



From Lived Reality to a Cultural Script: Punishment Miracles as an Experience

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This chapter focuses on experiencing religious change: conversion to penance after encountering an external incentive—that is, the malice of demons and the punishing ability of a saint. Rather than detecting what “actually happened” to and within an individual or “how it really felt,” an idea termed as a “simplistic ground of immediacy” by Martin Jay,¹ the mediated nature of events is acknowledged and they are here approached as a process of giving meaning. Thus, the experience is understood as an amalgamation of personal emotions, bodily signs and sensations, and the requirements of the miracle genre and cultural script produced and contributed to by local clerics. The experiences explored in this chapter are something that were collectively negotiated and accepted; they included identifiable details, like sensory elements to evoke memories of past occurrences in the minds of listeners, and therefore they had the potential to produce a model of experiencing. The geographical focus is late medieval

¹Jay, *Songs of Experience*, 3.

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Sweden, more specifically Vadstena Abbey and its surroundings. The social and spiritual context is formed by those who compiled and heard versions of the chosen miracle recorded in Saint Birgitta's canonization process (1374—1380) and later sermons preached on her feast day.

FROM A BLASPHEMER TO A DEVOTEE: CONVERSION AS A CULTURAL SCRIPT

In many respects, conversion is the most demanding and prominent religious experience. Etymologically *con-version* means a new orientation: a person turns towards a new ideal, leaving behind his or her old habits. A biblical prototype for this is obviously the dramatic events on the road to Damascus and St Paul's transformation from a persecutor of Christians into an apostle of Christ. Religious conversion is often described as a personal crisis and a transition to a new life, a second birth.² It is essentially internal, a change of heart, *cordis versio*, but detectable by outer signs, gestures, and deeds. An external influence was also a typical element causing it. It was available to every Christian: on the path of virtue one could turn from bad to good, from good to better, or from better to excellent.³

During the Middle Ages, conversion—whether to Christianity, religious life, or simply penance—took many forms. Be it on an individual or societal level, “conversion” was a process, not a singular occurrence that led rapidly to a complete renunciation of the previous beliefs and way of life. Rather, a gradual change was typical. The gradual progress and potential for relapses were well understood during the Middle Ages: various exempla warned religious people not to stray from their chosen path within a religious order or, for example, cautioned baptized Jews for not fully abandoning their former ways of worship. Both could be seen as apostasy, a renunciation of the true faith and the worst kind of converting one's habits.⁴

This chapter analyses the gradual transformation of religiosity in a less dramatic or traumatic context that transpires due to an outer intervention. This likely involved an internal process that can be observed by outer

²Pinard de la Boullaye, “Conversion”; Muldoon, “Introduction”, 1–10; Schott, “Intuition, Interpretation, Insight”.

³Caesar of Heisterbach, *Dialogus Miraculorum* 1, II.

⁴Keyword “conversion” gives 579 hits in the database of medieval exempla: *ThEMA: Thesaurus Exemplorum Medii Aevi*, <http://thema.huma-num.fr/> Accessed 6.1.2021.

signs, like the production of emotions and bodily signs and practices. Experience is understood as a cultural process involving mediation to explain and make sense of an individual occurrence. Therefore, the interpretation of the chain of events is equally important. This chapter unravels this process of giving meaning: how some acts were categorized as detrimental in the religious context and their results comprehended as a punishment miracle. How was “lived reality” fused with convention and the media producing “experience”?

Lived religion is concretized in what people do, see, hear, smell, and taste—in their emotions and actions. Inseparable parts of living one’s religion are, however, also teachings, memories, rituals, and learned practices. Therefore, a cultural script of how to react, what to feel, and how to behave was part of religion-in-action. Values and proper practices were propagated by the clerical elite, but they were internalized and put into practice in variable ways. This internalization had, in turn, its effects on values and practices; therefore, a cultural script within lived religion was not a unidirectional top-down process, but rather a circle or a spiral; theological definitions and teachings were lived out in daily life and rituals and corporeal phenomena affected the script.

Obviously, sacramental penance—the yearly confession of sins followed by penance before absolution—was mandatory for all Christians and a crucial constituent of the Western Christian culture after 1215 on the institutional, communal, and daily levels.⁵ On the path towards salvation, the first step was a sense of sin: contrition for one’s sins and bad deeds was followed by penitence and reconciliation. Contrition could be concretized in spiritual pain, felt like a sting, a puncture of the heart, *compunctio*, which could have been either a personal or social feeling. The conversion process, understanding the need for penance, required not only an individual or communal emotional dynamic but that of God’s as well, since God’s wrath and love were crucial in the process.⁶ He could also use an intermediary: a saint.

In the context of Italian flagellants, Piroska Nagy and Xavier Biron-Ouellet have identified a particular affective model: an emotional script

⁵ It is well-known that this regulation and new practice was heavily propagated by the church, particularly by the Mendicants. On their preaching agenda and forms of penance, see Jansen, *Making of the Magdalen*.

⁶ Nagy, *Le don de l’armes*: 425–30. On God’s wrath, see Nagy, “Liminaire. Emotions de Dieu au Moyen Âge”, 35–62.

leading Christians from damnation to salvation. This “script” can be understood as a sequence of predetermined and stereotypical actions defining a well-known situation. In the context of conversion to penance, an emotional script guided the spiritual path of the soul leading from hate to fear and shame, from pain and sadness to a joyful love.⁷ A similar process of predetermined actions was also propagated in exempla, short stories including moral lessons to arouse a fear of sin in the listeners. Such a “script of conversion” can be found in a specific sub-category of miracles as well—that of punishment miracles.

