

Rereading Leoba, or Hagiography as Compromise

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IN 836, HRABANUS MAURUS, as abbot of Fulda, undertook a program of church building and renewed evangelism in the areas controlled by his monastery. As part of this program, he asked Rudolf, monk and schoolmaster at the abbey, to compose a *vita* of Leoba, the Anglo-Saxon abbess and missionary to Saxony who had died 54 years earlier, and who was now buried near St. Boniface in Fulda's crypt. Rudolf's hagiography would answer the new Carolingian requirement for written texts to support the veneration of saints, asserting the legitimacy of the sanctity of the recently deceased local abbess.¹ Rudolf's task was to produce a laudatory yet accessible portrait of the woman who had traveled from her native England into the frontier of eighth-century Saxony converting pagans and establishing the first convent for women in that country. He was to explain how and why this woman had come to be interred in a male monastery, alongside one of Saxony's great established saints, and why she was worthy of veneration by the local populace.² The problem, for both Rudolf and Hrabanus, was that according to the two men and the ninth-century Carolingian church in which they served, St. Leoba did not quite behave as a holy woman should.³

The difficulties Rudolf faced in writing his *vita* of Saint Leoba are apparent in his finished text and will seem familiar to many scholars of feminist literary history. Rudolf's ideals concerning religious women's behavior seem to align with the official positions of the ninth-century Carolingian church after the Benedictine reforms: religious women are to be strictly cloistered, focused on internal piety and prayer, with very limited if any engagement with either the ecclesiastical or secular worlds beyond the convent's walls. The facts of Leoba's eighth-century pre-reform historical life, however, contrast sharply with this ninth-

century post-reform ecclesiastical ideal. She left her convent in her native England to become a missionary in Saxony, where she certainly taught and perhaps preached publicly and actively engaged in the life of Charlemagne's court, even advising in political affairs. She travelled independently, including frequently visiting Boniface in his monastery at Fulda, and she was apparently well-known and well-regarded by the local townspeople, engaging in local secular affairs. In this way, it is easy to paint our characters according to neat stereotypical categories: Rudolf as the institutional Church patriarchal oppressor, Leoba our strong rebellious woman. Rudolf's *Vita Leobae* thus seems to provide a clear example of Jane Tibbets Schulenburg's statement about hagiographies of female saints written by men during this period, "On this level, the vitae might be viewed as oppressive tools utilized by the clergy to control or restrict women's activities and visions."⁴

Scholars have long recognized the problematic disconnect between Rudolf's ideals and Leoba's actions. As Thomas Noble and Thomas Head note in the introduction to the vita in their anthology *Soldiers of Christ*, "Rudolf was in a bit of a quandary. His account makes it clear that he personally favored the strict claustration of women, but he had to write of a woman who traveled widely and frequently."⁵ Numerous scholarly discussions of the vita have been undertaken by historians interested in Rudolf's text for what it might reveal about eighth-century Saxony, Anglo-Saxon missionary activities, and women's roles in the early medieval church.⁶ In these cases, Rudolf's obvious displeasure at parts of his subject's life has often been treated as an obfuscating veil between the modern researcher and the "real" medieval woman. One is thus left with a choice between taking Rudolf's word—and thus his point of view—on his subject, or searching for ways to see past or beyond the intervening veil of authorial bias. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, echoed by Schulenberg, has suggested that hagiographies allowed for negotiation between text and reader in order to produce meanings which may have been more liberating for women readers than those intended by the hagiographers.⁷ While this approach opens a space for one form of feminist reading of these texts, both of these modes of reading are still dependent upon one of two oppositional binary models—hagiographer versus saint, or hagiographer versus reader.⁸

Such approaches to Rudolf's *Vita Leobae* are useful in reminding us of the interpretive possibilities available in reading early medieval hagiography. However, my goals in this essay are at once more modest and more complex. In this article I will undertake a close literary reading of Rudolf's *Life of Leoba* to explicate how Rudolf diffuses the ideological conflicts inherent in his own text and reaches a practical compromise within Leoba's vita. In spite of the tension produced by the conflict between some of Leoba's actions and Rudolf's (and the church's) expectations for holy women, Rudolf nonetheless produces a cohesive, laudatory narrative of Leoba's life. Rudolf, as a hagiographer, engages in a series of negotiations in order to find a space, both literal and figurative, where both he and Leoba can live. Rudolf's hagiography of Leoba moves her historical actions into the institutional confines of the post-reform church, even as it justifies her physical interment within the walls of Fulda. This project extends some of the arguments made by Stephanie Hollis in her discussion of Rudolf's text as reflecting the transformation of accepted gender roles within the Anglo-Saxon church.⁹ In addition, it considers some of the ways in which John Wayland Coakley's work on gender and hagiography might inform our readings of earlier hagiographic texts such as the *Vita Leobae*.¹⁰ Overall, I will suggest some ways in which Leoba's vita might serve as a model for re-reading, or differently reading, other hagiographic texts about medieval holy women in terms that emphasize accommodation and compromise, rather than simply conflict and oppression, between differing conceptions of gender, sanctity, and behavior.

A hagiographic text can usefully be understood as a product of negotiation. This is distinct from ex post facto negotiation between an already existent text and its audience, as discussed by Wogan-Brown and Schulenberg. In my concentration upon production rather than reception, I follow previous scholars such as Patrick Geary, Kathleen Ashley, and Pamela Sheingorn in examining the constitutive elements of hagiographic composition. Geary claims that "to understand a hagiographic work, we must consider the hagiographic tradition within which it was produced; the other texts copied, adapted, read, or composed by the hagiographer; and the specific circumstances that brought him or her to focus this tradition on a particular work. The text stands at a threefold intersection

of genre, total textual production, and historical circumstance.”¹¹ In their examination of the *Miracles of St. Foy*, Ashley and Sheingorn frame their discussion of textual production in semiotic terms:

To begin with, any producer of signs—in this case, writer of miracle stories—is constrained in what can be selected to a repertoire of possibilities provided by the culture and historical moment. But at the same time it is clear that any semiotic system represents a meaningful and coherent but very radical selection from the huge range of options. In analyzing these miracle narratives as semiotic entities we must simultaneously attend to three aspects of the texts: we must see them as rhetorical structures (a set of internally related signs), as historically contingent constellations of signs, and as sign systems designed to have historical agency.¹²

Geary, Ashley, and Sheingorn all highlight multiple influences that shape the production of hagiographic texts. Whether vita, miracle collection, or other writing about a saint, all hagiographic texts are subject to multiple constraints at the moment of composition. Some of these constraints are common to all texts understood as rhetorical constructions; others bear specific relevance to writings about saints.

