

## MENTAL DISORDERS IN ANGLO-SAXON HAGIOGRAPHIES

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**Abstract.** This article examines the representation of mental disorders in Anglo-Saxon hagiographies, analyzing perceptions, symptoms, cultural contexts, and narrative purposes. Anglo-Saxon views on the mind and soul, influenced by both vernacular and classical traditions, shape understandings of madness. Old English terminology for madness reflects diverse cultural INFLUENCES, ranging from naturalistic-organic to supernatural etiologies. Analysis of the hagiographies show that there was a tendency to depict demon possession as madness, which could partly be attributed to the Anglo-Saxon way of perceiving the soul and mind, partly to the narrative purpose, and partly to the influential sources.

**Keywords:** madness, mental disorder, Anglo-Saxon, medicine, Old English, demon possession

What is madness? The answer is not straightforward, nor is it easy to define. The concept of madness and mental disorders is constantly changing through space and time: it is shaped by our social norms, by our understanding of how the mind works, by our understanding of what rationality is, to name but a few factors. It differs in today's medical discourse from colloquial conversations of everyday people, it was different 100 years ago, and even more so 1000 years ago; however, the common denominator is the irrational behaviour and the irrational way of thinking of the "madman". The aim of this article is to examine the topic of mental disorders in Anglo-Saxon hagiographies: what was considered mental disorder, what its symptoms were, what its cultural background was and what purpose it fulfilled in hagiographical literature. For this purpose there are a number of concepts that need to be expounded and defined: firstly, the Anglo-Saxon perception of the mind and soul, then the Anglo-Saxon concept of madness along with the influences that shaped the Anglo-Saxon view. Once the conceptual background and

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the definitions are established, I move on to analyze the hagiographies and then I discuss the conclusions. It has to be noted that the aim of this article is neither to search for signs that could be categorized as modern mental disorders, thereby imposing contemporary classifications on medieval circumstances, nor to provide retrospective diagnoses, but rather to search for phenomena what Anglo-Saxons themselves acknowledged as mental disorders. The difference between modern and medieval understanding of madness is so vast and so multi-layered that it is dubious whether forcing modern labels on medieval phenomena is fruitful at all and whether it enables us to understand the past more, or if it only offers us a deluding picture of the past. It also has to be mentioned that different periods in medical history saw different namings for madness-type phenomena: lunacy, mania, mental alienation, mental illness, to name but a few, with varied scholarly, varied colloquial and varied derogatory connotations. Since none of these have any more relevance to Old English vocabulary than the others, there is no “correct” choice of terminology: hence, for the sake of ease, I use the general terms “madness”, “insanity”, and “mental disorder” interchangeably in this article.

The Anglo-Saxon perception of mind and soul is an enormous topic in its own right that could fill volumes, but I confine its discussion only to a brief summary that is required in the context of discussing mental disorders. As it can be observed in Old English sources, two distinct trends can be identified in the Anglo-Saxon view of the mind: one is what Godden calls the “vernacular tradition” and the other is the “classical tradition”.<sup>2</sup> The vernacular tradition “preserve[d] the ancient distinction of soul and mind, while associating the mind at least as much with passion as with intellect”.<sup>3</sup> Whereas the classical tradition appears in texts of authors who drew on late antique writers like Plato or St Augustine, “but developed that tradition in interesting and individual ways”: their main hallmark is that “they show the gradual development of a unitary concept of the inner self, identifying the intellectual mind with the immortal soul and life-spirit”.<sup>4</sup> The vernacular tradition establishes the dichotomy of *sawol* and *mod*: *sawol* is the spiritual entity that represents humans in the afterlife and is otherwise relatively inactive throughout people’s lives. Whereas *mod* encompasses

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<sup>2</sup> Malcolm R. GODDEN, “Anglo-Saxons on the mind”, in M. LAPIDGE, and H. GNEUSS (EDS), *Learning and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England: Studies Presented to Peter Clemoes on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 271.

<sup>3</sup> GODDEN, 271.

