

THE POWER OF THE KEYS:  
A PARALLEL TO THE LINE DRAWINGS IN BL MS STOWE 944

The line drawings on fol. 7r of BL ms Stowe 944, the New Minster *Liber Vitae*, have traditionally been taken for a representation of the Last Judgement. The central register of the illumination shows St. Peter striking the devil with his key and trying to release from his clutches a soul whose fate seems to be at stake, whereas the top and bottom sections depict the celestial city and the mouth of hell respectively [Fig.1]. It is perhaps this simultaneous depiction of heaven and hell that has prompted the association with a Last Judgement context. In a recent study, however, David F. Johnson has noted significant differences with traditional and contemporary representations of this theme and, analyzing iconographic details in the light of Old English homiletic literature, has concluded that the scene is rather a vision of individual judgement at the moment of death and represents the efficacy of intercessory prayer.<sup>1</sup> This re-interpretation can be further refined through a comparison with the 12th century Latin miracle of the monk of St. Peter's at Cologne, which constitutes a very close parallel to the central register of the Stowe drawing. Both the story and the illumination are indeed concerned with intercession and illustrate the same doctrinal point: the power of the keys, that is, the power of absolution granted by Christ to Peter and the Church. The joint analysis of text and image can also be extended to explore a broader field, since the history of the transmission of the miracle story and the context

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<sup>1</sup>David F. Johnson, "St. Peter's Key and the Knell of Doom: An Old English Homiletic Motif," Twenty-sixth Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan U, May 9, 1991.

of drawings offer a good insight into the changing traditions of medieval devotion.

The story of the monk of St. Peter's at Cologne appears regularly as the 7th (occasionally 8th) in the most widespread of medieval collections of Marian miracles: that termed by Mussafia HM (after the initials of the first and last story in the series, Hildefonsus-Muriel).<sup>1</sup> This collection was put together at the beginning of the 11th century, almost certainly by Anselm the Younger.<sup>2</sup> The story tells of a monk in the monastery of St. Peter by the city of Cologne who led an evil life. As a proof of his iniquity we learn that, "contra proposito monachi," he even fathered a son whom, in some versions of the story, he also made a monk at the same monastery. Not surprisingly, the devils seize his soul at the moment of death. Peter sees this and begs God for the salvation of his monk, but God refuses:

Ignoras inquit quid propheta me inspirante dixerit, domine quis habitavit in tabernaculo tuo, aut quis requiescit in monte sancto tuo? Subitiens, qui ingreditur sine macula, & operatur iustitiam. Quomodo ergo hic potest fieri saluus, cum neque sine macula sit ingressus, neque ut debuit iusticiam operatus.<sup>3</sup>

'Do you not know what the prophet, under my inspiration, said: "Lord, who shall abide in thy tabernacle, and who shall dwell in thy holy hill? He that enters taintless, and works righteousness. How

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<sup>1</sup>Adolf Mussafia, *Studien zu den mitteralterlichen Marienlegenden*, Sitzungsberichte der K. Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Wien (1886-1893).

<sup>2</sup>R. W. Southern, "The English Origins of the 'Miracles of the Virgin,'" *Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies* 4 (1958): 176-216.

<sup>3</sup>Elise Dexter, ed., *Miracula Sanctae Virginis Mariae*. U of Wisconsin Studies in the Social Sciences and History 12 (1927): 21. Christ's words are taken from Psalm 15. The full text of the miracle is reproduced in the Appendix below. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from the miracle story are taken from this edition.

can this be saved, who would not enter taintless, and did not work righteousness as he ought to have done?’

Peter then asks the angels and saints to intercede with God for the monk and pray for the salvation of his soul, but God replies to all of them in the same way. Finally, Peter turns to the Holy Mother of God and the Holy Virgins, certain that their prayers will be heard. Christ, not willing to contravene the Prophet’s words, but at the same time unable to refuse his Mother and dear sisters’ request finds a compromise solution in letting the monk go back to life to repent and do penance, and thus be able to face judgement again with a better chance. Upon hearing this, Peter "magna clave quam tenebat diabolum terrens eum in fugam vertit, et animam fratris eripuit": he scares away the devil with the large key he had and snatches the soul of the brother. The soul is then led back to the body. The monk comes back to life and explains to all that he was saved from the power of the devil through the intercession of the Virgin Mary and St. Peter.