Miracle narrations are, by their very nature, emotive scripts: the chain of events proceeds from one emotional level to the next. Emotions were part of proper ritual and narration. First, the need for divine aid was expressed by despair, anguish, and grief. Inner emotions could be expressed verbally, but desperation was typically conveyed in a ritualized manner by tears, the tearing of clothes and hair, and the beating of the chest. Such ritualistic language conveyed not only personal emotions but also social expectations. On the next stage, during the invocation, emotions—especially humility—were more readily expressed only in deeds and gestures. After the grace was bestowed, joy, gratitude, and enhanced devotion were expected elements in giving thanks for the miracle, a sign of genuine divine grace being the increase of devotion among the participants. Emotions were thus crucial for the comprehension of a miracle; they were not passive states but demanded a committed performance from the participants. Producing them marked the crossing over from one state to the next in the process of becoming a beneficiary of (or a witness to) a miracle. These emotions were part of the lived experience, but they were also part of the genre; together they formed a cultural script guiding the expectations of experiencing a miracle.⁸

As all canonization processes and miracle collections form a unique context of their own, it is clear there are differences and various nuances in the script of emotional stages. Emotions seem to have been more emphasized in the southern European context, within Italian urban settings, while lay participation was shunned in the Nordic cases: especially in the canonization process of Saint Birgitta, the witnesses were usually clerics, not lay members of the society. Furthermore, no lay invocations were

⁷Nagy & Biron-Ouellet, “A Collective Emotion in Medieval Italy”.

⁸Katajala-Peltomaa, *Demonic Possession and Lived Religion*, 86–87 on emotional stages.

recorded meticulously, and on a general level, the laity's devotional practices, for example when manifesting gratitude after a miracle, were not emphasized.⁹

THE CANONIZATION PROCESS OF SAINT BIRGITTA

Birgitta of Sweden¹⁰ (1303–1373) was a member of a Swedish noble family. She was a married woman and a mother of eight, but also one of the most well-known and most controversial medieval saints. Her mystical visions, recorded in *Revelaciones*, and prophetic abilities gained her a reputation of sanctity. Furthermore, she did not shy away from using her powers also for secular ends. As a member of the nobility, Birgitta was well connected to both the secular and ecclesiastical elite, and she took part in political struggles. Birgitta held a controversial position since neither her political activity nor her sanctity after her death were unanimously accepted.¹¹

However, soon after her death a canonization inquiry into her sanctity was launched, and she was officially canonized in 1391. In the late Middle Ages, official canonization was a papal privilege. Before adding a new candidate to the litany of saints, an official inquiry, *inquisitio*, of his or her life, merits, and miracles was due. For this, the pope usually nominated three commissioners of high clerical rank to carry out the investigation. Local proctors helped them in this endeavour and official notaries recorded the depositions. Witnesses, in turn, were summoned to testify and they took an oath before giving their testimonies.

Canonization processes were judicial hearings and canon law guided their implementation. The actual organization and methods of questioning were mentioned in the major rulings only briefly, and despite the shared background, the practicalities varied from one process to another, and preserved records come in many shapes. Birgitta's process in particular differs from many other contemporary canonization records. Hearings

⁹ Katajala-Peltomaa, "Devotional Strategies in Everyday Life", 21–45.

¹⁰ The scholarship on Saint Birgitta is vast, but her miracles have aroused less interest. See, however, Fröjmark, *Mirakler och helgonkult*; Myrdal and Bäärnhielm, eds., *Kvinnor, barn & fester*; Krötzel, *Pilger, Mirakel, und Alltag*; and Heß, *Heilige machen im spätmittelalterlichen Ostseeraum*, 99–204. On the practicalities of Birgitta's canonization, see Nyberg, "The Canonization Process of St. Birgitta of Sweden", 67–85.

¹¹ On Birgitta's and the royal couple's relations, see Salmesvuori, *Power and Sainthood*, 145–58 and 115–18 for the relationship between Birgitta and her political adversaries.

were carried out in Sweden, Rome, and Naples. Instead of being divided into parts concerning the life and miracles of the candidate, like many other medieval processes, Birgitta's process consisted of three parts, *Acta*, *Attestaciones*, and *Summarium*. *Acta* includes practical information about the process and miracles recorded by local clergy in Sweden as well as letters written by the Archbishop of Lund and the Bishop of Linköping Nicholas Hermansson, which also contain miracles.¹² This part will be the focus here. The clerics in charge of recording the miracles in Sweden were Gudmarus Frederici, Johannes Giurderi, and Katilmundus. They were all Birgittine brothers of Vadstena Abbey. Gudmarus had been Birgitta's chaplain, followed her on her pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and took part in the expedition which brought Birgitta's relics back to Sweden. Johannes Giurderi (Präst) was a well-known preacher, likened to Chrysostom in his abilities. He revised the earliest known version of Birgitta's *Revelaciones*. They were appointed to the duty by the Bishop of Linköping, Nicholas Hermansson, who also was an active supporter of Birgitta and her cult. All the aforementioned were men of authority and experience.¹³ Clearly, they were not disinterested participants in the matter of canonization.

The cases registered by local clergy did not meet the requirements of canon law: witnesses were not apparently interrogated separately, a pre-set questionnaire—either *articuli* of the life and miracles or *Interrogatorium*, the papal ruling to validate the reliability of the testimony¹⁴—did not guide the interrogation. Depositions were not recorded verbatim or one by one but in the form of a synthesis. Furthermore, the office of public notary was not in use in medieval Sweden; the cases were recorded by the local clerics instead. The less strict judicial framework enabled a process of interpretation that better suited the needs of the local inquisitorial committee. Apparently, they wished to depict an image of Birgitta as a thaumaturge fighting against demons and urging Christians to confess their sins and turn to penance. This is demonstrated by both the demonic activity

¹² *Acta et processus canonizacionis beate Birgitte*. On contents of part *Acta*, see also Hess, *Heilige Machen*, 111–12.

