The Life and Passion of William of Norwich
(1152–70)

Thomas of Monmouth
Contributed by Sarah Edwards Obenauf

Introduction

During Easter Week in the year 1144, William, a twelve-year-old skinner’s apprentice, was found dead in Thorpe Wood, Norwich, a town in East Anglia. According to his biographer, Thomas of Monmouth (d. ca. 1173), the boy had been ritually tortured and crucified by local Jews. This is the first such account of ritual murder by Jews in the English Middle Ages, and that aspect of The Life and Passion of William of Norwich has dominated recent scholarship about William. However, William’s death was not the main feature of these contemporary records, for Thomas documents 110 miracles in seven books, eighty of them concerning physical and mental impairments.

Below are ten representative examples. Most of these pilgrims with disabilities were brought to William’s tomb by their friends and family (Books III.vii, V.xiii, V.xvi, VI.v, VI.viii, VII.iii, and VII.xiv), while others traveled to the shrine on their own, both with technological aid (Book VI.x) and without (Book VII.vi). For example, Gilliva (who is blind) is guided by a cord held by her nephew in Book VI.viii, and Agnes (who is wracked with gout) is brought to the tomb in the arms of her mother in Book VII.xiv. Most of the miracles attributed to William took place at his tomb. In one instance, a woman’s cancer is cured by William’s intervention at her home but the cancer returns when she fails to take a votive to the tomb; upon making the offering at the shrine, she is cured a second time (Book VII.vi). These examples reveal that people with disabilities were not on the outskirts of society in the Middle Ages, even if they wished to be cured of their conditions. To the contrary, they were loved and cared for by their families, friends, and neighbors. These rich networks of support carried people with disabilities, sometimes considerable distances, in search of a cure for a variety of ailments.

Thomas’ meticulous record-keeping points to a variety of medical conditions as medieval people understood them. Of the eighty miracles dealing with physical and mental impairment in The Life and Passion, over twenty-five distinct conditions are discussed, all of which were putatively curable by William’s intervention. These conditions include being “bent double” (the seven-year-old girl in Book V.xvi, and Matilda in Book VI.xi) and “dumb” (also the seven-year-old girl in Book V.xvi), madness and demonic possession (the son of Richard de Needham and Silverun in Book V.xiii, Robert in Book VI.v, and a clerk also named Robert in Book VII.iii), kidney and knee pain (Claricia in Book III.vii), blindness (Gilliva in Book VI.viii), “a cancer” (an unnamed woman in Book VII.vi), and gout (Agnes in Book VII.xiv). Other conditions that do not appear in the examples below include deafness, dropsy, dysentery, fever, flux, a goiter, palsy, paralysis, toothache, viper attacks, weakness of constitution, and many unidentified illnesses.

The Life and Passion lends itself to a reading through the lens of disability studies both
because of Thomas’ careful record-keeping and because the concept of disability is so closely tied to social context. By taking what Thomas says about these miracles at face value, readers can see the social dimension of the conditions (and their purported cures) as well as how medieval people regarded these afflictions as medical conditions. Readers can detect in these examples a difference between disability and impairment, where “disability” is the social construct and can therefore change over time and place, and “impairment” is the physical condition which does not change regardless of time and place. The social construct of disability in the Middle Ages was not necessarily the same as today; these miracles show that it was often the consensus of those present at the tomb which determined whether the cure was efficacious, thus mapping a social dimension onto the impairment (and transforming it into a disability).

Bibliography


Book III.vii
Concerning a certain woman cured of a long-standing sickness.

Not long after this Claricia, wife of Gaufridus de Marc and niece of the brothers Gerold came to the sepulchre of the most blessed martyr seeking a much desired remedy for her infirmity. This lady had been suffering for some years from pain in the reins and knees, nor could she be cured by any physicians, though she spent much upon them. But coming to this worshipful sepulchre by means of those who led her there, or rather by the leading of her faith, standing there for a little while she offered up a prayer, and then bending her knees as far as she was able she applied them all bare to the bare stone. And immediately at the touch of it the aforementioned pain in her limbs began to abate so that she felt already the long lost soundness spreading through her limbs. Thus it came to pass that she who came with her feeble body by the hands of others, when the heavenly medicine did its work, went back safe and sound needing no man's support.