The description of Peter brandishing his key to frighten away the devil and regain the damned soul closely parallels the action depicted in the central register of the *Liber Vitae* illumination. It is indeed possible that there may have been a connection between both: the *Liber Vitae* was produced in the first half of the 11th century; William of Malmesbury, who retells this story in his *Miracula Sanctae Mariae Virginis*, places the miracle in the first half of the 9th, under the reign of Louis the Pious.<sup>1</sup> Without more conclusive evidence, however, it would be rash to conclude that this story is the direct source for the picture of Peter in the *Liber Vitae*, especially since William’s

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<sup>1</sup>For the dating of BL Stowe 944 see N. R. Ker, *A Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1957). William’s text is edited by Peter N. Carter in “William of Malmesbury’s Treatise on the Miracles of the Virgin,” diss., Oxford U, 1959. The story is no. 17 in this collection.

dating has been shown to be occasionally unreliable.<sup>1</sup> But since, as David Johnson pointed out, there is no known pictorial source for this drawing, we may at least assume that the artist had in mind a story similar to this one, a vision in which a soul is about to be condemned after death but is rescued through Peter's intercession. This focus on intercession is no doubt appropriate to the Stowe manuscript: the *Liber Vitae* contained a record of the members of the monastic community and confraternities for whom the monks would offer their prayers.

The comparison with the Latin miracle thus clears up one important point in the interpretation of the *Liber Vitae* drawing: it shows that the fate of the soul for which Peter and the devil seem to be contending is by no means undecided, since the fact that Peter shows his key is a proof that he has triumphed over the devil. The significance of Peter's keys is alluded to, though not really explained, in the earlier versions of the miracle. At the end of his tale, the narrator comments on the extraordinary character of his story and defends its veracity. If someone should think this miracle is incredible, he protests, they should consider how great the power of the Holy Mother of God is, over all the orders of saints, and abandon all doubt. And he adds: "Si uero obicit de clauē sancti petri qua terruit inimicum, meminerit quia incorporalia corporeis nisi per corporea narrari non possent"; if they object to Peter's having a key, they should remember that spiritual truths cannot be revealed to mortals except by material images.

Peter's key is obviously being used as a symbol for a spiritual truth, but the narrator does not elaborate on this. William of Malmesbury is more explicit on this point, although he still refers to the meaning of the key briefly:

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<sup>1</sup>See Peter N. Carter, "The Historical Context of William of Malmesbury's *Miracles of the Virgin Mary*," *The Writing of History in the Middle Ages: Essays Presented to R.W. Southern*, ed. R. H. C. Davis and J. M. Wallace-Hadrill (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1981), 127-65.

Idem de clave dicetur *que significativum potestatis Petro attribuitur* [emphasis added]. Nec enim nisi per corpoream similitudinem debuit potestas surrecturo monacho monstrari, nec ab alio aliter narrari, nec audientibus potuit aliter intellegi.

‘The same can be said as regards this key, *which represents Peter’s power*. Only in this graphic way could his power be revealed to the monk who was about to be resurrected; it is impossible to think of any other way of describing these things so that they can be understood by those who hear.’<sup>1</sup>

The association of the keys with Peter derives, obviously, from the words of Christ in the Gospel: "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: And whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mt 16, 19). This gift of the keys, and the power to bind and unbind conferred on Peter with it, has traditionally been interpreted in two ways: Peter, the prince of the apostles, is the celestial key-bearer; he is the lord of the gates of Heaven, and will open them to the souls of the righteous and close them against those who should justly be excluded. But more commonly, the gift of the keys has been related to the sacrament of penance, and understood as the power of absolution granted to Peter, or Peter and the Church. This second meaning of the keys seems to be the one operating in the miracle story. In the story, Peter unbinds in effect by assigning penance: by accepting this temporal penance, the monk is absolved from eternal punishment. Thus Peter functions in the hereafter as a priest would on earth. This relationship between Peter’s keys and the power of absolution is more clearly explained in the *Legenda Aurea*, which incorporates this miracle in the chapter dedicated to "St. Peter ad vincula." The chapter reviews four reasons

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<sup>1</sup>Carter ii, 424-25.

for the institution of this feast, the first being the commemoration of Peter's miraculous release from his bonds in prison and the last--illustrated by the story of the monk of Cologne--the celebration of the power to remit sins conferred on Peter by Christ, and represented by the keys:

Dominus enim a vinculis Petrum miraculose absolvit et eidem ligandi et absolvendi potestatem dedit, nos autem vinculis peccatorum obligati tenemur et absolvi indigemus. Ideo, igitur ipsum in sollemnitate, quae dicitur ad vincula, honoramus, ut, sicut ipse a vinculis absolvi promeruit et sicut absolvendi potestatem a domino accepit, sic ipse a peccatorum vinculis nos absolvat ... Quod autem per claves, quas accepit, interdum etiam damnandos absolvat, in quodam miraculo, quod legitur in libro miraculorum beatae Virginis, satis claret.