¹³ Berglund, *Guds stat och maktens villkor*, 69–71, 85 and Andersson, *De birgittinska ordenprästerna*, 195–96.

¹⁴ On papal rulings, see Wetzstein, *Heilige vor Gericht*, 219–20, 244–76, 538–39 and Paciocco, *Canonizzazioni e culto dei santi nella christianitas*, 45–58; Krafft, *Papsturkunde und Heiligsprechung* and Katajala-Peltomaa & Krötzl, “Approaching Twelfth–Fifteenth-Century Miracles”, 1–39; on articuli Katajala-Peltomaa & Kuuliala, “Practical Matters: Canonization Records in the Making”.

recorded in the process and the quantity of punishment miracles. Both of them are notable characteristics of Birgitta's process and often linked: the demons punish disrespectful people in various ways for belittling Birgitta's powers or denigrating her.¹⁵ This makes Birgitta's process an eminently suitable source material for this kind of scrutiny: a model—or a potential for a model—of a religious transformation, a conversion from sinful life to piety, was produced while recording Birgitta's saintly interventions among the laity.

A DEVIL WHO FELL ON SLIPPERY ICE

The case chosen for closer scrutiny is that of Cristina, a newlywed wife who was delivered from demonic possession at the shrine of Birgitta at Vadstena Abbey.¹⁶ She was apparently punished for her own and her parents' moral wrongdoings. The situation intensified only after her wedding, but Cristina had suffered from demonic molestations nearly all her life. The lengthy narration contains many specific details which imply Cristina's personal recollections are utilized in the descriptions but her own and her husband's depositions were not recorded. Instead, the case can be found in a letter written by the Bishop of Linköping, and it was also recorded in a local hearing of Birgitta's miracles. According to both versions, witnesses to the case were local clergymen, and Bishop Nicholas Hermansson's letter corroborates the much longer version recorded by the Vadstena clergy.

According to the records, Cristina was the daughter of a rich peasant from the town of Bro, Linköping diocese. She experienced severe demonic molestations in her early life. One of the symptoms was her inability to open her mouth to tell her parents what was happening. Her parents, however, detected that something was amiss and tried to ameliorate the situation: they invited a soothsayer, an *incantatrix*, to cure her, but Cristina only got worse after her visit. She started to see demons harassing her in the forms of a horse, wolf, dog, and snake. After a while another soothsayer, an *incantator*, performed incantations and tied magical items to her back. They were of no avail, and now, in addition to the animal-shaped cavalcade of demons, a new vexation arrived: a demon in the shape of an envious and cruel twelve-year-old boy who tormented Cristina

¹⁵Hess, *Heilige machen*, 201–04; Katajala-Peltomaa, *Demonic Possession and Lived Religion*, 138.

¹⁶*Acta et processus canonizacionis beate Birgitte*, 120–3, 175–6.

without mercy. The parents, wishing to find a cure, intended to resort to magic (*maleficia*) yet again, but this time Cristina managed to say that their attempts would only punish her more severely.

Moral transgression in the narration is clear. *Incantator/ix* may refer to soothsayers or folk healing, but here the reference to magic seems plausible; the parents' next step, *maleficium*, meant harmful magic that transgressed ecclesiastical and secular law. A synodal statute written by Nicholas of Linköping, the same bishop who added this case in his letter, grouped poisoners, murderers, *incantatrices*, sacrilegious people, and those invoking demons all together.¹⁷ Cristina herself may have been innocent as she was only a child, but nonetheless, the sins of the parents could be visited upon their children (Ex. 20:5). This is clearly what happened in this particular case, even if the affliction was initially brought about by the malice of demons and not by the punishing ability of a saint.

Years passed and Cristina came of age and she married; not much more is known of her social position or that of her husband. On the third day after the wedding, the demon, greatly agitated, came to her again and attacked Cristina so that she fell to the ground, became stiff, and pressed her legs together so tightly that no one could open them. It was as if her legs were nailed together with iron nails. She was unable to move her limbs and had difficulties in speaking, seeing, and sensing. She was merely lying like a useless trunk (*truncus inutilis*) and her speech was hardly intelligible; she only smelled a horrid stench and later lost her sight. She could only see the devil and a small circle around him.

Lost mental and bodily control were signifiers of a demonic presence, and the alterity of the demoniac was encapsulated in the bodily and sensorial symptoms. The inability to move and communicate intelligibly with others caused an inversion of identity. Cristina was not an agent in the social interaction any longer; rather, she was posited outside her ordinary roles, positions, and identities into a realm where the whole sensorium interacted with the supernatural and communicated this interaction to the surrounding community.¹⁸ The bad stench of the evil spirit, for example, was a cultural convention signifying a demonic presence¹⁹; simultaneously

¹⁷ Reuterdaahl, *Statuta synodalia veteris ecclesiae*, 63. "Item intoxicatores vel aliquando mortiferum procurantes seu consilium adhibentes, item sacrilegos et incantatrices, et quoscunque demones invocantes."

¹⁸ On inversion of identity and alterity of demoniacs, Katajala-Peltomaa, *Demonic Possession and Lived Religion*, 28, 93–8, 180–82

¹⁹ On bad stench reflecting religious otherness Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*.

this kind of sensory experience was highly intimate—one cannot turn the olfactory system “off,” and it is literally felt and sensed inside oneself. The “inner feelings” or “lived reality” were used to produce a cultural pattern.

