felt the need for the healing of body and soul. As the only virgin in Audelay's catalogue of Holy Women, Winifred is the "swete may" whose resistance to sin made possible her own revival. In recounting her legend, Audelay poetically reverses the sacrilegious slaughter committed by Lestrangle, and in commemorating her miraculous power, he prays that the virgin of the "wonderful wel" might serve as his own "souls leche."

## Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, comments on the appearance or content of the Audelay manuscript are derived from the observations contained in Ella Keats Whiting's Introduction to her edition of *The Poems of John Audelay*, EETS o.s. 184 (London, 1931).
2. Susanna Greer Fein, "A Thirteen-Line Alliterative Stanza on the Abuse of Prayer from the Audelay MS," *Medium Ævum* 63 (1994), 61-74, at 61.
3. Richard L. Greene, ed., *The Early English Carols*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1977), p. xxx.
4. Winifred's name appears in a variety of spellings throughout the manuscript ("Wenefred," "Wynfryd," etc.), as does Beuno's ("Bewnou," "Bewnew"). I employ modern spellings for the sake of consistency.
5. Michael Bennett, "John Audley: Some New Evidence on His Life and Work," *Chaucer Review* 16 (1982), 344-55, at 346.
6. Fein, "A Thirteen-Line Alliterative Stanza."
7. *The Poems of John Audley*, p. 224 line 53.
8. Bennett, "John Audelay," p. 345.
9. *The Poems of John Audelay*, p. 180.
10. *The Poems of John Audelay*, p. 171. The phrase "night and day" allows a convenient rhyme which Audelay uses throughout his carols; compare the burdens in nos. 39, 43, and 52.
11. Greene, *The Early English Carols*, p. clx.
12. Quoted in Greene, *The Early English Carols*, p. 420.
13. The same injunction is found at the end of the Francis carol: *The Poems of John Audelay*, p. 214 line 53.
14. Evelyn Birge Vitz, "From the Oral to the Written in Medieval and Renaissance Saints' Lives," in *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell (Ithaca, 1991), pp. 97-114, at 97-101.
15. Greene, *The Early English Carols*, pp. cxxxiv-cxl.
16. Paul Strohm, "Passioun, Lyf, Miracle, Legende: Some Generic Terms in Middle English Hagiographic Narrative," *Chaucer Review* 10 (1975), 62-75, at 62-67.
17. Lines quoted from the Winifred carol are from *The Poems of John Audelay*, pp. 171-75.
18. Whiting notes that a similar story is told of the childhood of Thomas à Becket: *The Poems of John Audelay*, nos. 33-40 (pp. 247-48).
19. *The Poems of John Audelay*, pp. 175-77. The repetitive pattern of phrases beginning with "Hail!" typifies Audelay's salutary poems.
20. *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, ed. Herbert Thurston and Donald Attwater, 2nd ed., 4 vols. (Westminster, 1990), 4:245-46.
21. Whiting states that no manuscript has been found, although Greene cites London, British Library, MSS. Cotton Claudius A. V and Lansdowne 436 as the two principal medieval sources of the Winifred story. William Fleetwood, an eighteenth-century editor of the Shrewsbury account, locates the original in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud lat. 21., fol. 140. Fleetwood's own source for his 1713 edition of Winifred's life is an anonymous 1712 reimpresion of a 1635 translation from the original Latin by a Jesuit known as "J. F." Fleetwood declares this "the most authentick account," although undermining that authenticity is his chief concern. He states frankly that he is a Protestant with "a Zeal for the Purity of God's Service, and a sincere Desire of undeceiving the Papists in this erroneous and very hazardous Point of Saint-worship." Throughout the Volume, Fleetwood delights in dissecting the Winifred narrative and in sneering at the heresies of her believers, though he somewhat regrets his efforts, as he is "a little ashamed of having spent so much of [his] Time in reading so much Trash": William Fleetwood, *The Life and Miracles of Saint Winifred, Together with Her Litanies, with Some Historical Observations Made Thereon* (London, 1713), pp. 15-18.
22. *Mirk's Festial*. Part 1, ed. Theodor Erbe, EETS e.s. 96 (London, 1905), pp. 177-82.
23. *The Poems of John Audelay*, no. 24 (p. 247).
24. Greene, *The Early English Carols*, p. 420.
25. E. K. Chambers and F. Sidgwick, "Fifteenth Century Carols by John Audelay," *Modern Language Review* 5 (1910), 473-91, at 474-75.
26. Bennett, "John Audley," pp. 346-48.
27. Whiting, Introduction to *The Poems of John Audelay*, pp. vx, xvii.