Book III.ix
Concerning the boy who being nigh unto death was cured by the merits of Saint William.

In those days the infant son of Radulfus, Prior Elias’ nephew, was sick unto death and his last hour was at hand. So his father and mother were advised that a candle of the length and breadth of the little boy should be made with utmost haste, and that when it was made they should offer it to Saint William for the restoration of their son, and that without doubt they would receive back their son safe and whole. Wherefore as was advised, straightway the candle was made, and having been brought by the father’s hands it was offered as a votive offering at the sepulchre of the holy martyr. The father on his return rejoiced to find his son safe whom a little while before he had given up for dead.

Book V.xiii
Of the cure of a second madman.

I also saw another possessed man healed at St. William’s tomb by the divine pity in Whitsun week. He was the son of Richard de Needham, and his mother was named Silverun; and one day he was seized by a devil and began to handle himself so roughly that seven men were hardly able to chain him. He remained in this state, bound, for six days, eating nothing, and sleep entirely forsook him. Thus bound he was at last brought by his parents to the oft-mentioned tomb; and as he approached it he suddenly yelled with a terrible voice and said, “What do you want with me? where are you taking me to? I won’t go there! I won’t go there!” But as he was being dragged thither with some violence he burst his bonds, not by his strength but by that of the evil spirit, and attacking his mother, threw her to the ground and fastened his teeth in her throat. And he would certainly have killed her, had not the people run up and rescued her. Then, gnashing his teeth, and glaring fiercely on the bystanders, he maltreated frightfully all whom he could reach. A crowd assembled; he was savagely seized and bound, and with his hands and feet tied together, was put down willy-nilly beside the holy tomb. As soon as he touched the sacred spot, wonderful to say, neither by voice nor look did he show the least token of madness. After an hour had passed he gently and meekly asked to be loosed, and was unbound by one of the servants of the Church. Thereafter he behaved himself as quietly and tamely as if he had suffered no touch of madness. In a short time sleep came upon him, and he who for many days had not slept at all, as I said, now rested for some little space.
On waking, though he had remained many
days without food, he now said that he was
exceedingly hungry. Food was brought, he
ate and drank, and returned home with his
parents and friends, sane and whole, in the
greatest joy.

Book Vxxvi
Of a girl who was bent and dumb and was
healed.

On Maundy Thursday° of the same year," which Christians call the day of absolution,
while Bishop William was solemnizing the
mass, there came a woman to the tomb of St.
William, with a daughter of seven years old,
bent double and dumb. The mother put her
down by the tomb in the sight of many, and
after praying with tears she sat down beside
Godiva the wife of Sibald, son of Brunstan,
who was also seated there. After some little
time, it happened that she fell asleep. Then,
an egg happening to be brought to the tomb,
the girl, who had never yet been able to speak
or walk, arose in the sight of the said Godiva,
took the egg, turned to her mother, and said
in English: “Look, mother! I've got an egg!”
At the sound the mother awoke, and seeing
her daughter speaking and walking, burst
into tears of joy; and being now assured of
her daughter, proclaimed publicly to those
present how great benefits the pity of God
had conferred on her by the merits of St. Wil-
liam. I ran up and inquired diligently into the
facts, and was at once informed by Godiva
and many others that they truly knew the
woman, and had often seen the deformed and
dumb girl.

Book VI.v
Of a second wonderfully mad man who was
restored to health.

At another time also we saw a second man
out of his mind who was raging fearfully be-
fore the tomb of the blessed martyr; his name
was Robert, of the parish of St. Michael Con-
isford at Norwich." He was subject to attacks
of madness at uncertain intervals, and had
in consequence come with his mother to St.
William, in the hope of being cured. On ar-
iving at the church he began at once to be
violent. His mother with tears contrived to
coax him into the building and presented
him before the martyr’s tomb. But when he
had sat quietly for a short time beside his
mother, who was praying in the presence of
a large crowd of spectators of both sexes, he
suddenly began to tremble all over as if he
were breaking down altogether; and he suf-
ffered indescribably. His eyes flashed fire; he
emitted frightful noises. The same mouth
gave utterance to every kind of sound; forget-
ing his humanity he tore off his clothes and
stripped himself naked; unable to control
himself, he exercised enormous strength. The
crowd of onlookers were panic-stricken; all
were astonished, some wept, others prayed
for the patient’s recovery. What more? By
the intervention, as we believe, of the prayers
of the holy martyr, God’s pity looked upon
the man, drove out the madness of his raving
spirit, and gave him sanity for the future.
The people were filled with amazement at the
miracle, and proclaimed the Divine power to
be wonderful in his saint William, and re-
turned to their homes in joy.