Every hagiographer undertakes a series of negotiations in order to acknowledge a series of constraints upon the narrative, each of which must be accommodated to a greater or lesser degree. Expanding upon the lists provided by Geary, Ashley, and Sheingorn, I argue that any given hagiography represents a compromise between the competing claims of historical fact, generic convention, ecclesiastical practice, theology, and the personal ideas and biases of the author. All of these constraints, in addition, are historically contingent, in that what counts as relevant fact, generic expectation, etc. will be to a certain degree particular to the time and place of textual production. For Rudolf, these five categories of constraint can be described as follows:

1. the “facts” as they are (or were) known regarding the real historical Leoba
2. the narrative conventions of the hagiographic genre

3. ecclesiastical norms of the time of composition (as distinct from Leoba's lifetime)
4. accepted theology (by which I mean a general consensus concerning the nature of the relationship between the human and the divine, as accepted in a particular time and place)
5. Rudolf's own personal convictions

All of these constraints are to some extent elastic, but none can be ruptured without consequence—without, quite simply, Rudolf failing at his task of writing a hagiography of Leoba (the result being, for instance, that the narrative won't make sense or won't be recognizable as hagiography or won't be acceptable to the audience). Rudolf must therefore negotiate between these constraints in order to produce a text which accommodates all of them to some degree without stretching any to the breaking point. In the case of Rudolf's vita of Leoba, the potential for conflict between these constraints is clear as Rudolf's own ideals and the norms of the ninth-century Carolingian church posit a theological understanding of gendered sanctity at odds with Leoba's historical actions. In view of these potential conflicts, we can understand Rudolf, as Leoba's hagiographer, entering into a kind of partnership with his subject in order to negotiate a liminal space in which these potential conflicts can be diffused and feminine sanctity defined in a way that allows for Leoba's inclusion in the category.¹³ The hagiographer's task is thus to negotiate a compromise.

In order to read and understand Rudolf's interventions within the constraints upon the narrative he composed, I will undertake a close reading of several important points of the *Vita Leobae*. These moments of importance are places where the stretching of constraints and brokering of compromise are most evident in the text; in short, they are the places where we can see the stretch marks upon the constraints of convention.

Rudolf begins his *Vita Leobae* in the generically expected manner. Early medieval hagiographies almost invariably begin with a short dedication or preface indicating the sanctity of the subject, the insufficiency of the hagiographer to his or her task, and often an indication of the person who commissioned the text and/or the text's intended audience. Rudolf,

in fact, fulfills this formula twice. In the “Prologue,” or chapter one of the *vita*, Rudolf indicates the exceptional holiness of Leoba, employs the modesty topos in ascribing his literary endeavor to obedience to his abbot Hrabanus rather than belief in his sufficiency to the task, and prays for Christ’s help in composing a text adequate to Leoba’s sanctity. In addition, he scrupulously catalogues his sources so that “*de fide dictorum nemini fidelium arbitror esse ambigendum*” (there should be no doubt in the minds of the faithful about the veracity of the statements made in this book).¹⁴ This prologue in all likelihood opened the *vita* in the form commissioned by Hrabanus in 836 and is the opening found most frequently in the manuscript tradition.

One manuscript adds, prior to this prologue, a dedication to a certain Hadamout, or Hathumoda, abbess of Gandersheim, indicating that Rudolf sent the *vita* to Hathumoda sometime after 852.¹⁵ Hathumoda is expected to share the text—and her prayers for its author—with her sisters in Christ (“*cum omnibus sanctis virginibus*”).¹⁶ The particular importance of this dedication comes in Rudolf’s again conventional indication of the potential use of this text by the religious women for whom it is intended.¹⁷ The entire first sentence of Rudolf’s dedication reads as follows:

Libellum, quem de Vita atque virtutibus sanctæ & venerandæ
virginis Liobæ conscripsi, nomini tuo, religiosa virgo Christi
Hadumout, dedicare curavi, ut habeas, quod & libenter legere, &
religiose possis imitari.

[The small book which I have written about the life and virtues
of the holy and revered virgin Leoba has been dedicated to you, O
Hadamout, virgin of Christ, in order that you may have something
to read with pleasure and imitate with profit.]

Rudolf here specifically cites a double purpose for this text: “*libenter legere & religiose possis imitari*.” We are told, then, that this is a didactic text, intended for imitation; however, this will be a specifically circumscribed imitation of only particular portions of Leoba’s life. Rudolf will exploit the standard double purpose of hagiography, *admiratio* and *imitatio*, as one way to draw Leoba’s story into institutional orthodoxy.

We are still well within the conventions of literary genre here, but this particular aspect of the genre—the interplay between admiration and imitation—will become one of the conventions stretched, but not broken, by Rudolf in his composition of Leoba's vita. Throughout the Middle Ages and beyond, hagiographies were generally understood to inspire both devotion and imitation on the part of readers and hearers. The idea that some aspects of a saint's life—such as piety and modesty—were to be emulated by all Christians, while others—such as the working of miracles—were meant to inspire wonder at God's agency in the world, was commonplace to medieval audiences. However, the line separating these two categories was open to negotiation, and the elasticity of this division is central to Rudolf's portrait of Leoba.