<sup>4</sup> GODDEN, 271.

mind, thought, emotions and passion, as “thought and feeling were conceived of as aspects of the same experience”.<sup>5</sup> According to the *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, *mod* means the following: the inner man, the spiritual as opposed to the bodily part of man; with more special reference to intellectual or mental qualities, mind; with reference to the passions, emotions, etc, soul, heart, spirit, mind, disposition, mood; a special quality of the soul, in a good sense, courage, high spirit; in a bad sense, pride, arrogance.<sup>6</sup> Instead of residing in the head, the *mod* was localised in the chest, where all sorts of mental and psychological activities took place. Thus, in Old English poetry, both emotional and mental activities are described as “coincid[ing] with cardiocentric swelling, boiling, or seething, but this spatial deformation is attributed variously to the mind, to the mind’s contents or condition, and to the fleshly organs of the chest cavity”.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, texts of the classical tradition reveal a perception of mind that was thought to be a special part of the soul; namely, the rational part of the soul that raised humans above animals and closer to God. Anglo-Saxon authors like Alcuin followed the footsteps of e.g. Augustine and wrote that “the soul embraces intellect, passion, and desire ... [and] that the principal part of the soul is the mind (*mens*)”.<sup>8</sup> In his *De Animae Ratione*, he stated that “Triplex est enim animae ut philosophi volunt natura. Est in ea quaedam pars concupiscibilis alia rationabilis tertia irascibilis ... Sed his duobus (id est concupiscentia et ira) ratio quae mentis propria est imperare debet”.<sup>9</sup> Roughly two centuries later Ælfric expounded his view on the subject in *The Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ* in the sermon compilation *Ælfric’s Lives of Saints*.<sup>10</sup> In

<sup>5</sup> Soon Ai Low, “The Anglo-Saxon Mind: Metaphor and Common Sense Psychology in Old English Literature” (unpublished dissertation), Toronto: University of Toronto, 1998, 34.

<sup>6</sup> ‘mod’, *Bosworth-Toller*, p. 693.

<sup>7</sup> Leslie LOCKETT, *Anglo-Saxon Psychologies in the Vernacular and Latin Traditions*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011, 63.

<sup>8</sup> GODDEN, 272.

<sup>9</sup> ALCUIN, *De Animae Ratione*, in J. J. M. CURRY (ed. and transl.), “Alcuin, De Ratione Anmiae: a Text with Introduction, Critical Apparatus, and Translation” (unpublished dissertation), Cornell, 1966, 41–42, 74–75. “The structure of the soul, then, is threefold, as the philosophers maintain. One part of it is appetitive, a second rational, and a third passionate ... But over these two - appetite and passion - reason must reign, being the special characteristic of the mind”.

<sup>10</sup> ÆLFRIC, “The Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ”, in W. W. SKEAT (ed. and transl.), *Ælfric’s Lives of Saints: Being a Set of Sermons on Saints’ Days Formerly Observed by the English Church*, 3 vols., London: Oxford University Press, 1881, 10–25.

the text, he describes the soul as an intellectual entity: “seo sawul is gesceadwis gast”<sup>11</sup> that has three functions which are capable of desire, anger and reason.<sup>12</sup> He explains that the soul is responsible both for life and for the intellectual faculties:

Hyre nama is anima þæt is sawul and seo nama gelympð to hire life. And spiritus gast belimpð to hire ymbwlatunge. Heo is sensus þæt is andgit oððe felnyss þonne heo gefret. Heo is animus þæt is mod þonne heo wat. Heo is mens þæt is mod þonne heo understent. Heo is memoria þæt is gemynd þonne heo gemanð. Heo is ratio þæt is gescead þonne heo toscæt. Heo is uoluntas þæt is wylle þonne heo hwæt wyle. Ac swa þeah ealle þas naman syndon sawul.<sup>13</sup>

Various aspects and functions of the intellect are attributed here to the soul: reasoning, memory, perception to name but a few. The huge innovation in Ælfric’s view was that he replaced the role of *mod* with *sawol*, thus bringing the concept closer to the classical tradition. Thus it can be concluded that the main terms that refer to the entities that drive people’s actions are *mod* and *sawol*. These are responsible for people’s thoughts, emotions, sensations, and desires. If these faculties are functioning irrationally, then the malfunctions can be considered manifestations of madness. According to Soon Ai Low’s extensive study on the Anglo-Saxon mind and soul, further common words expressing different aspects of *mod* and *sawol* are e.g. *andgit*, *gemynd* and *gewitt*, as it is attested in Ælfric’s text above, too.<sup>14</sup> These terms and their derivations need to be located and examined in context in order to identify the terminology of mental disorders and find cases

<sup>11</sup> ÆLFRIC, “The Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ”, 20–21, “the soul is a rational spirit”.