Maundy Thursday The Thursday before Easter year the year in which this occurred was 1155, which
Thomas mentions in Book Vx St. Michael Conisford at Norwich a medieval parish church that was
destroyed during the Reformation
Book VI.viii

Of a blind woman who received sight.

Near the same time, at Lynn in the parish of St. Edmund, there was a woman called Gilliva, daughter of Burcard a carpenter. She lost her sight by an accident and suffered blindness for three years. To crown her misfortune, such pains and anguish attacked her in the eyelids that for the whole of that time her lashes were always closed, and as it were glued together, and she was never able to open them. At the end of three years she determined to fly for succour to the blessed martyr William, as to her one and only refuge; and this with the more confidence as report had told her that others similarly afflicted had been cured at his tomb. Her young nephew put a clew of thread in her hand and went before to guide her, and in this way she reached Norwich and St. William. Standing before the altar she began to pray, and had finished but a little of her prayer when she was interrupted by a sudden and instant attack of pain. Her head reeled, her eyes were smitten with a fiery vapour; she tore her brow and cheeks with her nails, and falling on the ground in agony rolled on the pavement like a mad thing, filling the church with loud and terrifying shrieks. Yet amidst her pain she called aloud with such ejaculations as these: “O gentle boy and martyr William, pity me! many are those on whom thou hast mercy!” A large throng rapidly assembled, who had that day come to the church in procession. All compassionated her sharp agony; and, moved with pity, poured forth prayers and tears. Both sexes wept, prayed, and cried alike at the pitiful sight. For whose heart could have been so stony as to behold this and refrain from shedding tears? At length after this long torture, at the look of the divine mercy, by the intervention, as we truly believe, of the blessed martyr’s merits, the pain began slowly to abate. Then the woman, feeling that the heavenly medicine was on its way, rose, and lifting her hands to heaven, opened those lids which had been before closed, and could not be opened even for a moment, for the pain they gave her. At once a ray, as I may call it, of blood shot from either eye, and therewith the long night of blindness melted away as if at the dawn of a new light. She that had for long not seen, and had desired the light, now saw; and with joy she said, “Now unto Thee, O God most high, creator and amender of all things, and to thee also, William, most holy martyr of God, I pay the thanks and praises I owe, for that I now receive again rest after so great pain, and sight after three years’ blindness.” With these words she wiped the blood from her eyes and drew near the tomb of the holy martyr. She prayed, and offered a candle that she had brought with her, and, turning to the people, proclaimed that she had received her sight. The bystanders marveled; their sorrow was turned to joy, and all united their voices in extolling the glorious and evident power of the most blessed martyr William, to the praise of God.

Book VI.xi

Of the healing of a certain woman who was wonderfully bent.