The devil continued to torment Cristina viciously. It tossed and crashed her against walls, whether she was lying down or sitting, and tore at her hair and limbs. On seeing her, people wondered how she could survive all these anguishes. The reason for her affliction was not given, but the timing just after the wedding, as well as the pressing of the legs together, implies that the reasons were linked to sexuality and her status as a newlywed. The timing could have been a deliberate rhetorical choice: the practice of the three chaste nights spent in prayer before consummating the marriage was known also in medieval Sweden and was presented as a model for pious couples.²⁰ The clerical construction of the event may imply that three chaste nights had passed and it was time to engage in a carnal relationship and consummate the marriage, or that this practice was not followed and therefore the demon gained power over the newlywed wife. The husband was, however, described as legitimate (*maritus legitimus*). This may have been a reference to the consummation of the marriage,²¹ but it may also have been a way to emphasize his acceptable status; nothing illicit was going on in the marriage, contrary to the previous choices of Cristina’s parents.

Clear culpability is not given as a reason for the worsening of the situation. However, the clerics added a didactic exclamation to the narration, offering sin as the reason for the affliction. Simultaneously, they generalized the situation from Cristina as an individual to the general condition of Christians: “O how irrational and fixed is the harshness of a sinner, to regain one’s senses from the bad ones (*a malis*), to understand how malice punishes the soul which it [the malice] governs for its enormous evilness, in with such a fury it afflicts the body, which the soul does not fully govern.”²²

²⁰ Andrén, ed., *De septem sacramentis*.

²¹ Consummation was a principal of valid marriage according to the canon law. In medieval Sweden, however, consummation was not mentioned in the secular matrimonial law. Instead, bedding, the ritual of leading the bride to the bed and the couple being publicly bedded together after the wedding banquet, was a legal constituent of a valid marriage. Korpiola, *Between Betrothal and Bedding*, 60–65.

²² *Acta et processus canonizacionis beate Birgittæ*, 121: “o insensata peccatorum obstinata duricia, vt a malis resipiscas intelligere, quanta malicia puniat animam, in quam secundum

After this exclamation, the narration continues chronologically: on 13 January 1376, the husband made preparations with some friends to take Cristina to Vadstena Abbey. According to the narration, Cristina's father was from Husaby parish, Linköping diocese, but it is not known where the newlywed couple lived. However, January was a suitable time for a peasant family to make a pilgrimage, since their journey to Vadstena took several days. On the journey, the devil followed them in the form of a "modern courtier." The depiction of the demon's lavish outfit may have been a remark on the interconnection between vanity and peril; it may have even been inserted to argue for a linkage between the king's court and the demonic. There are other references pointing to this direction among the miracles and the memory book of the abbey.²³

The northern context exemplified in the conditions of travelling is specified in the text. The pilgrim group took a shortcut via frozen lake, and the devil fell on the slippery ice and started weeping. Cristina, being the only one who could see what happened, told this to her companions and they all started laughing. This infuriated the devil and when he got up, he tripped one of the travellers on the ice and another he treated like a beast of burden, riding him and hurting his mouth with a bit-like instrument, drawing blood. When they were in pain, the devil said, "once you laughed, but now the one laughing is me."

Wherever the companions took Cristina, the devil followed. The only place he dared not enter was Linköping cathedral; he waited by the graveyard. Clearly, the Bishopric seat of the initiator of the local hearing, Nicholas Hermansson, was too holy a place for the malign spirit to enter. Eventually, after a laborious journey, the pilgrims reached Vadstena. When Cristina was taken by cart to the shrine, many of the inhabitants of Vadstena and the surrounding areas came to see her. The demon resisted her entrance to the shrine; he made Cristina fall over so that she needed to be carried inside. The demon made her heavier and heavier for her husband and the man assisting him to get her inside the chapel. Once inside, the demon tried to drag her out so that her husband needed to grip her

scelerum suorum enormitatem plene preualet, cum tanto furore affligit corpus, in cuius anima dominium forte non possidet."

²³A case in point is Hans Smek, king's knight who was possessed after defiling Birgitta. *Acta et processus canonizationis beate Birgittæ*, 109–10; 147–48. The reign of Albert of Mecklenburg (1364–1389) was turbulent, German nobles playing an important role in the Swedish realm were heavily criticized. For more details, see Katajala-Peltomaa, *Demonic Possession and Lived Religion*, 138–42.

head to hold her inside. The demon gnashed his teeth horribly, nearly breaking the hearts of the people present out of fear.

We may read this as an allegory of persistent temptation; the unwillingness to relinquish one's former ways. More than depicting an actual pilgrim's progress or soul's journey on earth, the scene at the Vadstena gate is a clear hagiographic topos: abhorrence of sacred places and items was a telling sign of demonic presence. Combat between supernatural powers: saints and demons—and demoniacs as their battlefields—is a recurrent theme in didactic miracle collections and exempla: it was an essential element in the interaction between the sacred and the diabolical that manifested the victory of the former and defeat of the latter.²⁴

BIT(E)S AND PIECES

Cristina's tribulations and subsequent delivery are not typical depictions for canonization processes, where sworn testimonies were typically constructed differently. The records made by local clerics show clear hagiographical reformulations, in line with Gábor Klaniczay's argument.²⁵ Didactic messages embedded into the narration are manifest. It is noteworthy that neither Cristina herself nor her husband were named among the witnesses. As Cristina was the only one to be able to testify to her childhood torments and visions, she was likely interrogated at the shrine. However, those listed as witnesses were clerics from Linköping and Husaby.

Appearing and tormenting demons are, obviously, part of Christian rhetoric from late Antiquity on. Animal-shaped demons are known from contemporary exempla and being punished after resorting to illegal or superstitious methods is a commonplace. Many of Cristina's childhood memories have a taste of daily life, and this pertains particularly to the envious and vicious twelve-year-old boy bullying a younger girl. Being bullied by older children is an experience belonging to many people's childhood memories, regardless of the era or social background.