<sup>12</sup> ÆLFRIC, “The Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ”, 16–17, “Uþwytan sæcgað þæt þære sawle gecynd is ðryfeald. An dæl is on hire gewylnigendlic, oðer yrsigendlic, þrydde gesceadwislic”. “Philosophers say that the soul’s nature is threefold: the first part in her is capable of desire, the second of anger, the third of reason”.

<sup>13</sup> ÆLFRIC, “The Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ”, 20–23, “[Soul] is called by various names in books, according to its offices. Its name is Anima, that is, Soul, and the name befitteth its life; and Spiritus, that is Spirit, which appertaineth to its contemplation. It is Sensus, that is, perception or sensation, when it perceiveth. It is Animus, that is, intellect, when it knoweth. It is Mens, that is, mind, when it understandeth. It is Memoria, that is, Memory, when it remembereth: It is Ratio, that is, Reason, when it reasoneth. It is Voluntas, that is Will, when it willeth anything; nevertheless all these names are one soul”.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. S. A. Low, “The Anglo-Saxon Mind: Metaphor and Common Sense Psychology in Old English Literature” (unpublished dissertation), Toronto: University of Toronto, 1998.

of them in Anglo-Saxon sources. I use them as control points when it comes to deciding whether a certain case in a text is madness or not. As for the overview of terminology of madness, I use the *Thesaurus of Old English*.

According to the *Thesaurus of Old English*, expressions denoting madness in Old English is a colourful medley:<sup>15</sup> some of them are indeed derived from the terms above,<sup>16</sup> some of them can be traced back to transmissions and translations,<sup>17</sup> and some of them name supernatural perpetrators that cause mental ailments.<sup>18</sup> The most generic term, however, is *wod*: it is the most frequently occurring word in the Old English corpus describing madness. *Wod* and its lexemes can express irrational aggression and fury,<sup>19</sup> nonsense,<sup>20</sup> and even possession.<sup>21</sup> Apart from *wod*, most of the madness-terms can be divided based on their aetiologies: madness-type conditions are attributed both to naturalistic-organic and to supernatural causes.<sup>22</sup> In most of the cases, the organic causes are manifestations of the influence of Graeco-Roman medicine: certain sections of medical texts can be traced back

<sup>15</sup> A Thesaurus of Old English, source: <https://oldenglishthesaurus.arts.gla.ac.uk/category/?type=search&qsearch=madness&word=madness&page=1#id=4058> 2024. 02. 14.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. *ungewitt, gewitleast, gewitseoc, ungemynd*, etc.

<sup>17</sup> E.g. *bræcseoc, brægenseoc, monseoc* (probably)

<sup>18</sup> *Ylfig, gydig, deofolseoc, feondseoc*

<sup>19</sup> ÆLFRIC, “Sermo de memoria Sanctorum”, in W. W. SKEAT (ed. and transl.), *Ælfric’s Lives of Saints: Being a Set of Sermons on Saints’ Days Formerly Observed by the English Church*, 3 vols., London: Oxford University Press, 1881, 352–353, “He wet nu swiðe and wynð on ða Cristenan”. “Now he rageth furiously, and warreth on Christians”.

<sup>20</sup> ÆLFRIC, “Nativitas Domini nostri Iesu Christi”, in W. W. SKEAT (ed. and transl.), *Ælfric’s Lives of Saints: Being a Set of Sermons on Saints’ Days Formerly Observed by the English Church*, 3 vols., London, 1881, 12–13, “Ac se man wet þe wyle habban ænig þincg ær anginne”. “But the man is mad who wishes to have anything before a beginning”.

<sup>21</sup> ÆLFRIC, “Passio S. Bartholomæi Apostoli” in B. THORPE (ed. and transl.), *The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church, the First Part, Containing the Sermones catholici, or Homilies of Ælfric in the Original Anglo-Saxon, with an English Version*, 2 vols., London: Oxford University Press, 1844, 458–59, “Sum wod mann ðurh deofles gast”. “Some madman ... through the devil’s spirit”.