Immediately following his preface, Rudolf begins his delineation of the separation between admiration and imitation as he begins stretching the literary conventions of the hagiographic genre in order to express his own convictions. Of a twenty-three chapter vita, Leoba is not born until chapter six.¹⁸ Rudolf dedicates the first five chapters of the text to a description of the convent of Wimbourne and the strict discipline kept there by the abbess Tetta:

In quo duo monasteria antiquitus a regibus gentis illius constructa sunt, muris altis & firmis circumdata, & omni sufficientia sump-tuum rationabili dispositione procurata: unum scilicet clerico-rum, & alterum foeminarum. Quorum ab initio foundationis suae utrunque ea lege disciplinae ordinatum est, ut neutrum eorum dis-par sexus ingrederetur. Nunquam enim virorum congregationem foemina, aut virginum contubernia quisquam virorum intrare permittebatur: exceptis solummodo presbyteris, qui in ecclesias earum ad agenda Missarum officia tantum ingredi solebant, & consummata solenniter oratione, statim ad sua redire. Foeminarum vero quaecunque seculo renunciants, earum collegio sociari voluerat, nunquam exitura intrabat.

[In olden times the kings of that nation had built two monasteries in the place, one for men, the other for women, both surrounded by strong and lofty walls and provided with all the necessities that prudence could devise. From the beginning of the foundation

the rule firmly laid down for both was that no entrance should be allowed to a person of the other sex. No woman was permitted to go into the men's community, nor was any man allowed into the women's, except in the case of priests who had to celebrate Mass in their churches; even so, immediately after the function was ended the priest had to withdraw. Any woman who wished to renounce the world and enter the cloister did so on the understanding that she would never leave it (2).]

Rudolf describes life at the convent, characterized by strict claustration, asceticism, and discipline and cites examples of each of these virtues. Rudolf emphasizes the antiquity and nobility of the convent's traditions and cites the rule of St. Caesarius of Arles in his assertion that once a girl enters the convent, she must never leave its doors for any reason until her death. The abbess Tetta herself is established as a holy woman endowed with exceptional piety and blessed with the favor of God, and is thus unassailable in her administration of the community. Here, as Rudolf stretches the conventions of genre, he also stretches the historicity of his story. Wimbourne in the eighth century, like most Anglo-Saxon double monasteries of the period, was unlikely to enforce the type of strict gender separation that Rudolf describes. In addition, with his description of Tetta observing such strict enclosure that she conducts the monastery's business through a small window, as Stephanie Hollis has noted, "Rudolph is surely reconciling truth with didactic purposes by describing a practice that Tette adopted only toward the end of her life."¹⁹ Rudolf takes pains to represent the abbey of Wimbourne as exemplary, simultaneously providing an extended description of his ideal life of a holy woman. Thus, in the first five (generically anomalous) chapters of Leoba's vita, Rudolf provides a clear exemplum to be imitated by Saxon holy women. Tellingly, however, Leoba does not yet figure in this description.

With Wimbourne established as his standard for imitation, Rudolf next moves to define, in contrast, matter suitable primarily for admiration. When Rudolf finally turns to his narration of St. Leoba's life, he begins by recounting the dream experienced by Leoba's mother prior to the saint's conception. This dream is also characteristic of the

hagiographic genre: a parental dream predicting the future sanctity of an as-yet-unborn child is a commonplace of medieval hagiographies.²⁰ Rudolf tells us that Leoba was born of noble and religious English parents named Dynno and Aebba, who, due to long infertility, had given up hope of having a child. At this point Aebba experiences a dream which informs her both that she will finally conceive a child and that this child will be extraordinary:

Cum autem pertransissent dies plurimi, & eis jam senibus atque ætate provectis spes generandæ prolis abesset, mater ejus per somnium vidit, se quasi signum ecclesiæ, quod vulgo klockum vocant, in sinu suo habere, idque immissa manu tinniens extrahere. Expectata itaque, nutricem suam jam vetulam vocavit, & ei somnium, quod viderat, revelavit. Cui illa prophetico spiritu: Adhuc, inquit, ex utero tuo videbimus filiam, quam ut Domino jam nunc voveas oportet: & sicut Anna Samuel omnibus diebus suis in templo Dei servitutum obtulit, ita hanc ab infantia sacris literis eruditam, in sancta virginitate, quandiu vixerit, illi servire concedas.

[After many years had passed and the onset of old age had deprived them of all hope of offspring, her mother had a dream in which she saw herself bearing in her bosom a church bell, which on being drawn out with her hand rang merrily. When she woke up she called her old nurse to her and told her what she had dreamed. The nurse said to her: "We shall yet see a daughter from your womb and it is your duty to consecrate her straightway to God. And as Anna offered Samuel to serve God all the days of his life in the temple, so you must offer her, when she has been taught the Scripture from her infancy, to serve Him in holy virginity as long as she shall live"(6).]

Again following generic convention, Aebba awakens to seek help in interpreting her divinely inspired dream, in this case from an old wise-woman.²¹ The dream and its interpretation place Aebba within the biblical tradition of exceptional children born to long-childless mothers, such as the New Testament Saint Anne and Samuel's mother Anna, explicitly mentioned here. The old nurse's comparison of the as-yet-

unborn Leoba to Samuel foreshadows Leoba's career as a missionary, echoing Samuel's career as a travelling judge and prophet, and also lends credence to Leoba's own future divinely inspired dream since she, like Samuel, will be a prophet spoken to by God. The figuration of the future Saint Leoba as a churchbell, which loudly and publicly calls people to worship, also prefigures her future missionary work converting pagans to Christianity in Saxony. By thus foreshadowing Leoba's future travel, prophesy, and teaching through a divinely inspired dream, Rudolf simultaneously introduces and categorizes these activities as miraculous—and thus inimitable. Aebba is given explicit instructions as to what she is to do as a result of her oneirically gained knowledge: she is to give Leoba over to a convent at a young age, which is exactly what she does.

