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Expecting Christina: Reading Christina of Markyate in the St. Albans Psalter

[Before I begin my paper, I'd like to extend my thanks to the workshop organizers Paula, Jacki, and Andrew for their really hard work bringing this event together. Thanks to them, Kit French, and to my fellow panelists for their feedback and comments that helped guide me in the right direction. Finally, my thanks to Ruth Karras for her talk yesterday, with which I think my paper shares at least couple thematic points.]

Christina of Markyate, 12th-century prioress and anchoress, has increasingly been the subject of critical inquiry over the past 30 years. Scholars have paid particular attention to the relationship between Christina and the St. Albans Psalter [SLIDE], a book of psalms that was believed to have been given to her during her lifetime. In addition to the Latin psalms, the Psalter contains a liturgical calendar [SLIDE], many ornately illustrated and illuminated biblical scenes [SLIDE], and an Anglo-Norman saint's life, the *Vie de Saint Alexis*, or *Life of St. Alexis* [SLIDE]. The manuscript [SLIDE] is now digitized and easily accessible online. Most scholars have questioned how or why Christina would have read the psalms and other texts contained within the manuscript. With these questions, academics have brought to the table their expectations of Christina's ability, or inability, to read Latin or Anglo-Norman. Others have questioned the need for a woman to own such an opulent manuscript, and others still have argued that the manuscript would only have been read by men.

I find these scholars' questions and conclusions to be frustrating because they underestimate and ignore the abilities of women like Christina. Their expectations of

Christina of Markyate as a reader and owner of the St. Albans Psalter overshadow the contents of the manuscript. Instead of expecting Christina the reader, I'd like to focus on the textual and visual moments in the manuscript where it is possible to actually read her. I will identify Christina textually in the manuscript's calendar and in relation to the Anglo-Norman *Life of Saint Alexis*, as well as visually in an historiated initial for one of the psalms. Scholar's have often called the St. Albans Psalter "the Psalter of Christina of Markyate." I hope that by setting aside the idea that the psalter was created *for* her use, I can demonstrate how the manuscript was *of* her, created as a site where others can read her.

[SLIDE] What we know about Christina of Markyate comes to us from the Latin *Vita*, or saint's life, which was likely written in the latter half of the twelfth century at St. Albans. The original text was damaged in a fire in 1731, and what remains of the *Vita* is incomplete (Talbot 5). Because our knowledge of Christina's life is partial, I do not seek to thread together a complete understanding of her biography. The Christina I read in the St. Albans Psalter complements, rather than mirrors, the Christina from the *Vita*. And to clarify, the biographical information I cite in this paper does, however, come from Christina's *Vita* and serves as an entry point to seeing Christina in the Psalter. Reading the St. Albans Psalter and the *Vita* together allows us to glimpse a different sort of assemblage of the Christina figure.

First, allow me to highlight important biographical events from the *Vita*. Christina was born in Huntingdon around 1098, nearly 40 years after the Norman Conquest, to a wealthy Anglo-Saxon family (Talbot 14). At 13, she and her family visited

St. Albans, where she made her vow of virginity. Two years later, Ralph Flambard, the Bishop of Durham, made unwanted sexual advances against her. When Christina rejected him, he suggested to her parents that she be married to a man called Burthred. She was kept in custody for a year while the proposal was considered and was eventually forced into marriage when she was about 16. Christina was able to escape from her situation and sought shelter in various religious houses over the next 30 years, eventually becoming a prioress in Markyate near St. Albans in 1145. She died between 1155 and 1166.

The *Vita* tells of the strained relationship between Christina and her family. Yet, where we see our prioress first in the Psalter is alongside her family in a calendar at the beginning of the manuscript [**SLIDE**]. Here, a reader of the codex will find the feast days, zodiac, lunar cycles, and obituaries. The obituaries are particularly striking because we see Christina herself memorialized alongside her family members [**SLIDE**].

11 January: Obiit Auti pater dominae Cristinae (Died Autti, father of Lady Christina);
12 February: Obiit Gregorius monachus frater dominae Cristinae (Died Gregory, monk and brother of Lady Christina);
7 June: Obiit Beatrix mater dominae Crisintae (Died Beatrix, mother of Lady Christina);
2 November: Obiit Symon frater dominae Cristinae (Died Symon, brother of Lady Christina);
8 December: Obiit Cristina prima priorissa de Bosco (Died Christina, first prioress of Bosco)

The overwhelming presence of Christina's family in the St. Albans Psalter calendar is remarkable for two reasons. The first is quantitative: of the eighteen obituaries in the calendar, five are for Christina and her family, which places this family at the forefront of the reader's mind. The second striking characteristic is that every obituary of Christina's family member clearly draws a connection to Christina by mentioning her

name: Domina Christina. Christina's presence in the Psalter is both prominent and pervasive. While the calendar is the only place in the manuscript where we have explicit textual references to Christina, her implicit presence in the Psalter is also important to my work here.