<sup>22</sup> It has been noted that usage of the term “supernatural” is anachronistic in the context of Anglo-Saxon culture as the phenomena we today call supernatural were part of reality for Anglo-Saxons (see e.g. J. NEVILLE, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry*). However, as Boyer showed, recognition of supernatural beings and phenomena is intrinsic to the human brain and is thus universal across time and space, even if there

to authors whose works are rooted in Graeco-Roman humorism. E.g. a medical compendium called *Bald's Leechbook* contains the following recipe:

Eac of þæs magan adle cumað monige 7 missenlica adla geborstena wunda 7 hramma 7 fyllewærc 7 fienda adl 7 micla murnunga 7 unrotnessa butan þearfe 7 oman 7 ungemetlica mete socna 7 ungemetlice unlustas 7 cisnessa 7 sara inadde on wifes gecyndon 7 on fotum 7 blædran 7 unmode 7 ungemetwæccum 7 ungewitlico word. Se maga biþ neah þære heortan 7 þære gelodre 7 geadortenge þam brægene of þam cumað þa adla swiþpost of þæs magan intingan, 7 of yflum seawum, wætan atterberendum.<sup>23</sup>

Deegan and Doyle found an almost perfect match for this recipe in *Practica Alexandri*: presumably, the fragment is a transmission.<sup>24</sup> But whether Anglo-Saxons had the original or even knew about the original is a subject to debate; suffice it to say that traces of humorism occur in their texts. Nonetheless, as Doyle points out, “there seems to be no consistent terminology with which four distinct humours are defined in Old English”, which suggests that the notion of the four humours was not fully embraced by the Anglo-Saxons in its entirety.<sup>25</sup> The extent to which

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was no distinct name for the category (see P. BOYER, *Religion Explained: the Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*).

<sup>23</sup> *Bald's Leechbook II.i*, in T. O. COCKAYNE, *Leechdoms, Wortcunning and Starcraft of Early England: being a Collection of Documents, for the most part never before Printed, Illustrating the History of Science in this Country before the Norman Conquest, Chronicles and Memorials of Great Britain and Ireland during the Middle Ages* 35, 3 vols., London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1864, 174–177, “Also from the disease of the maw come many and various diseases of bursten wounds, and cramps, and *fyllewærc* and *fienda adl*, and mickle murmurings and uneasiness without occasion, and erysipelalous eruptions, and immoderate desires for meat, and immense want of appetite, and daintinesses, and sore internal diseases in ... the uterus, and in the feet, and in the bladder, and despondency, and immoderately long wakings, and witless words. The maw is near the heart and the spine, and in communication with the brain, from which the diseases come most violently, from the circumstances of the maw, and from evil juices, humours venom-bearing”.

<sup>24</sup> Marilyn DEEGAN, “A Critical Edition of MS. B.L. Royal 12. D. xvii: *Bald's Leechbook*” 2 vols (unpublished dissertation), Manchester: University of Manchester, 1988, 124, and C. DOYLE, “Anglo-Saxon Medicine and Disease: A Semantic Approach” 2 vols (unpublished dissertation), Cambridge, 2017, 174.

<sup>25</sup> Conan DOYLE, “Anglo-Saxon Medicine and Disease: A Semantic Approach” 2 vols (unpublished dissertation), Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2017, 194.

Anglo-Saxons understood humorism remains hidden to our eyes; nevertheless, their medical compendia provide instances of humoral aetiology and it could affect their perspective on mental disorders. The example cited above attributes *fyllewærc*, *fienda adl* and various psychical malfunctions to humours that form in the stomach and affect the brain. *Fyllewærc* literally means “falling sickness” and it has been suggested that it is a calque that was based on Isidore of Seville’s description of *epilemsia* in the *Etymologiae*.<sup>26</sup> *Fienda adl* means “fiend sickness” and it denotes conditions with possession-like symptoms in medical texts. In fact, the majority of conditions that have madness-like traits are expressed with the term *fienda adl* or *deofol seocnys*, meaning “devil sickness”, and the aetiology of these ailments are indeed demonic. However, in this recipe, the root cause of *fienda adl* is clearly organic as it is brought about by the “evil juices” in the stomach.