Other minor details—like the knees pinned together with iron nails, Cristina as a tree trunk unable to move, the devil riding his victims with a bit in their mouth, and the slippery ice—give an impression of a peasant

²⁴ See also Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, 225–35; on abhorrence of the sacred and other symptoms, Craig, “The Spirit of Madness”, 60–93.

²⁵ Klaniczay, “Speaking about Miracles”, 365–95. Other similar examples can be found in Birgitta's process, see for example *Acta et processus canonizacionis beate Birgittae*, 125.

origin and illuminate the Nordic atmosphere. Nevertheless, these details should not be taken at face value, as they may have also been narrative conventions. This is clear at least for the expression *truncus inutilis*, as Cristina was not the only useless trunk we meet in the records. Others are described in the same way, for example, a paralyzed woman named Margareta and a monk insulting Birgitta and receiving his punishment in a form of epilepsy.²⁶ Clearly, this was an accustomed way to describe a severe inability to move and function. It is not a particularly compassionate expression sympathizing with the victims' suffering, but it does bring forth the bodily sensations in forming an experience—even if from the perspective of by-standers.

These details question Leigh Ann Craig's arguments about Cristina; she sees Cristina's case as a performance with her self-representation showing remarkable agency; all the participants played identity roles which helped the demoniac play her role.²⁷ Since the recorded narration is a clerical interpretation of Cristina's situation and symptoms, it is their interpretation of the performance and the role of the demoniac that emerges from the source material, not Cristina's self-representation or the immediacy of her feelings. Rather, the narration tells of generally accepted—or actively propagated—notions of sanctity and sin, forming a model of their experience.

Brian Leveck strongly argues that all demoniacs followed scripts that were encoded in their religious cultures; according to him, all possessions were theatrical productions where each participant played a role and acted in a way the community expected him or her to act.²⁸ Demonic possession was a general European phenomenon, and the general Christian "script" affected its conceptualization. Many of the aforementioned details may have been conventional tropes, ways of describing a situation and affliction like this. The local nuances of the cultural pattern are clear, too. Details, like the useless trunk, reveal ways the surrounding community saw conditions of this sort. The methodological problem that arises is that individual experiences cannot be separated from convention. The cultural models influenced the way people comprehended this kind of situation. As all experiences are mediated via language and culture, even intimate

²⁶ *Acta et processus canonizacionis beate Birgitte*, 117 and 113.

²⁷ Craig, *Wandering Women and Holy Matrons*, 203–18.

²⁸ Leveck, *The Devil Within*. The idea of cultural scripts can be seen as drawing origin from Erving Goffman's theories of dramaturgical perspectives and stage metaphor.

experiences are social and shared in that sense. Therefore, conventions are an inseparable part of any experience. They form the background against which the occurrences are analysed, memorized, and communicated to others.

Sensory modalities were used to explain the situation and condition of Cristina, bridging the personal and the cultural. The motionless torso could have been inspected by others; it was not a highly intimate sensation out of reach of others, like the bad smell of demons. Impaired vision falls into the middle ground, as it can be recognized by others as well by outer signs and actions. How Cristina felt about these symptoms cannot be known; they did, however, require explanation and this process of interpretation and validation is the core of experience here. Her symptoms should be seen as embodied enculturation; this is not to agree with Brian Levack's argument that all demoniacs assumed dramatic roles—quite the contrary. Medieval people did not have the terminology to express mental alterity or the inversion of identity. Therefore, instead of words, corporeal expressions mediated such messages. The bodies of demoniacs became messages, and this language was read by the surrounding community and interpreted as demonic possession. General cultural assumptions of demonic presence and saintly powers enabled the elucidation of the symptoms, chain of events, and options for solving the situation. The situation needed to be understood as needing divine intervention, and a general consensus of the healing options was also required. These cultural patterns were encoded in the intimate details of Cristina's bodily sensations. Therefore, cultural models and "scripts" were present already on these first stages of communicating and explaining; without them it would have been impossible to see the condition of Cristina as demonic possession and understand that Saint Birgitta and her shrine at Vadstena Abbey offered the potential for recovery.

FORMING A SCRIPT: VADSTENA BROTHERS' RHETORIC IN CONSTRUCTING SANCTITY AND SIN

Vadstena was the head of the *Regula Sancti Salvatoris* monastic order founded by Birgitta. It was an important religious, intellectual, and political centre in medieval Sweden. The abbey had received land from king Magnus Eriksson and his queen, Blanche, even before Birgitta left for Rome. This, in addition to other donations, eventually made it a rich

monastic centre. The abbey served several times as a meeting place for the state council and political negotiations, and the turbulent state of affairs within the Nordic countries gave it an opportunity to gain authority in the political arena. An abbess was the head of the double monastery, while one of the priest brothers acted as a general confessor. Preaching, also to the lay audience, was a crucial part of the Birgittine monastic idea.²⁹ In the 1370s, during the collecting and recording of Birgitta's miracles, the position of Vadstena was not yet established or secure, since the abbey was not dedicated until 1384.

The priest brothers were eager to participate in the politics of the realm. They commented on the state of affairs in the memory book of Vadstena Abbey, and they did not shy away from using their sermons as channels for political advice.³⁰ It seems the recording of miracles played a similar role. The description of the chain of events leading to Cristina's cure at the shrine was a conscious choice on the part of the local clergy, a propagandistic tool in constructing Birgitta's sanctity. This is particularly emphasized in the words and deeds of the demon at the shrine. First, he tried his best to stop Cristina from entering the shrine. While his physical powers were overcome, he resorted to verbal persuasion. The combat of supernatural powers, and Birgitta's superior position in the outcome, is a core message of the narration.

