

Community, Solitude, and Nature in Felix's Discernment of Sanctity

The 19th-century Danish theologian and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard is credited with the line, "To be a saint is to will the one thing." In *Vita Sancti Guthlaci* or The Life of Saint Guthlac, East Anglian monk Felix explores the various ways in which the "one thing" might manifest itself in the life of the prominent 8th-century anchorite. The hagiography illustrates Guthlac's noble upbringing, from being an even-tempered child to becoming a decorated warrior on the borders of Mercia. In the narrative, upon discovering that his fate as a pagan warrior would result in an untimely death, he made the choice to enter the monastery at Repton in Derbyshire to pursue the path of a cleric. He spent two years being educated on the prayers and routines, while also emulating the virtues of his fellow church members. Guthlac was compelled to embark on a solitary journey to the remote island of Crowland after reading about the lives of former monks. This endeavor would further his asceticism and bring him great acclaim beyond East Anglia. Throughout the saint's life, Guthlac's environment changed, but his sacred devotion and subsequent sanctity remained. Thus, Felix's Life of Guthlac presents a compelling exploration of the interplay between religious settings and sainthood, examining themes of community, isolation, and nature in his judgment of sanctity.

Through the early depiction of Saint Guthlac's transition from paganism to his role in the church, Felix argues that true holiness necessitates engagement with the Christian community. Even during his secular pursuits, Guthlac remained under the guidance of the Lord, according to Felix, as he would return a third of the "booty" he accrued through his pillages, "as if instructed by a divine counsel." This intrinsic spirituality displayed would serve as an early indication of his later affiliation. Yet, crucially, Felix did not portray the journey as one that Guthlac could

achieve on his own. At twenty-four, Guthlac “spruned his parents, [fatherland, and] comrades of his youth” to enter the monastery at Repton, replacing his former community with a clerical one and “[renouncing] the pomps of this world [to keep] his unwavering faith [in] Christ.”

Unfortunately, when he arrived, he faced social resistance due to his abstinence from alcohol. Felix wrote that he was “intensely hated by all the brethren who lived with him there.” This detail is interesting, particularly because abstaining from alcohol is often regarded as a holy act in Christianity, as lucid self-restraint from the sin of drunkenness. Additionally, acceptance is considered a fundamental principle of the religion, which raises questions about the reasoning of the monks. Felix was likely motivated by his ongoing idealization of Guthlac, as he went on to write that “when they had proved the sincerity of his life and the modesty and serenity of his mind, the hearts of them all were turned to an affectionate love of him.” Felix's editorializing of the situation emphasizes his perception of what constitutes a saintly man — someone who upholds Christian values regardless of how they are received. Felix, however, described a quick reversal of sentiment towards Guthlac as a representation of righteousness among the brethren. Therefore, the monastery came to appreciate and even admire his ways. In the following years, Guthlac was “cared for moreover by the best teachers and aided by the heavenly grace” in his education. He followed in the footsteps of his fellow monks, imitating their obedience, humility, patience, and sincerity — altogether illuminated him with “divine grace.”

In 2016, Lisa M. C. Weston, a researcher specializing in medieval literature and Old English at Fresno State University, published an article titled “Guthlac Betwixt and Between: Literacy, Cross-Temporal Affiliation, and an Anglo-Saxon Anchorite.” In it, Weston argued that Felix portrays Guthlac as the connective force that united the people in his life, as well as his

faith. She wrote, "...Guthlac's social bonds [model] varieties of friendship, especially monastic *amicitia* (friendship), among both blood and volitional kin sometimes separated in space (even the spaces of earth and heaven) but linked within one temporal moment, the span of Guthlac's life." The "amicitia" created by Guthlac was an achievement made possible by his entrance into the monastic community. While his previous successes as a warrior were entirely individual, Felix depicts Guthlac's spiritual quest as being inseparably tied to his Christian brethren. What he accomplished on his own, including his personal call to worship, was insufficient compared to the results achieved through his involvement with the church. He required the shared space to learn and grow as a man of God. Hence, after two years, when he was overcome with the need to embark on his religious journey in the desert, he obtained the elders' approval to commence his journey. Felix demonstrated how Guthlac adhered to the rules of his new community, without disregarding the monastery he worked to become a part of.

As Guthlac transitioned to a solitary mode of worship, Felix chose to depict his voluntary retreat and moderation as an exceptionally holy act of devotion, furthering his ongoing portrayal of what constitutes a saint. Guthlac left the church in search of "eternal bliss," and sought out the seclusion of Crowland — what is now part of the mainland Lincolnshire Fens in England. The land was desolate due to the "phantoms" and "unknown portents... of various shapes" that dwelled there. Felix, however, portrays Guthlac as undeterred in his anchoritic plan. He wrote that he was "determined with heavenly aid, to be a soldier of the true God" despite previous accounts of failed attempts to inhabit the land. This accentuated Guthlac's unwavering trust in divine providence, heightening his sacred status, according to Felix. He described Guthlac's rituals in great detail and repeatedly emphasized how he kept vigil, wore clothes made of animal

skins, and only scarcely ate after sunset during his fifteen years in the desert. Yet, Felix was cautious in portraying Guthlac's asceticism as noble rather than extreme. His decision to live in Crowland was one made solely with God in mind. Dr. John R. Black, a professor of medieval English literature at Moravian University, noted that this conservative portrayal differed from that of his early contemporaries. In Black's 2007 article titled "Tradition and Transformation in the Cult of St. Guthlac in Early Medieval England" in *The Heroic Age* journal, he wrote, "...Guthlac's eremitism is not as extreme as that of the early Desert Fathers; instead, Guthlac follows the more tempered, attractive, and palatable expression of eremitism." Felix used Guthlac to emphasize the sanctity of moderation. As such, Felix devoted a chapter of the narrative to personify the dangers of severe asceticism, writing about how the devil, "in false friendship," encouraged Guthlac to engage in excessive fasting. Nevertheless, Guthlac remained uncompromising in his faith and championed evil. As such, Felix commends Guthlac for his ability to recognize the needs of his mortal life, albeit temporary. Felix preferred to describe the "palpable" and "tempered" to encourage a long life of serving God, even through hardship.