One of the most influential texts that shaped Anglo-Saxons’ understanding of madness was the above mentioned *Etymologiae* written by Isidore of Seville. Isidore was also a significant representative of organic-rational medicine. The *Etymologiae* was among the most extensively utilized texts during the Middle Ages throughout Europe and held significant authority. The statements within the *Etymologiae* served as pivotal references across various fields of knowledge. According to Lapidge, the *Etymologiae* formed a fundamental component of the standard Anglo-Saxon library.<sup>27</sup> Isidore’s influence extended over vast geographical regions and persisted for many centuries; manuscripts of the *Etymologiae* were reproduced from eighth-century Northumbria to tenth-century Canterbury and eleventh-century Salisbury. Also, Lapidge documents a considerable number of extant manuscripts of English provenance, totaling 19, which contain the *Etymologiae*.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, glossaries derived from this work served as the basis for numerous Latin translations across multiple areas of knowledge and thus had a huge impact on Anglo-Saxon culture. In Isidore’s view, *anima* is what makes creatures alive, but it is *mens* that makes humans the image of God and it is responsible for certain cognitive processes: describing the faculties of the soul, he points out “[n]am et memoria mens est, unde et inmemores amentes. Dum ergo vivificat corpus, anima est: dum vult, animus est: dum scit, mens est: dum recolit,

<sup>26</sup> See e.g. Alaric HALL, “Elves on the Brain: Chaucer, Old English and Elvish”, in *Anglia: Journal of English Philology* 124, Issue 2 (2006), 225–243

<sup>27</sup> Michael LAPIDGE, *The Anglo-Saxon Library*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 127.

<sup>28</sup> LAPIDGE, 311.

memoria est: dum rectum iudicat, ratio est: dum spirat, spiritus est: dum aliquid sentit, sensus est”.<sup>29</sup> A somewhat similar description of the *sawol* is reflected in Ælfric’s homily mentioned above. The importance of *mens* in intellectual and emotional health is echoed in Isidore’s use of the word *demens*, a term widely used in the Middle Ages for people with mental disorders: he explains that even if the spirit perishes, the soul can stay long as in people who lose their mind.<sup>30</sup> In Book IV of *Etymologiae*, he also identifies five conditions that affect the *mens* and thus can be considered mental disorders: *frenesis*, *lethargia*, *epilemsia* (sic), *mania* and *melancholia*. These five words, especially *frenesis* and *epilemsia* figure prominently in Old English texts, and Isidore’s explanation of *epilemsia* served as a basis for many Old English interpretations of mental disorders, e.g. *fyllewærc* mentioned above, *bræcseoc* which literally means humour-disease and denotes conditions resembling epilepsy, and was used for denoting demon possession as well.

As for the supernatural aetiology of mental disorders, the main perpetrators are usually either demons or *ælf*e. In medical compendia, maladies caused by demons and *ælf*e are often grouped together with conditions that Jolly calls “mind-altering” thus showing that they “indicat[e] a consciousness of a similarity between these ailments”,<sup>31</sup> and the recipes “form a coherent series of remedies against spiritual, malevolent forces, which, nonetheless, are manifested in physical symptoms and can be cured with natural ingredients properly brought into relation with the spiritual macrocosm”.<sup>32</sup> These mind-altering conditions were thought to cause both bodily diseases and behavioural malfunctions as it can be inferred from recipes in medical compendia. One of the recipes in *Bald’s Leechbook* that provides a treatment of demon possessed people offers even a brief explanation of what the condition means: “Wiþ feond seocum men, þonne deofol þone monnan fede oððe hine innan

<sup>29</sup> ISIDORE, *Etymologiae* XI.i.12–3, in W. M. LINDSAY (ed.), *Etymologiarum sive Originum libri XX* 2 vols., Oxford, 1911, “Indeed, memory is mind, whence forgetful people are called mindless. Therefore, it is soul when it enlivens the body, will when it wills, mind when it knows, memory (memoria) when it recollects, reason (ratio) when it judges correctly, spirit when it breathes forth, sense (sensus) when it senses something” (transl. Stephen A. BARNEY et al, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, Cambridge: Cambridge, 2006, 231.)