In Cristina's case, this battle was not easily won, though. Once at the shrine, all who knew how to sing (*congregatis omnibus in loco cantare scientibus*) gathered around her during the next day and sang hymns and antiphons to create a sacral soundscape to expel the malign spirit. Finally, after a week at the shrine, Birgitta's head relic was placed on Christina's head and a silver cross was tied around her neck, a cross that Birgitta herself had placed on the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Cristina's presence in the sacred space and the vicinity of Birgitta's relics were not enough; her body needed to be enclosed, marked out by the sacred crystallized in specific items, the highly valued treasures of the abbey.

After this turning point, Cristina's recovery proceeded stepwise: first, she regained her speech, then her sense of smell, and then finally her sight.

²⁹ The first nuns and monks apparently arrived at Vadstena immediately after the donation in the 1340s; Birgitta's order (*Ordo Sanctissimi Salvatoris*) was approved in 1370 by Pope Urban V. On political relations, see Nyberg, ed., *Birgittinsk festgåva*. On brothers' preaching agenda, Andersson and Borgehammar, "The Preaching of the Birgittine Friars", 209–36.

³⁰ On the political agenda in the Vadstena diary, Gejrot, "Diarium Vadstenense", 131–47; on political messages in sermons, see Berglund, *Guds stat och maktens villkor*.

The return of the sensory faculties and the potential to communicate with others indicated her return to her former self. This did not mean she fully regained agency, though. She was able to move only after the former confessor of Birgitta came to her, a detail emphasizing the need for secular hierarchies in constructing supernatural ones. Cristina offered an oblation to the shrine and returned home. She was, however, possessed anew. The clerics recording the case surmised that she had not shown enough gratitude and was afflicted again. They clarified that only Jesus Christ knew all the secrets—including the reason for the second tribulation—but in their eyes Cristina's ungratefulness brought the misery upon her the second time. Cristina was not depicted as an innocent victim during the first round of tribulations, but the major part of the blame was placed on her parents. The second affliction was, however, her own fault; ingratitude was a typical incentive for a saint to punish a negligent petitioner with a renewed illness. Several punishment miracles can be found in Birgitta's process, as noted; furthermore, the punishment was often performed by demons. The renewed possession due to Birgitta's punishment is an important detail pointing to the need for hierarchy and the humility of the petitioner, not only in the face of the heavenly patron, but also when facing her loyal—clerical—supporters. They knew and were able to determine the sufficient amount of gratitude. Only after another pilgrimage and oblation was Cristina cured.

The narration emphasizes the importance of the local clergy's ritual participation, the singing and placing of relics upon her, not Cristina's own agency. She did participate in the rituals of thanksgiving after the cure, and they only underline her inability to participate independently. Rather than being an agent, Cristina was posited in an object-like position. She was a medium in the construction of the sanctity of Birgitta; her continuing and renewed tribulation affirmed both the malice of demons and the superior powers of the relics of Birgitta. At the same time, the narration reinforced the authority of the local clergy in handling the relics and controlling the sacred space.

The core message of the events was the superior powers of Birgitta and an affirmation of her saintly status. The tribulations of Cristina and the thaumaturgical powers of Birgitta are likened to a Biblical prototype: Jesus healing a paralytic by forgiving his sins and asking him to rise up and leave (Mark 2:5–12). The linkage stresses further the sinful nature of Cristina manifesting itself in paralysis, like in the aforementioned case of the insulting monk. Simultaneously Birgitta is positioned as a Jesus-like

thaumaturge: she can both redeem sins and exorcize demons.³¹ Turning to penance and experiencing the miraculous needed intermediaries, however, as we will shortly see.

The devil took action once again when the relics were placed on Cristina's head and throat. Expressing his disgust clearly, he said in anger, "I have done a lot with you, and now they put the worst kind of stick on your head." He also protested against the intolerable stench of the relics, the priests around Cristina, and the vehement noise (the singing) resonating in the church. The speech of the demon fits well within the general role reserved for them in miracle narrations. Their words had theological significance in confirming the divinity and powers of Christ. "What have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? Art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God" (Mark 1:24), as a demon inside a possessed man cried out to Christ in Capernaum. The saints were, after the Apostles, the successors of Christ and the holy ones of God.

The abhorrence of the demon in Vadstena was confirmation of the holy powers of Birgitta and the abbey as a sacred space. Here, again, the intimate sensations of Cristina were crucial; she was the only one to be able to hear the devil, and he spoke directly to her. Cristina was a medium, but her role was, however, crucial, and it is further underlined in the devil's exclamation upon his exit: "Woe, woe, since I can do harm to you no more!"³²

It seems that the cultural script the Vadstena clergy was shaping circulated around the combat of sacred and diabolical powers. It is encapsulated in the time and space dedicated to the deeds and speech of the devil. Demons tend to be more verbal in didactic miracle collections and Cristina's tribulations are a case in point: no direct invocation is recorded, yet the words of the demon are quoted verbatim several times. Apparently, Cristina's change of heart and conversion to new religious habits were not clear enough, because she was possessed anew. Reverence was crucial in constructing the miraculous. A proper experience of Birgitta's sanctity was not constructed only by disavowing parental mischievousness; rather respect for the secular hierarchies was also needed.

The model of experiencing a religious change produced by the Vadstena clergy was not based on an emotional bond and affectivity between the

³¹ I thank Xavier Biron-Ouellet for pointing out this perspective to me.