'Our Lord miraculously freed Peter of his chains and gave him the power of absolving from sin; we, on the other hand, are bound by the chains of sin, and have need of being absolved. And therefore we honour him in the feast which is called *ad vincula*, in order that as he merited to be set free of his bonds and to receive the power of absolving from the Lord, so also he may absolve us of our sins. And a certain miracle whereof we read in the book of the miracles of the Blessed Virgin shows that by the keys which he received, he does absolve even those who are about to be condemned.'<sup>1</sup>

Both the story and the drawing then seem to exemplify the same doctrinal issue: the power of the keys. But, as the earliest versions extant present it, there seems to be a central inconsistency in the miracle story. Ideally, the key

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<sup>1</sup>Latin text from Th. Groesse, ed., *Jacobi a Voragine. Legenda aurea* (Leipzig, 1850), 459-60; trans. by Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger, *The Golden Legend* (New York: Arno, 1969), 406.

Peter shows the devil represents his power to absolve. Yet, the narrative in the story does not precisely inspire confidence in Peter's power: he tries, but is not able to save the monk by himself, and has to request Mary's help.

This inconsistency may be explained by the fact that this story was not originally a miracle of the Virgin Mary, but of St. Peter. The transfer to Mary of a miracle first associated with a saint is by no means unprecedented. A clear example is the story of the two brothers at Rome (HM 10). An early version of this story appears in the *Dicta Anselmi*: Two brothers, Peter and Stephen, die. Stephen is sent to hell, since he was a judge and had made ill use of his office moved by greed; he had, for instance, deprived the churches of St. Lawrence and St. Agnes of some land. But, as his only good deed, he had always served Praeiectus martyr devoutly. This Saint hears of Stephen's plight, turns to St. Lawrence and St. Agnes and begs them to cease in their wrath. The three of them then intercede for him before Christ:

In illis ergo poenis dum esset, beato martyri Praeiecto ... quidam sanctorum dixerunt: "O Praiecte quid agis? Nonne quantum miser iste te dilexerit recordaris? ... Cur pro illo non oras?" Quibus ille, "Vos" ait, "videris quod sanctus Laurentius et beata virgo Agnes indignati sunt ei." "Nos," inquit "veniemus tecum. Eamus precari eos ut hanc sibi noxam remittant, ac deinde pro eius liberatione dominum Iesum nobiscum exorent." Laurentius itque et Agnes interpellati venerabili martyri Praeiecto culpam donaverunt eiusque amore dominum Iesum pro damnati ereptione adeuntes veniam obtinuerunt. Protinus ergo domini imperio nuntius ivit qui eundem Stephanum de lacu miseriae educeret, et pro eo qualiter Praeiectus martyr oraverit indicaret. Denuntiatum est illi etiam quod triginta dierum haberet spatium in corpore vivendi in quibus vitam pristinam emendaret.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Text cited by Southern, 214-15.

‘While he suffered these torments some saints said to Praeiectus: "Praeiectus, what are you doing? ... Don't you remember how much this wretched soul loved you? Won't you pray for him?" But he said: ‘You have seen that St. Lawrence and the blessed virgin Agnes are greatly offended by him.’ They said: ‘We will go with you. We will go beg them to forgive his offence and then to come with us and pray to God for his deliverance. Lawrence and Agnes, when Praeiectus martyr asked them, forgave Stephen, and for the love of Praeiectus went to the Lord Jesus and obtained pardon for the theft. Then the messenger of the Lord was dispatched at once, with the command that he should bring Stephen out of the pool of misery and explain to him that Praeiectus martyr had prayed for him. It was also announced to Stephen that he would have thirty days to live in his body, so that he could amend his earlier life.’

As it appears in the *Dicta*, therefore, this is not a miracle of the Virgin. Mary does not even figure in the story. But when the story is recast in the 11th-12th century collections of miracles, the Virgin appears together with Praeiectus, interceding and obtaining grace for Stephen's soul:

... Sanctus Praeiectus, primo accedens ad sanctum Laurentium et Sanctam Agnetem in quos ille deliquerat, precebatur ut ei veniam darent. Illi vero pro amore eius culpae illius pepercerunt citius. Deinde exoravit dominum pro eo, *cooperante sancta genitrice Dei Maria* [emphasis added], et mox obtinuit ut anima illius rediret ad corpus quatinus quod rapuerat redderet et peccatis suis paenitentiam ageret, vivens diebus triginta.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Southern 216.