Felix highlights Guthlac's interactions with the natural world during his life as a hermit as evidence of his profound sanctity. Despite the state of the cursed land, Guthlac embraced Crowland as a suitable home for isolated prayer. In doing so, he also welcomed the wildlife. As an example of this, Felix made frequent reference to the birds — *corvos* in Latin, 'ravens' in Old English, and 'jackdaws' today—which caused annoyance and stole various objects in the desert. Nonetheless, Felix depicted Guthlac as unaffected by the disturbances, as he trusted that the lost items would be returned through his faith in God. As the objects were returned as Guthlac expected both times, Felix provided commentary, stating that "the grace of [Guthlac's] excellent

charity abounded to all creatures, so that even the birds of the untamed wilderness and the wandering fishes of the muddy marshes would come flying or swimming swiftly to his call as if to a shepherd.” The power of his faith extended beyond his physical self and the “excellence” of his altruism ensured harmony with his environment. Guthlac was the exception in Felix's eyes, not only because he was the only man capable of conquering the inhospitable lands, but also because he found peace and acceptance within their ecosystem.

When the devil later tried to tempt Guthlac by taking the form of vicious animals, Guthlac quickly banished the “roaring” lion, “bellowing” bull, “scaly” serpent, “croaking” raven, and “lowing” ox with simple words, trusting in the Lord. The same holy principle applied to metaphysical creatures. Felix defended this, writing, “If a man faithfully and wholeheartedly serves the Maker of all created things, it is no wonder though all creation should minister to his commands and wishes.” Verena Klose, a professor of Medieval English Language and Literature at the University of Gottingen in Germany, also commented on this, stating that the “wild beasts are able to [recognize] a prudent servant of God.” In her 2019 article titled “Landscapes between Heaven and Hell in the Old English Guthlac Material,” Klose explores Felix's interpretation of divine providence in the desert. She wrote that Guthlac's harmonious relationship with wildlife was the “restoration of the natural order because the world was created in subjection to Adam's species. While the creation gladly serves any faithful servant of God, humanity as a whole has lost its supremacy due to its disobedience of the Creator.” Thus, Felix argues that Guthlac is one of the few who understands what is proposed as the ‘original’ hierarchy of the natural world—where animals were made to be controlled by humans. Due to Guthlac's devotion, can sustain the ‘intended’ authority over them. Klose points out that Felix's perception of Guthlac's spiritual

influence extends beyond individual creatures. Felix wrote that “even the very water and the air obeyed the true servant of the true God.” Guthlac's devotion had a tangible impact on the fabric of the natural world, exemplifying Felix's pinnacle of sanctity.

As Felix narrates Guthlac's life from beginning to end, certain patterns emerge in every setting, emphasizing Guthlac's unwavering commitment to a life of holiness. As a warrior, Guthlac learned skills that he later employed in the church, serving as the first parallel. He remained strong, loyal, and persistent, and hence Felix portrayed Guthlac as a soldier once again, but this time serving God and the religious community. Black wrote that the transition brought about a different *comitatus*, which is the Latin word used to describe the relationship between a king and a warrior. The new relationship tied him to the Repton brethren and God, and it would accompany him as he continued his spiritual journey to the deserts of Crowland. In the new environment, Felix once again recreated a familiar situation from Guthlac's past. Guthlac formed a new kind of community with the number of visitors he received through the teaching of moderate eremitism, as well as his prophecies and healing abilities. Weston wrote, "Although it may seem paradoxical in the life of a hermit, the creation and maintenance of community threads through this vita of a solitary Guthlac who is, in fact, rarely alone." The Christian religion valued communal involvement, and Felix also highlighted this in his narration of events. Weston even counted the apparitions, both good and evil, as members of this new 'community.' Felix expressed this re-creation as a means of establishing a reward for Guthlac's significant sacrifice. As such, Guthlac's new 'congregation' was expansive enough to accept not only humans but also the natural world. He found peace in what became a kind of relationship with the jackdaws. Consequently, Klose wrote that “he [turned] the birds as a replacement for the lack of a human

community in his exile." Despite this newfound religious space, Felix did not portray Guthlac as desiring to construct a new monastery in Crowland. Though it would have been a perfect representation of the recurring patterns in Guthlac's life, Black argued that it would have negated Felix's portrayal of Guthlac as a pure man of faith. Black wrote that Felix's Guthlac was "not [concerned] with the growth of a community or an institution, but with the growth of a life in the spirit." As a result, Felix successfully portrayed Guthlac as a perfect model of sanctity, as he overlaid Guthlac's role in religious communities, isolation, and nature, and introduced an element of multiplicity to Søren Kierkegaard's concept of "one thing" in sainthood.

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