On a narrative level, Leoba's mother's dream serves a parallel function to all such parental dreams in medieval hagiography: Leoba's life story is announced at the opening of the narrative through a symbolic prenatal dream, which is interpreted for the reader through reference to the Bible. Aebba's dream exhibits all of the expected characteristics of a hagiographic parental dream, except for its somewhat unusual, although not unprecedented, placement in the sixth chapter of the text. As in the preface, however, Rudolf seems to use this conventional and expected aspect of a hagiographic text in order to prepare a space for later negotiations. Here and later, Rudolf uses the hagiographic convention of the divinely inspired dream and the theology of prophesy to mitigate the potential conflict between historical fact and the institutional orthodoxy of his time by figuring Leoba's less conventional activities as admirable but not imitable. He prepares his audience to accept this compromise by here offering a canonical hagiographic dream with clear and concrete theological meaning.

After recounting this dream episode, Rudolf continues his conventional hagiographic narrative by describing the sanctity and nobility of Leoba's parents, the circumstances of her birth, and her early education. These early portions of Leoba's life pose little challenge to Rudolf's project as the known facts of Leoba's life align easily with hagiographic convention, institutional norms, accepted theology, and Rudolf's personal convictions. The young Leoba enters Wimbourne to be raised as a nun by Tetta. In the convent, Leoba distinguishes herself in all of the

virtues which Rudolf expounded in the opening chapters of the *vita*: Leoba is humble, obedient, assiduous at her studies, and ascetically inclined. She is recognized by all around her as an exemplary nun, the best of what Wimbourne has to offer:

sed præcepta Domini custodiens, memoriam eorum in executione operum semper habere consuevit. Sicque vitam suam instituens, ab omnibus prioribus puro diligebatur affectu, & ab omnibus discens, omnibusque obediens, proprias singularum gratias imitando captabat. Hujus continentiam, illius jucunditatem sectabatur: istius lenitatem, illius patientiam, alterius autem mansuetudinem mirabatur. Hanc vigilantem, illam vero legentem studuit æmulari. Charitati præcipue operam dabat, sine qua reliquas virtutes nihil esse sciebat.

[She took great care not to forget what she had heard or read, observing the commandments of the Lord and putting into practice what she remembered of them. In this way she so arranged her conduct that she was loved by all the sisters. She learned from all and obeyed them all, and by imitating the good qualities of each one she modeled herself on the continence of one, the cheerfulness of another, copying here a sister's mildness, there a sister's patience. One she tried to equal in attention to prayer, another in devotion to reading. Above all, she was intent on practicing charity, without which, as she knew, all other virtues are void (7).]

For a moment, here in the middle of the text, Leoba embodies Rudolf's ideal of feminine holiness as she imitates the virtues Rudolf has praised in his initial description of the convent. This portion of the *vita* makes later negotiations possible: Leoba has been shown to be exemplary and worthy according to Rudolf's value system, and all of the relevant constraints on Rudolf have been relatively easily fulfilled for a portion of the text. This gives Rudolf a basis from which to broker a compromise on the remaining, more controversial portion of Leoba's life.

Leoba, of course, did not become famous and end up buried at Fulda because she was a dutiful nun at Wimbourne. Chapters eight through eleven of the *vita* thus represent an important, and subtly negotiated,

turning point in Rudolf's account of Leoba's life story as Leoba transforms from a cloistered English nun into a publicly active and visible Saxon missionary. Rudolf carefully constructs and circumscribes his account of Leoba's departure from Wimbourne as he delicately stretches aspects of hagiographic convention, historical fact, institutional hierarchies, and accepted theology in order to produce a narrative in which Leoba is correct, saintly, and thoroughly exceptional. In the course of this negotiation towards a cohesive and acceptable narrative, Rudolf stretches hagiographic convention through the inclusion of a second divinely inspired dream and a tangent on St. Boniface; he stretches historical fact by downplaying the importance of Boniface and Leoba's kinship; he displaces expected ecclesiastical hierarchies in order to avoid conflict between Leoba and Tetta; and he subtly redefines the role of divine agency in Leoba's saintly actions. By exploiting the interpretive space between the categories of *imitatio* and *admiratio*, Rudolf categorizes Leoba's actions as either attributable to her own agency, and thus imitable, or attributable to divine agency, and thus suitable only for admiration. Rudolf avoids any implication that other women should imitate Leoba's public actions during her missionary career. The effect of these compromises is to portray the missionary Leoba as a woman to be admired and venerated, but only selectively imitated.

Rudolf begins his account of the major turning point in Leoba's life by recounting a divinely inspired dream experienced by Leoba at Wimbourne in which her future as a missionary preacher is revealed to her:

Cum his & aliis hujusmodi virtutum studiis per singulos dies animum ad cælestia roboraret, quadam nocte per somnium vidit quasi purpureum filum de ore suo descendere. Quod apprehensum manu cum extrahere conaretur, prolixius cœpit extendi, & velut ex interioribus viscerum procederet, paulatim crescebat in malius, & augmenta sui capiebat. Cum autem exuberante materia, colligendo manum impleret, & filum nihilominus ex ore dependeret, globum ex eo rotundo schemate volvendo formavit. In cujus confectione cum nimis laboriose desudaret, præ angustia somno soluta est, cœpitque intra se tacite cogitare, cupiens somnii cognoscere discretionem. Intellexit enim sibi non sine causa visionem apparuisse, sed aliquid ei latentis inesse mysterii.

[When she had succeeded in fixing her attention on heavenly things by these and other practices in the pursuit of virtue she had a dream in which one night she saw a purple thread issuing from her mouth. It seemed to her that when she took hold of it with her hand and tried to draw it out there was no end to it; and as if it were coming from her very bowels, it extended little by little until it was of enormous length. When her hand was full of thread and it still issued from her mouth she rolled it round and round and made a ball of it. The labor of doing this was so tiresome that eventually, through sheer fatigue, she woke from her sleep and began to wonder what the meaning of the dream might be. She understood quite clearly that there was some mystery hidden in it (8).]