‘ ... St. Praeiectus first turned to St. Lawrence and St. Agnes, against whom Stephen had sinned, and begged their pardon for him. They, for his love pardoned Stephen’s guilt immediately. They then prayed to the Lord for him and, with the help of the Holy Mother of God, were soon granted that the soul might return to the body, so that he would live for thirty days to return what he had wrongfully taken and do penance for his sins.’

In the case of the miracle of the monk of St. Peter’s, the scant evidence we have suggests that this story is also adapted from a miracle of a saint: as in the Stowe drawing, Peter would probably have occupied the central place in the original version. The setting for the story, a monastery of St. Peter, seems to hint in that direction. But the clearest indication that such an adaptation has taken place is the apparent clash between Peter and Mary’s roles in the narrative. The allusion to the keys as a symbol of Peter’s power to bind and unbind conflicts with his failure to resolve in favour of his monk, and does not cohere with the emphasis on Mary as universal protector and mediator.

This conflict between the image of the keys and the new role assigned to Mary was certainly perceived by those who recast the story. That is perhaps why they hint at the significance of the keys, but do not expand on the doctrine. The history of the transmission of the miracle, moreover, gives us further evidence that the story was in the process of being adapted from a Peter to a Mary miracle: in several later collections of Marian miracles, the inconsistency is solved by omitting the reference to Peter’s driving the devil away with his key. Thus, for instance, Gonzalo de Berceo in his *Milagros de Nuestra Señora* still has Peter rescue the monk’s soul, but there is no mention of the keys:

Quando udió Sant Peidro esti tan dulz mandado,  
vío que su negocio era bien recabdado;  
tornó a los diablos, concejo enconado:

la alma que levavan tolliógela sin grado.  
Diógela a dos ninnos de muy gran claridat,  
creaturas angélicas de muy gran sanctidat;  
Diógela en comienda de toda voluntat  
por tornarla al cuerpo con gran seguridat.<sup>1</sup>

‘When St. Peter heard this sweet command and knew that his petition had been well received, he turned angrily to the devils and took the soul they were carrying away. He gave it in charge to two bright youths, angelic creatures of great sanctity, so that they would return it to its body safely.’

Nigel of Canterbury in his *Miracles of the Virgin Mary* goes even further in his adaptation of the story. After the account of Christ’s sentence, commanding the soul to be led back to the body, the narration turns directly to the resurrection of the monk. Any reference to Peter or his keys is silenced:

Dixit; et in corpus anima redeunte reuixit  
dandus iam tumulo iamque tegendus humo.<sup>2</sup>

‘This he said; and as the soul entered the body, he who was going to be buried and covered with earth revived.’

In one case in this process of transmission, however, the story is brought back to its original Peter context. The *Legenda aurea*, even though it tells the story as a Mary miracle, includes it, as we have seen, in the chapter devoted to "St. Peter ad vincula." In this chapter, the story follows a full discussion of

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<sup>1</sup>Gonzalo de Berceo, *Milagros de Nuestra Señora*, ed. Michael Gerli (Madrid: Cátedra, 1988), vii.173-74.

<sup>2</sup>Nigel of Canterbury, *Miracles of the Virgin Mary, in Verse*, ed. Jan Ziolkowski (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1986), 1099-1100.

the symbolic meaning of the keys and Peter's power to remit sins. In this case, the narrator logically omits the final comment emphasizing Mary's power as mediator.

This change in the dedication of miracle stories is a consequence of a change in devotional practices. Before the 12th century most miracle stories were associated to the shrine of a saint, and had therefore a strong local emphasis as pieces of propaganda.<sup>1</sup> By the 11th and especially the 12th century, the increasing popularity of the miracles of the Virgin reflect a new kind of piety:

[In these stories, t]ime and place lose all significance, and we come under the sway of a universal power ... exercised with the appearance of caprice for the protection of all who love the person from whom these benefits flow. Like the rain, this protective power of the Virgin falls on the just and the unjust alike. ... The *Miracles of the Virgin* were not written to proclaim the glories, or to enhance the reputation of any church or corporate body: they appealed solely to individuals, and if they had a propaganda purpose, it was the encouragement of pious practices, which came in time to occupy a position at the very centre of medieval personal devotion.<sup>2</sup>

In both the *Liber Vitae* drawing and the miracle story, we have then a vision of post-mortem judgement that illustrates Peter's power to remit sins. In both cases, too, the context seems to reflect a change of emphasis from Peter's power of absolution as represented by his key--whose importance is well exemplified, for instance, in Bede's account of the synod of Whitby--to Mary's rising role as mediator par excellence, as the main channel, or "aque-

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<sup>1</sup>R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1953), 247.