This calendar, which grounds Christina of Markyate so squarely in the manuscript, invites us to read her in other sections of the Psalter and therefore allows us to connect Christina and her family to St. Albans monastery. It also raises questions of genealogy and lineage common to religious figures, and vows of virginity and chastity. Anxiety about lineage is also present in the *Vie de Saint Alexis*, a vernacular, Anglo-Norman saint's life, situated in the middle of the manuscript, which seems to parallel Christina's experiences. [SLIDE] In this narrative, a noble Roman couple cannot conceive a child, so they pray to God, who allows for the couple to conceive a child, Alexis. In order to preserve the family line and happiness of their only son, when he is old enough, they arrange for him to marry the daughter of another aristocratic family. On their wedding night, Alexis cannot bear to confront the carnal acts he's about to commit with his wife, so he flees to Laodicea and commands his wife to take Jesus as her spouse. After seventeen years living abroad as a pauper, and at God's command, Alexis returns and lives with his family, even though they do not recognize him. He lives there for an additional 17 years until he dies, unrecognized by his family and wife until they learn the truth from a letter found on his corpse.

Through this synopsis, we can see two similarities between Alexis and Christina's lives. The first is the coerced marriages both figures are forced into despite

their devotion to God. [SLIDE] It is said of Christina in the *Vita* that “although she was married, her former intentions were not changed, and she freely expressed her determination not to submit to the physical embraces of any man.” [SLIDE] Similar lines appear in Alexis’s Life: “Alexis marries her well, but it is an agreement he wants no part in, for his desire is fully with God.” For both Christina and Alexis, familial expectations supersede their own pursuit of faith, and they are forced to escape these unfavorable situations.

The second similarity between these two figures lies in their material, textual afterlives. Alexis’s letter tells of his parents, his travels, his miracles, and his return to Rome. It tells important events from Alexis’s life and assuages the anxiety his parents had for his marriage and continuing the family line. I draw a parallel between the letter in the *Vie de Saint Alexis* and Christina of Markyate’s presence in the St. Albans Psalter. Neither the letter nor the manuscript is a complete biography, but they comprise the material genealogies of these two figures, in part, to fulfill familial expectations of reproduction. And unlike the calendar at the beginning of the St. Albans Psalter, the Alexis story serves as an allegorical representation of Christina and the expectations her family held her to.

Finally, I’d like to turn toward a visual representation of Christina of Markyate in the psalms of the St. Albans Psalter. [SLIDE] Psalm 105, *Confitemini Domino* (Give Praise unto the Lord), begins with a large initial “C.” The C is divided in half vertically, with the left side occupied by four monks and one female figure against a green background. The figures are facing to the right side, which depicts Christ against a blue,

sidereal background facing back. Reaching across the divide and touching Christ's hand is Christina of Markyate. Once again I'd like to read this image against a scene in the *Vita*, when Christina's dear friend, Abbott Geoffrey de Gorham, visits her in her chamber. [SLIDE] After Christina helped him, Geoffrey "promised to avoid everything unlawful, to fulfil her commands, and to help her convent in the future: all he asked was her intercession with God" (139). I argue that this historiated initial shows Christina doing just that, and the tag for the initial reads [SLIDE] "Spare your monks, I beg you, O merciful kindness of Jesus." Christina is aiding the monks of St. Albans and possibly fulfilling the expectation Geoffrey had of her.

[SLIDE] The initial was drawn on a separate piece of parchment and then added to the St Albans Psalter at another time. Scholars have many theories about which came first, the initial or the Psalter, but that it was not originally part of the manuscript raises the question of what was expected to go there. I can't say, but scholars seem almost unanimously agreed that the figure in Psalm 105 is Christina of Markyate. [SLIDE] All of these texts use this initial to represent her and further ground Christina in the St. Albans Psalter.

My intervention here is not to undermine the painstaking and crucial work scholars have done in charting the provenance, creation, and context of the St. Albans Psalter. Their work has proven invaluable to my project. Rather, I have identified three moments in the Psalter—the calendar, the *Vie de Saint Alexis*, and Psalm 105 where we may read Christina of Markyate on her own terms in an effort to forego the expectations of her as a reader and owner, which are so fraught with limitations. Some expect that

Christina could not have read Anglo-Norman or Latin. Others expect that she would not have read the codex because of conflicting dates when parts of the manuscript were copied or added. Others, still, insist that the psalter was intended for the use of men and not women. Now that the St. Albans Psalter is digitized and available online, there is much wider accessibility to a manuscript that memorializes Christina and acts as a counterweight to the *Vita*, providing different and exciting glimpses of a remarkable woman.

I'm excited to see where this project will continue to take me and I don't know what to expect, but as I hope my paper has demonstrated, setting aside expectations is just part of the fun.