Rudolf begins this passage by making an explicit transition from his description of Leoba's unproblematic life at Wimbourne, explaining that Leoba now experiences her divinely inspired dream because of her previous ideal behavior as a reward for her merit. Rudolf is thus specifically employing a theology of sanctity in the story of Leoba's life: her life at Wimbourne should be understood in terms of personal merit, while her dream and subsequent missionary work should be understood in terms of divine grace. The dream signals the upcoming change in Leoba's life by predicting her future work as a missionary. This transition from exemplary nun to missionary must be carefully recounted by Rudolf as the unavoidable historical fact of Leoba's leaving Wimbourne and traveling to Saxony poses a direct threat to ninth century institutional norms and his own convictions.²² This dream represents the first step in Rudolf's negotiation, as the form of this dream is unusual according to hagiographic convention on two counts: it repeats, using different images, the prophetic dream experienced by Leoba's mother earlier in the story, and Leoba herself does not understand it.

Divinely revelatory dreams are a familiar trope of early medieval hagiography, and on a first reading it may not seem striking that both Leoba and her mother experience them in this text. Rudolf is clearly familiar with the conventions of the genre in which he writes, and he is using them to his advantage. Leoba's dream, rather, is unusual for the genre in two details. First, it is common for *vitae* of this period to

include either parental dreams, or saintly dreams, but it is unusual for a single text to include both. Parental prophetic dreams ordinarily occur in hagiographic texts which narratively emphasize the revelation of an already established sanctity. The parental dream at the beginning of the text functions, as is does in the *Vita Leobae*, to announce in the opening chapters of the text the future course of the saint's life; the remainder of the story, then, is propelled by the gradual discovery of this sanctity by doubting people in the world. Saints in vitae that contain parental dreams are ordinarily depicted as always already holy from the moment of (or, in fact, prior to) birth; their entire lives, from childhood, are described as manifestations of sanctity. However, dreams experienced by a saint him- or herself generally occur in hagiographies which narratively emphasize the evolving interiority of an individual saint and mark an important turning point in the saint's life. Hagiographic narratives that contain saints' own dreams experienced in the prime of life (rather than foreshadowing upcoming death) ordinarily emphasize the personal agency of the saint in a moment of conversion, either a conversion to Christianity, like that of St. Martin, or a conversion from ordinary Christian to saint, like that of St. Radegund or St. Serenicus.²³

By including both a parental dream by Aebbe and a dream experienced by Leoba herself in the prime of life, Rudolf makes the unusual assertion that it is the earlier, more conventional aspects of Leoba's life that constitute her exemplary sanctity, in spite of her later conversion to a more active life. The parental dream establishes Leoba's early life at Wimbourne as already saintly; this is what ninth-century Saxon women should imitate. Leoba's own dream in book eight signals a moment of conversion, but a conversion from imitable saint to admirable saint. Rudolf thus exploits generic convention, while stretching it, in order to simultaneously assert Leoba's sanctity and remove her missionary activities from possible imitation.

The second way in which Leoba's dream is surprising, both generically and theologically, is that she does not herself understand it without assistance. This both undermines the generic implications of the saint's agency in hagiographies that contain saints' dreams and flouts the standard medieval theology of sanctity and dreams. According to both St. Augustine and Gregory the Great, saints are characterized by

the ability to consistently and correctly interpret their own dreams, a position habitually borne out in hagiography of this period.²⁴ Rudolf, however, makes Leoba an exception. Upon awakening from her dream, she is aware that it is significant, but does not understand its meaning. Out of humility, Leoba asks a fellow nun to go to an aged woman in the convent, renowned for her gift of prophecy, and to present the dream to the old woman as her own. The wise old nun is not fooled and immediately recognizes the dream as Leoba's, but then goes on to explain its meaning:

Illi, inquit, hæc ostensa sunt, cui merito sanctitatis & sapientiæ talia congruunt: quoniam multis profutura est tam verbo prædicationis, quam bonæ operationis exemplo. Filum enim, quod per os ejus ex visceribus prodiit, doctrina sapientiæ est, vocis ministerio ex illius corde procedens. Quod autem manum implevit, hoc significat, quia omnia, quæ ore docuerit, operibus exæquabit. Porro globus, qui volvendo conficitur, & rotunditate sui volubilis est, mysterium exprimit verbi divini, quod per os actusque prædicantium volvitur, & nunc per activam vitam in imis versatur, nunc per contemplativam in sublimia erigitur: nunc se per compassionem proximi humiliat, nunc per dilectionem Dei exultat. His quidem indiciis Deus Magistræ tuam verbo & exemplo multis profuturam ostendit: effectus autem procul ab hoc loco in aliis nationibus erit, quo eam proficisci oportet. Hanc igitur interpretationem somnii veram fuisse, rerum probavit eventus.

[“These things,” she went on, “were revealed to the person whose holiness and wisdom make her a worthy recipient, because by her teaching and good example she will confer benefits on many people. The thread that came from her bowels and issued from her mouth signifies, the wise counsels that she will speak from the heart. The fact that it filled her hand means that she will carry out in her actions whatever she expresses in her words. Furthermore, the ball which she made by rolling it round and round signifies the mystery of the divine teaching, which is set in motion by the words and deeds of those who give instruction and which turns earthward through active works and heavenward through contemplation, at

one time swinging downward through compassion for one's neighbor, again swinging upward through the love of God. By these signs God shows that your mistress will profit many by her words and example, and the effect of them will be felt in other lands afar off whither she will go." That this interpretation of the dream was true later events were to prove (8).]