<sup>2</sup>Southern 248.

duct" as St. Bernard would call her, of God's grace. In the New Minster drawing (dating from the early 11th century), Peter still retains the central place he would have occupied in the source of the Latin miracle story. But Winchester was already an important center of Marian cult, and the New Minster had been re-dedicated to Mary.<sup>1</sup> The *Liber Vitae* itself bears witness to the increasing importance of Mary as mediator: in the illumination on 6r [Fig.2], depicting Cnut's gift of a golden cross to the monastery, we see both Mary and Peter as the two figures to whom the monks represented below pray for intercession. The Latin miracle, as we know it from the earliest versions extant, seems to represent a later stage in this process. The central role which must originally have been Peter's has been finally transferred to Mary.

#### APPENDIX

In monasterio sancti Petri quod apud coloniam, erat quidam frater, cuius uita & mores nimis ab habitu monachili discrepabant. Nam leuiter se agens in pluribus actibus etiam filium contra proposito monachi habebat, et seculari se actu in multis tradiderat. Hic igitur aliquando cum quibusdam fratribus potionem pro corporis salute accipiens, irruente languore nimis afflictus, sine confessione uel Christi corporis sacra communionem repente defunctus est. Cuius anima ab antiquo mox hoste arrepta, ducebatur ad infernalium loca. Quod cernens sanctus petrus cuius erat monachus, accessit ad benignum sominum, & pro anima ipsius deprecabatur eum. Cui dominus: Ignoras inquit quid propheta me inspirante dixerit, domine quis habitabit in tabernaculo tuo, aut quis r. in m. sancto tuo? Subitiens, qui ingreditur sine macula, & operatur i. Quomodo ergo hic potest fieri saluus, cum neque sine macula sit ingressus, neque ut debuit iusticiam operatus.

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<sup>1</sup>Mary Clayton, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), 132.

Hec audiens sanctus petrus, iterum sanctos angelos et deinde singulos ordines sanctorum precatus est, ut orarent pro anima fratris. Quibus singulis se deprecantibus cum ea que supra retulimus respondet dominus, nouissime uenit ad sanctam dei genitricem sanctasque uirgines, sciens certissime earum exaudiri preces. Ob quam rem cum surrexerit sancta dei genitrix, precatura suum filium cum sanctis uirginibus, statim assurrexit eis Christus, dixitque sue sancte matri sanctisque uirginibus: Quid a me poscis dulcissima mater, cum meis carissimis sororibus? Cui sancta uirgo dum respondisset: quod pro anima fratris memorati postularet, Christum ait illi: Licet per prophetam dixeri neminem posse in meo tabernaculo habitare, nisi qui sine macula ingreditur, & iusticiam operatur, tamen quia tibi placet ut indulgentiam consequatur, concedo ut anima eius ad corpus reuertatur, ut acta de malis actibus penitentia, demum requie perfruatur. Hec ut sancta uirgo sancto petro innotuit, confestim sanctus petrus magna claue quam tenebat diabolum terrens eum in fugam vertit & animam fratris eripuit. Quam duobus spetiosis pueris commendauit, et et ipsi michilominus commendauerunt eam cuidam fratri, qui fuerat monachus prefati monasterii. Qui reducens eam, rogauit quasi pro mercede ut singulis diebus diceret pro eo psalmum, misereri mei deus, & persepe scopis mundaret sepulchrum eius. At frater ille de morte resurgens, que sibi contigerant, uel quod uiderat narrauit, et quomodo a diaboli potestate fuisset ereptus, suffragiis sancte dei genitricis, atque sancti petri apostoli. Sane si hoc quod narrauimus miraculum alicui uidetur incredibile, cogitet quantum possit sancta dei genitrix supra omnes ordines sanctorum apud filium suum celi et terre dominum, et deponet omne incredulitatis ambiguum. Si uero obicit de claue sancti petri qua terruit inimicum, meminere quia incorporalia corporeis nisi per corporea narrari non possunt.

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*The Power of the Keys: a Parallel to the Line Drawings in BL MS Stowe 944*

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Figure 1 fol. 7r of BL ms Stowe 944

*The Power of the Keys: a Parallel to the Line Drawings in BL MS Stowe 944*

Figure 2 fol. 6r of BL ms Stowe 944