³² "Ve, ve, quia iam nichil mali possum tibi facere!" *Acta et processus canonizacionis beate Birgittae*, 122.

heavenly intercessor and her devotees, but the core of living out religion was the hierarchy between Christians and supernatural powers as well as the clergy and laity. The perseverance of these themes—the need for reverence and fear of sin—is underlined in the preaching activity of the Vadstena clergy. Clearly enough, the need for penance, to avert Christians from the path of sin, was obviously a major legitimation for all preaching activity. However, the priest brothers of Vadstena Abbey seem to have been particularly driven by this goal—and not without success. Around 1400, an anonymous Franciscan friar described the preaching of the Vadstena brothers as fervent and persistent in focusing on the vices of the listeners; they were not only uttering soothing words for itching ears. Because of this, they gained great fame among the laity and great envy among other members of the clergy. This led not only to the abuse of Birgitta and her words, but also to accusations and slander against these priests themselves.³³

Vadstena was an important pilgrimage centre and Birgitta's feast days (*Translacio; Nativitas; Canonizacio*) among the most well-attended occasions at the abbey's church. Sermons on these days were to reach a wide lay audience, potentially thousands, and thus they were an important communicative channel. The specific liturgical moment enhanced the engagement of the audience: a sermon on a patron's feast day was more momentous than an ordinary Sunday sermon. The preaching activity of the Birgittine brothers was defined and regulated according to the words of Jesus given to Birgitta in her *Revelaciones*: they should preach in the vernacular with simple and few words, with no superfluous words or artificial expressions. Everything should match the capacity of the audience, which was defined as simple people. Apparently, this regulation was followed, as plainness is argued to be the most distinguished feature of Birgittine preaching.³⁴ Sermons on Birgitta's feast days do not seem to focus on an intimate connection with the heavenly patron. Instead, a major component in many of them is the avoidance of sinfulness and the demonstration of due reverence to Birgitta. Another persistent

³³The text in question is an "epistola" against those attacking Birgitta and her *Revelaciones*. The text is translated in Andersson & Borgehammar, "The Preaching of the Birgittine Friars", 213.

³⁴Andersson & Borgehammar, "The Preaching of the Birgittine Friars". *De sanctis* sermons increased especially during the thirteenth century because of Dominican activity. Saints' *vitae* were often the background text used in them, Ferzoco, "The context of medieval sermon collections on saints", 279–88.

undercurrent seems to have also been the propagation of Vadstena Abbey's reputation as a sacred place.³⁵

A sermon for the feast of Birgitta's canonization (7 October) from the second half of the fifteenth century is a case in point. More or less a century after Cristina's recovery, Nicholas Ragvaldi (c. 1445–1514) estimated that “many come here [i.e. Vadstena] for the health of the body but are not liberated.” According to him, “God gives different kinds of infirmities or cures them. Some are cured to manifest the glory of God, [...] others as a sign of the purging of sins and exercising patience, and yet others are cured for God's occult judgement. All requests are not fulfilled—only those that please God.” He brought to the mind of listeners how Christ explained to his disciples, when they could not expel a certain demon, that some forms of demons were only cast out by prayers and fasts—not by the power of Apostles. Therefore, Christians should not judge saints if they did not perform miracles for all petitioners.³⁶ The sermon's message follows a similar logic to Cristina's case: penance and reverence were a crucial component in experiencing the miraculous.

The pilgrimage and physical presence at the shrine were prerequisites for Cristina's recovery, and the importance of pilgrimage is stressed in other feast day sermons. The adversaries of pilgrimages and sacred places

³⁵ Vadstena was an important learning centre with large library and active preaching agenda; approximately 5000 sermons were produced in Vadstena during 1380–1520. The collection is preserved in Uppsala university library in so-called C-Sammlung. Berggren, *Homilectica Vadstenensia*, VII–XI; ca.120 sermons for Birgitta's feast can be identified. *Mittelalterliche Handschriften der Universitätsbibliothek Uppsala*: Bd 8, 25. Due to the large quantity, the cases presented here are only a small sample of the whole and conclusions tentative. For closer scrutiny are selected sermons with references to miracles; a preliminary analysis suggests they form a small minority and the majority of the references is to *miracula in vita*. I wish to thank Roger Andersson and Stephan Borgehammar for letting me have access to their unpublished database of C-Sammlung sermons. Some of the transliterations of original material are from the database, some are my own, and all the translations are mine.

³⁶ “Sed forte dicit quis, quia multi huc pro sanitate corporis veniunt, qui tamen non liberantur. Respondendum est, quia infirmitas datur diuersimode vel permittitur a Deo. Nam aliqua permittitur ad gloriam Dei manifestandam, sicut Thobie cecitas et ceco nato et claudo ab vtero matris, vt in Actibus apostolorum habetur iii capitulo; aliis vero pro purgacione peccati et exercicio paciencie et etiam sepius ex occulto Dei iudicio; et ideo non omnes, sed quibus Deo placuerit, petita recipiunt. Eciam in ewangelio legitur Christum dedisse discipulis potestatem super spiritus immundos etc., et tamen demonem ab vno expellere non potuerunt, sed Christus ipsum per se expellere voluit dicens apostolis: Hoc genus demoniorum non nisi in ieiunio et oracione expellitur etc. Ideo caueat Christianus, ne iudicet de sanctis, quare non circa omnes faciunt miracula etc”. UB C 303 f 185v.

are likened to the adversaries of Jerusalem by the words of Tobit: “cursed are the ones who scorn you; damned are the ones who blaspheme you” (Tobit 13:16).³⁷ In addition to reverence, humility was presented as an inescapable element while experiencing the miraculous: Birgitta was able to supersede the powers of nature and answer humble and devoted prayers.³⁸

It is not known if Cristina’s molestations were used as an example to show the necessity to beg for forgiveness for one’s sins and to express humbleness. The narration itself was filled with didactic remarks and miracles were typically remodelled to be reused as parts of sermons. Concerning the Vadstena sermons, it seems however that the details from Birgitta’s *vita* and especially extracts from *Revelaciones* were more readily used as material, while thaumaturgical powers do not stand out.³⁹ Miracles, not to mention the experiences of the miraculés, did not form an important element in the communication. When references to individual miracles can be found, they are typically stripped of details and anonymized so that different cases or beneficiaries are not identifiable. Potentially, then, the story of Cristina’s recovery could have been told under the title “how Birgitta liberated a woman brought to desperation and trembling by a devil.”⁴⁰ Close to a century after the canonization hearing, the cases recorded in the canonization records were likely forgotten from the collective oral memory, and the preacher could not resort only to the short, written remarks but needed to diverge from it by using other sources. The canonization dossier was used as a point of reference when composing the feast day sermons, but references to and quotations from the part

³⁷ “Maledicti erunt, qui contempserint te et condempnati erunt, qui blasphemauerint. Benedicti erunt, qui edificauerint te... Beati omnes, qui diligunt te et qui gaudent super pacem tuam”. UB C317, f 279r, this is an anonymous sermon from the mid-15th century, see also C 389 f 141v.