The old nun begins her interpretation by reiterating that this dream is a reward for Leoba's extraordinary merit, as evidenced through her behavior thus far within the walls of the convent. Rudolf thus posits this dream as a dividing line between merit and grace. Leoba is portrayed as a woman of both words and action who will do good both through speech and through her works in the world. These two complementary aspects of Leoba's vocation are emphasized repeatedly by the old nun: her life will be active, as opposed to purely contemplative. Many, presumably more than her fellow sisters within the convent walls, will benefit from her words and actions. She is portrayed as a possessor of the divine mystery in the form of the ball of thread. Even though the thread comes out of her body, she did not produce it herself through expected bodily processes; it is a miraculous object which unexpectedly and unnaturally, yet concretely, comes out of her. The divine warrant symbolized by the thread is similarly not of her own making, but rather a gift from God which will inform and sustain all that she does and says.

Both the imagery of this dream and Leoba's incomprehension of it indicate that the future course of Leoba's life is a divine reward for her devotion, not an expression of her will. Like the thread in her dream, her career as a preacher and missionary is not natural, but supernatural. She will teach, which involves speaking publicly; she will be active, in contrast to her previous contemplative life; and she will interact with "many," in faraway places, traveling away from her convent.²⁵ All of these actions would seem to contradict directly the model of feminine sanctity which Rudolf carefully constructed in the opening chapters of this text. Rudolf mitigates this conflict by displacing Leoba from the dream's interpretation. The aged nun understands what the dream is saying while the abbess Tetta and St. Boniface will decide that Leoba will fulfill the dream's prophecies. Rudolf thus subtly alters the context of Leoba's

dream in order to remove Leoba's own agency from the initiation of her missionary activities. She leaves because she follows God's orders and those of her superiors. Rudolf makes Leoba's departure from Wimbourne a miracle to be admired rather than a choice to be imitated.

Rudolf departs from hagiographic convention again in the following chapter as he embarks upon a tangent describing St. Boniface's career in Saxony. Again, this stretching of generic convention allows Rudolf to diffuse a potential conflict in institutional and ecclesiastical hierarchy by establishing Boniface's status and authority and then having him, rather than Leoba, approach Tetta about Leoba's leaving the monastery. According to Rudolf, around the same time that Leoba experiences her dream, St. Boniface writes to Tetta asking her to send Leoba to him, since "quam fama sanctitatis & doctrina virtutum tunc per longinqua terrarum spatia divulgata, & laude celebri multorum ora repleverat" (Leoba's reputation for learning and holiness had spread far and wide and her praise was on everyone's lips) (10). Here Rudolf, in addition, stretches the constraints of historical fact by attributing Boniface's request for Leoba to her supposedly widespread reputation, rather than to the fact that the two were related and had been corresponding independently.²⁶ In fact, Leoba herself had initiated the correspondence with her cousin Boniface. This strategic omission allows Rudolf to portray Leoba's departure from Wimbourne without rupturing the constraints of ecclesiastical hierarchy and by merely stretching, but not breaking, the confines of monastic rule, as Leoba chooses obedience over claustration. Leoba follows the orders of the older nun while Tetta follows the orders of the bishop, and thus both remain virtuous according to Rudolf's convictions. This compromise is made explicit as Rudolf explains Tetta's feelings about Leoba's departure: "Ejus itaque abscessum mater congregationis molestissime quidem ferebat, sed tamen quia divinæ dispensationi resistere non potuit, beato eam viro, sicut rogaverat, cum honore direxit" (The abbess Tetta was exceedingly displeased at her [Leoba's] departure, but because she could not gainsay the dispositions of divine providence she agreed to this request [from Boniface] and sent Leoba to the blessed man) (10). Rudolf explains this breach of usual institutional practices by appealing to both Church hierarchy and divine will, asserting God's agency in the events of the narrative.

Rudolf's account of Leoba's departure to Saxony thus stretches several of the hagiographer's constraints in order to compose a unified narrative of Leoba's sanctity. Literary conventions of the hagiographic genre are expanded in two ways: first, with the account of Leoba's dream, and second, with the narrative tangent regarding Boniface's career. Rudolf subtly negotiates the accepted mechanisms of ecclesiastical hierarchy. He never shows Leoba expressing a desire to leave the convent, but instead demonstrates her humility and obedience. Historical fact is compromised when Rudolf downplays Boniface and Leoba's familial relationship and omits their independent correspondence, instead claiming that Boniface is motivated only by Leoba's reputation when he writes to Tetta. From a theological standpoint, Rudolf exploits the interplay of merit and grace in sanctity by positing Leoba's departure for Saxony as a miracle enacted by God through Leoba as a manifestation of her sanctity and a result of her exemplary behavior as a nun. Rudolf thus places the entirety of Leoba's missionary activities in the same category as her miracles—acts wrought by God through her—and as a result excludes these actions from possible imitation by other women. Through all of this, Rudolf manages to construct a story of Leoba's life in which she is beyond reproach and yet largely beyond imitation. In order to write a coherent narrative of Leoba's life which accommodates all of his given constraints, Rudolf sacrifices the exemplarity of Leoba's actions; as Hollis puts it, Leoba's "virtues, not her actions, are offered as a model for imitation."²⁷

Rudolf's description of Leoba during her lengthy career in Saxony reveals an unquestionably intelligent, active, creative, and pious woman. Rudolf tells us that, as abbess of Bishofsheim, "*Erat adspectu angelica, sermone jucunda, ingenio clara, consilio magna, fide Catholica, spe patientissima, charitate diffusa*" (in appearance she was angelic, in word pleasant, clear in mind, great in prudence, Catholic in faith, most patient in hope, universal in her charity) (11). Rudolf particularly praises Leoba's learning and intellect, emphasizing her knowledge of patristics and ecclesiastical law. She is a close friend of Boniface; she advises Charlemagne; and she is clearly an important and trusted authority figure in the greater Bishofsheim community as both nuns and townspeople turn to her repeatedly in times of need. By Rudolf's description, it is clear that Leoba is a powerful and praiseworthy woman. However, in his

description of the means by which Leoba came to occupy this position, he also makes clear that she is extraordinary.