There was at that time a woman named Matildis whom a pitiable weakness had afflicted from her earliest youth. Ever since then, in fact, she had been so weak of body, that owing to the curvature of her spine she was quite doubled up, her legs were twisted together, and her knees pressed one against the other. The consequence was, that when she wished to go from one place to another she had to support her feeble limbs with a
stick and either succeeded in getting a little way, or, sometimes, was not able to do even this. Peter, the priest of Langham, a vill of the Bishop’s, had long housed her by way of charity, and supplied her with food and clothing. If she ever desired to visit some shrine for the recovery of her health, he used to have her taken there laid like a sack across a horse. But she was always brought back as she had gone, and no good result followed her pains. When the fame of St. William’s great virtue was spread abroad, she conceived the hope of being cured by his means, and with eagerness born of confidence took her stick and started for Norwich. Her steps were helped by the fervent emotions of her mind more than by the material assistance of her feet, and she trusted to her own strength less than to the stick that supported her. Each step was hardly a finger’s length, and there was considerable delay between them, so that one watching her progress would judge her to be slower than any tortoise. The result was that, though she started on the twelfth day before Lent, she reached Norwich in the fourth week after Easter. At the moment of her entering the cathedral church, she felt the soles of her feet pricked as if by thorns; but when she stood before the tomb of the glorious martyr, and supporting her feeble limbs on her stick raised her hands in prayer, and poured out her whole soul before God, in the midst of her prayer she was interrupted by a sudden attack of pain. The anguish increased, and she rolled upon the ground, beating it with head, shoulders, feet and hands, and filled the church with cries—behaving herself altogether in a marvellous and pitiable manner. Who, I ask, would be so stony-hearted as to stand and look upon this and refrain his eyes from weeping? At last, after all this anguished writhing the violence of the pain abated, as the raging of the troubled sea is calmed when the mad winds are stilled. So the woman after a little got up, and since she was still in a feeble condition, she made her way to the screen, and passed along it by clenching to the shafts, and so finally reached the desired tomb of the blessed martyr. Here, in prayer and thanksgiving, she passed a good part of the day; and then turned to the throng of onlookers and boldly testified to the great things that had been done for her by the merits of St. William. But, inasmuch as a faithless and unbelieving individual was inclined to ascribe the cure to craft rather than miracle, she vowed that she would not leave Norwich until her aforesaid Sir Peter of Langham should come, and by bearing witness to the truth put an end to the wordy contentions of unbelief. And this was accomplished; for she awaited the coming of Peter, and he, when he came, bore witness to the truth.

Book VII.iii
Of a mad clerk healed.

I also saw one Robert, a clerk, son of William de Crachesford, who was troubled in his wits, and mad, being brought to the tomb of the blessed martyr by a number of people. After spending the night there with his friends quietly enough, at dawn he was overcome with sleep and, waking about the third hour, felt that his madness and the pain in his limbs were alike appeased. His friends were rejoiced and rendered thanks to the holy martyr for his recovery, and the people present also exulted at so great and sudden a miracle, for they saw him go away sane, who had come mad.
Book VII.vi

Of a woman twice cured of a cancer.

In the same vill of the Bishop's was a woman whose name I have forgotten, who suffered terribly in her breast. It discharged a great deal, and was afflicted with a cancer. She was long troubled with it, and got no aid from physicians; so, despairing of man's help, she betook herself to God's. She took wax, accordingly, softened it at the fire, and in the name of the holy martyr William applied it to her breast, and let it remain there for some time, praying and making vows with tears to the aforesaid martyr. Wonderful to say, the pain abated at once, and the creeping disease ceased to irritate her, while the discharge also was stayed. But as from day to day she put off presenting the wax I have mentioned to St. William at Norwich in accordance with her vow, the disease again attacked her breast more violently than before. Hence I conjecture that the blessed martyr was minded that her sin in breaking her vow should be expiated by severe punishment, and that she should be reminded to pay her vow by the trouble of a second attack of her disease. She, then, recognising her fault, took the wax and once more applied it to her breast, and in a short while recovered her lost health. She was more careful for the future, and made haste to go to Norwich, where she offered the wax at the tomb of the holy martyr, paid her vow and returned home in joy.

Book VII.xiv

Of a maid cured of gout.

There was at Norwich a maid eight years old called Agnes, whose father was Bondo, surnamed Hoc, her mother's name being Gunnilda. From her birth she had suffered severely from gout in the hands and feet, being unable to raise herself or even to turn from one side to the other without assistance. To make matters worse, the sinews in her neck were contracted and her left cheek adhered so firmly to her left shoulder that you saw the one imbedded in the other, and the neck could not be bent in any direction whatever without bending the shoulder. All these afflictions therefore she suffered: walk she could not with her gouty feet, nor touch anything with her contracted hands, while the adherence of her head to the shoulder deprived her of the wonted power of seeing, standing, turning, nay, eating: for when she had to take food, it was cut up on the ground or on a trencher, and she lay down and fed like a beast, able only to eat what her tongue or teeth caught hold of. In this absolutely helpless state she was turned, raised, and moved about by others' help. This poor creature was brought in her mother's arms to the tomb of the holy martyr William at the hour of matins the second Sunday in Lent, and, in presence of the crowds who assembled in greater numbers than usual on that day, by the intercession of the merits of the saint, immediately obtained relief and healing. Hence we ought to consider how great and how merciful is the power of the saints, since it can immediately upon their arrival send back whole those who are destitute of all strength.
Endnotes