³⁸ “Tanta enim est fama sanctitatis eius ob miraculorum chorusacionem, vt admirari non sufficiunt sensus auditorum. Nam in quacumque necessitate quis constitutus fuerit, si cum humili et fideli deuocione eius adiutorium postulauerit, siue in mari, siue in terra, siue sub terra, siue igne vel aere, ipsius meritis saluabitur, vt de illa verificetur illud ewangelicum: *Veni et mare obediunt ei*”. UB C 389 f 141v.

³⁹ *Relevaciones* as a source for sermons was given in the rule of the order. Andersson & Borgehammar, “The Preaching of the Birgittine Friars”.

⁴⁰ “Item qualiter liberavit quandam mulierem in desperatione et tremore posita a diabolo”. UB C75 132r.

compiled by the Birgittine brothers, *Acta*, are rare.⁴¹ As to the trembling demoniac, there are other options for its origin, as cases of demonic possessions are numerous in Birgitta's canonization process, as mentioned.

A sequence of predetermined and stereotypical actions—including emotions and rituals—defining a well-known situation can be termed a cultural script. The script produced by the Vadstena clergy focuses on hierarchy and reverence whilst the personal, inner emotions are not manifest in the experience of the miraculous. Emotional stages so typical of the miracle process in general are not found in this context, nor are they underlined in the spiritual path of the soul to penance and redemption from sins. The script guides an individual to know how to react, but the underlined communal emotions, like shared manifestations of devotion by the laity, are not needed in the Vadstena context. Cristina is clearly depicted as a victim, albeit not necessarily an innocent one, and she is not able to function alone: she does not act agentically. The lay audience of a preacher was not in a similar situation, but they, too, needed the clergy as an intermediary. The proper reaction required collaboration and the interactive parties were the clergy and the listeners. The model for experiencing the miraculous and religious change was built on a hierarchal collaboration between priest brothers and lay pilgrims.

CONCLUSIONS: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN “LIVED REALITY,” CULTURAL SCRIPT, AND EXPERIENCE AS AN ANALYTICAL CONCEPT

The experience under scrutiny here, Christina's conversion to penance and the experience of the miraculous, was constructed on multiple levels, which were intertwined, inseparable, and yet distinct. The immediacy of Cristina's feelings and bodily sensations is available to us only in a mediated form; references with a quotidian flavour were also already the results of negotiation on the familial and communal levels. Her symptoms should be seen as embodied enculturation: the sensory, emotional, and cognitive were commingled, producing the understanding of the affliction and potential cure—for Cristina herself and the other participants. Her bodily

⁴¹Typically *Attestaciones*, deposition collected in Italy was the part of canonization process used as a background information—not *Acta*. See, for example, C9, 37r-; C286, 446v-50r; C303, 176r-86r; C 317; C331, 172v-78r; C335, 156v-59v.

signs and sensory modalities were interpreted by the local community in a certain way to give meaning and render the situation understandable and ameliorable.

The cultural script produced by the Vadstena clergy was an ideal image of piety confronted by its negative counter image. In this case, the Vadstena brothers had the moral power to form the prevailing interpretation and construct an experience of Cristina's tribulations in which narrative conventions and tropes were an inseparable part. On a general level, the punishment miracle was part of the general cultural script produced by the church, but Vadstena was a specific context nuancing the tribulations of demoniacs. Vadstena Abbey with its priest brothers formed a script, a subcategory to the universalizing discourse of the church, a script where the malice of demons was omnipresent and the fight against them was a crucial building block in Birgitta's sanctity. Her punishing ability as well as the priest brothers' interpretative activity were the outer incentive for conversion to penance. Demons' victims formed the medium carrying this message.

To conceptualize Cristina's tribulations as an "experience" shows how religion-as-lived was a culturally bound social process interacting with other social categories. The demonic presence gave meaning to problematic behaviour that did not fit into accustomed modes of conduct; it justified the preaching agenda and authority of the brothers and participated in the sacralization of relics and Vadstena Abbey. This process of mediation—the amalgamation of sensory elements and bodily signs as well as the requirements of the miracle genre and the patterns produced and contributed to by local clerics—created a model of experiencing, a context-bound way to understand the miraculous in terms of both conceptualization and concretization.

Experiences are social in their very nature, which means all experiences are mediated and situational. "Authenticity" cannot be separated from the medium. Inner sensations, like sensory elements, were used in the text to give meaning to the occurrence, to construct it as an experience in this spatiotemporal context. To give meaning to a personal occurrence, bodily sensations, and inner feelings, communication with others is required. The bodily and the verbal intertwined and were an inseparable part of the meaning-giving process. This inevitably fuses "inner feelings" and "lived reality" with convention and media. This is not a deficiency in the scrutiny of historical experiences—quite the contrary. Approaching "experience"

as an analytical concept rather than a singular occurrence in an individual's life enables us to see its meaning in a wider context that connects various levels. Experience is a holistic phenomenon cutting across the individual, communal, and cultural.

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