Thus, Rudolf negotiates the composition of a laudatory *vita* of a woman who engages in activities he does not ordinarily approve of. By looking at the fissures in the text where this strain becomes evident, and by understanding the compromise Rudolf brokers in this text, we can also excavate the terms of that compromise and the ways in which ideals have been cut and stretched in order to form a coherent narrative. Rudolf has given up his role of disapproving traditionalist in the face of Leoba's career; at the same time, he has severely limited Leoba's status as *exemplum*. This exemplary function is one of the things I would like to recover in this excavation, and it is overlooked if we consider this text merely in terms of conflict and not of compromise. If we see Rudolf as patriarchal oppressor and Leoba as extraordinary woman, we buy into the compromise that Rudolf has so carefully constructed by agreeing with him that Leoba is exceptional and largely inimitable. But if we look more closely, give up our archetypes in favor of pragmatic analysis, we can instead see a more complex and detailed picture of a woman who was smart, hard-working, and practical; a woman who learned how to negotiate the complicated interplay of personal prejudices and ecclesiastical institutions in order to accomplish much; a woman who doubtlessly was, whether Rudolf liked it or not, a model and mentor for women in her own time and after.²⁸ By seeing beyond the apparent conflict, and into the details of the compromises that characterize Leoba's Life and life, we can recuperate her as an *exemplum* of the ways in which early medieval women negotiated and re-negotiated the constraints placed upon them in order to define their own relationships to divinity and spaces in the world.

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 END NOTES

1. As Julia M. H. Smith explains, Carolingian hagiographies of female saints are exceedingly rare and concentrated in areas of relatively recent conversion, such as Saxony, and/or the immediate geographical vicinity of the Carolingian court. Rudolf's *Vita Leobae* counts among these: Julia M. H. Smith, "The Problem of Female Sanctity in Carolingian Europe c. 780–920," *Past and Present* 146 (1995): 3–37; 8.

2. As the *Vita Leobae* recounts, Boniface himself requested that Leoba be buried in the same tomb as he “quatenus pariter diem resurrectionis expectarent, qui pari voto ac studio in vita sua Christo servierant” (so that they who had served God during their lifetime with equal sincerity and zeal should await together the day of resurrection) (ch. 17). When the time came, however, Rudolf tells us that the monks “metuebant sanctum sepulcrum beati martyris aperire” (were afraid to open the tomb of the blessed martyr [Boniface]) and instead buried Leoba within the same church, but in a different tomb and location (ch. 21). *Vita Leobae: Acta Sanctorum* Sept. VII, p. 760. All English translations of the text are taken from Thomas F. X. Noble and Thomas Head, eds., *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints’ Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995). The *Vita Leobae*, translated by C. H. Talbot, is on pages 255–77. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically by chapter number.

3. Hrabanus Maurus was famously one of Louis the Pious’s primary supporters in the Benedictine reforms of the early ninth century, which, among other things, much more strictly constrained the roles of religious women within the Carolingian Empire.

4. Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500–1100* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 53.

5. Noble and Head, eds., *Soldiers of Christ*, 256.

6. Leoba has figured in many historical accounts of early medieval women including Lisa M. Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe, 400–1100*, Cambridge Medieval Textbooks (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Susanmarie Harrington, “Women, Literacy, and Intellectual Culture in Anglo-Saxon England” (PhD diss, University of Michigan, 1990); Patricia Ranft, *Women and the Religious Life in Premodern Europe* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998); Idem, *Women in Western Intellectual Culture, 600–1100* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*; Suzanne Fonay Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister, 500 to 900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981). Marie Anne Mayeski extensively considers the theological implications of Rudolf’s account of Leoba in Marie Anne Mayeski, *Women at the Table: Three Medieval Theologians* (Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 2004). The most thorough treatment of Leoba’s vita undertaken from a literary perspective is Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1992), 271–300.

7. Wogan-Browne writes: “. . . there is often, even in stereotypical representation of women, the potential of slippage between particular hagiographic texts

and their readers' responses to them. Some women, most famously Christina of Markyate, seem to have used hagiography for their own purposes, and in (especially) the genre's sophisticated examples, meaning is in any case complex and to a significant degree negotiable between reader and text, rather than automatically fixed by the text." Schulenburg cites Wogan-Browne, and elaborates: "And while over the centuries the vitae served as a vehicle by which the Church attempted to mold or control women, the Lives also allowed for alternative readings." Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, "Clerc U Lai, Muine U Dame': Women and Anglo-Norman Hagiography in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries," in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500*, ed. Carol M. Meale, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 61-85, 64. Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, 56.

8. This binary model of reading has notably been contradicted by Marie Anne Mayeski, first in Marie Anne Mayeski, "New Voices in the Tradition: Medieval Hagiography Revisited," *Theological Studies* 63, no. 4 (2002): 690-710. This argument is later expanded in Mayeski, *Women at the Table*. Mayeski uses Rudolf's *Vita Leobae* as a source for understanding Rudolf's theology of evangelism. She demonstrates how Rudolf uses Leoba's vita as a means to assert theological continuity from Boniface's eighth-century mission to Hrabanus Maurus's ninth-century evangelical campaign, thus situating Hrabanus Maurus as Boniface's legitimate successor while simultaneously promulgating an ecclesiology based upon Boniface's mission church. While her theological reading of the text is instructive regarding heretofore often overlooked aspects of Boniface's mission and Leoba's life, Mayeski's analysis avoids confrontation with some of the more unconventional aspects of Rudolf's text (as distinct from Leoba's historical life), which I will treat in detail later in this article.

9. Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*.

10. John Wayland Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators, Gender, Theory, and Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

11. Patrick J. Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 23.

12. Kathleen M. Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn, *Writing Faith: Text, Sign & History in the Miracles of Sainte Foy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 20.

13. I take the concept of partnership between male hagiographer and female saint from John Wayland Coakley's work on later medieval saintly women and their male collaborators. While the situations which Coakley discusses differ significantly from that of Rudolf and Leoba, materially as well as in time

period and religious culture, I find the concept of institutionally authorized male hagiographers collaborating in positioning the sanctity of potentially disruptive female visionaries useful in this earlier period. Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power*.

14. Rudolf specifies that his hagiography is based upon the notes made by a priest and monk at Fulda named Mago, who interviewed several elderly nuns at Bischofsheim who remembered Leoba from their youths. Mago left his notes in disorder upon his death in 831; Rudolf worked through them and supplemented the information therein with further interviews while composing the *Vita Leobae*.

15. On the manuscript tradition, and specifically Rudolf's dedication to Hathumoda, see Frederick S. Paxton, *Anchoress and Abbess in Ninth-Century Saxony: The Lives of Liutbirga of Wendhausen and Hathumoda of Gandersheim* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 43.

16. *Vita Leobae*, "Epistola Dedicatoria."

17. The abbey of Gandersheim, founded in 852, was a community of canonesses, not nuns; thus, the mostly royal women who lived in religious community there were not under vows, and as such could own private property, leave the abbey (and the religious life) voluntarily, often maintained close contacts with their families, and generally were more engaged with secular society than was allowed of nuns. However, in the mid-ninth century, non-monastic communities of religious women were under considerable institutional pressure to conform to the uniform expectations of nuns established by the Benedictine reforms, including strict claustration. I would argue that Rudolf's sending this vita to Hathumoda can be understood as an example of such pressure. See Donald Hochstetler, *A Conflict of Traditions: Women in Religion in the Early Middle Ages, 500–840* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1992), 63–64.

18. As Julia M. H. Smith has noted, while this deferral of the narrative of Leoba's birth is unusual for hagiography generally, it is relatively commonplace in the few extant Carolingian hagiographies of near-contemporary female saints. Such deferrals often emphasize family genealogy to emphasize the domestic context of female saints. "Several *vitae* open with such a strong focus on family and kin (biological, adoptive or spiritual) that the subject of the *vita* is largely displaced from the forefront of her own life." Smith, "The Problem of Female Sanctity," 25–26.

19. Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 275.

20. An extensive catalogue of the trope of the maternal prophetic dream in ancient and medieval literature—including, but not limited to, early medieval hagiography—can be found in F. Lanzoni, "Il Sogno Presago Della Madre

Incinta Nella Letteratura Medievale E Antica,” *Analecta Bollandiana* 45 (1927): 225. The template for prophetic parental dreams in the Christian tradition is of course Joseph’s dream of an angel informing him of Jesus’ upcoming birth in Matthew 1:18–21.

21. For further explanation of the hagiographic generic conventions surrounding prophetic dreams, see Margaret Wickins Lynch, “Stories, Saints, and Dreams: The Literary Uses of Dreams in Early Medieval Hagiography” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2004).

22. Rudolf’s difficulty here is a symptom of the monastic reforms undertaken between Leoba’s death and Rudolf’s composition of her vita. Conventional accounts of the Benedictine reforms emphasize the ways in which, around the turn of the ninth century, religious women were increasingly excluded from positions of authority and public action as strict claustration became increasingly enforced: see Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*. More recent work on analogous reforms in England, however, has suggested more subtlety to the understanding of shifting women’s roles in this period; see, for instance, Patricia Halpin, “Women Religious in Late Anglo-Saxon England,” *The Haskins Society Journal* 6 (1994): 97–110; Pauline Stafford, “Queens, Nunneries, and Reforming Churchmen: Gender, Religious Status, and Reform in 10th and 11th Century England,” *Past and Present*, no. 163 (1999): 3–35; Barbara Yorke, “Sisters under the Skin? Anglo-Saxon Nuns and Nunneries in Southern England,” *Reading Medieval Studies* 15 (1989): 95–117. While studies of continental reforms are only beginning to profit from similar subtlety, it is nonetheless clear that institutional expectations and rhetoric surrounding women’s monasticism was significantly different at the time of Rudolf’s writing than it was during Leoba’s lifetime.

23. Lynch, “Stories, Saints, and Dreams.” Of the vitae of forty-three saints examined in this dissertation, only two (those of Sts. Leoba and Samson of Dol) contain both a birth dream and a “conversion” dream. Interestingly, this categorization of hagiographies as possessing static or dynamic narrative structures bears resemblance to Smith’s hypothesis about the characteristic differences between Carolingian hagiographies of male and female saints. She claims that, in contrast to dynamic narratives of male saints, often missionaries or bishops, who were intimately involved in secular affairs and thus demonstrated lives lived in chronological time, for female saints, in general, “[the portrait offered] is synchronic, not sequential, static, not narrational.” Smith, “The Problem of Female Sanctity,” 22.

24. Augustine, *De Genesi ad Litteram* 12; Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job* VIII.

25. Both Stephanie Hollis and Marie Anne Mayeski discuss the range of

public missionary activities almost certainly performed by the historical Leoba. Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*; Mayeski, *Women at the Table*.

26. As Noble and Head observe in a footnote to their edition of the text, it would have been quite surprising if Leoba's reputation had independently reached as far as Saxony when she was still relatively young, and it is rather likely that Boniface's request was motivated by kinship. Noble and Head, eds., *Soldiers of Christ*, 265. The relevant extant letters between Leoba and Boniface are available in English translation in Ephraim Emerton, ed., *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, Records of Civilization, Sources and Studies (New York: Norton, 1976).

27. Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 274.

28. Patricia Ranft points out that "Leoba led a group of Anglo Saxon women" to Saxony in response to Boniface's request for volunteers from Wimbourne and Minster-in-Thamet. Ranft cites several women who, like Leoba, ran schools and led monasteries as part of the mission. See Ranft, *Women and the Religious Life in Premodern Europe*, 28. More generally, many scholars have noted the relative freedom and authority allowed to religious women in the period immediately preceding the Benedictine reforms. For example, see Gary Macy, "The Ordination of Women in the Early Middle Ages," *Theological Studies* 61, no. 3 (2000): 481-507. Hochstetler, *A Conflict of Traditions*.