<sup>30</sup> ISIDORE, *Differentiarum* II.27, in A. SANZ and A. M. SANZ (eds), *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi: Liber Differentiarum [II]*, Corpus Christianorum CXI, Turnhout, 2006, 59–60.

<sup>31</sup> Karen Louise JOLLY, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context*, London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996, 133.

<sup>32</sup> JOLLY, 158.

gewealde mid adle”.<sup>33</sup> The description implies that *feond seocnys* not only entails a passive physical malady but that it might involve actions that the patient carries out under the demon’s control. As mentioned above, *mod* was the factor that determined how people behaved, it was will-power; thus demon possession, being a loss over self-control, behaviour and emotions could indeed be interpreted as a disease of the *mod* by the Anglo-Saxons, and as such it was a form of madness. This is exactly what the hagiographies reveal as well. Nevertheless, it should be noted that automatic association of madness with demon possession is problematic. In contemporary society, these were two very distinct categories of ailments, even though their symptoms were confusingly similar. While Church members theoretically had the ability to differentiate between demon possession and mental disorders, the similar mental symptoms often made it challenging for ordinary individuals to discern such differences. There are indications in literary sources that even representatives of the Church faced difficulties in recognizing these distinctions. Instances exist where only a distinguished saint could accurately identify demon possession and address the possessed individuals. The similarity between possession and mental disorders was both striking and deceiving, leading to uncertainty for both the Church and the general population in determining whether a specific case involved possession or a malfunction of the brain. Nevertheless, the Church indeed distinguished between the two conditions and did not dismiss the natural or somatic origins of mental disorders, but in cases with symptoms of madness it consistently had to consider the potentiality of demonic possession. To illustrate, Origen, while interpreting the parable of the lunatic boy in Matthew 17, attributed lunacy to both demonic influence and humorism: he presented a description of the natural-humoral explanation for the condition, aligning with the prevailing medical perspective of his time, which involved the moon and humors affecting the head, and he combined it with the workings of devils. Origen argued that the moon was not created by God to exert malevolent influence. Instead, he asserted that demons observed celestial changes, including those of the moon and other planets, and by using this knowledge to attack individuals in accordance with these phases, they deceived unsuspecting victims into attributing their plight to planetary influences.<sup>34</sup> A somewhat similar

<sup>33</sup> *Bald’s Leechbook* I.lxiii, 136–37, “For a fiend sick man, or demoniac, when a devil possesses the man or controls him from within with disease”.

<sup>34</sup> Jaques Paule MIGNE (ed), *Origenes*, *Patrologiæ Græcæ* Tomus XIV, Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1862, 1106–1107.

explanation is provided by the Cambridge commentator on lunacy: “Lunaticus est cuius minuente luna minuat uel mutatur cerebrum et, intrante daemone per narem, dementem facit. Aliter lunatici dicuntur qui incipiente lune uel in medio siue in fine cadunt et prosternuntur”.<sup>35</sup> In this explanation, diverse perspectives are seamlessly integrated: the materialistic-organic origin of epilepsy symbolized by the association of the moon and falling down; the materialistic-organic basis for brain malfunctions, once again linked to the moon; and the attribution of mental disorders or dementia to demonic possession. Initially, the waning of the moon is believed to influence the brain. Subsequently, or simultaneously, a demon is thought to enter through the nostrils, inducing dementia in the person. Importantly, the onset of dementia does not strictly follow the changes in the brain prompted by the moon; rather, it is the demon that triggers dementia, with the moon merely altering the brain, rendering it susceptible to demon-induced dementia. This suggests that the moon plays a crucial role in allowing a demon to enter one’s mind. Moreover, the second sentence implies that, in fact, a non-demonic manifestation of lunacy was also acknowledged. The ambiguity of demon possession and madness, or rather the fuzzy line between them, was bequeathed to the Anglo-Saxons and its synthesis with the Anglo-Saxon perception of madness can be observed in the hagiographies as well.

To summarize, we can state that there were both a natural-organic and a supernatural perception of madness in Anglo-Saxon culture that did not exclude each other, and that both types were believed to affect the *mod* and its various aspects. The main representatives of the vocabulary of madness are, on the one hand: *mod*, *andgit*, *gemynd* and *gewitt*, with respect to the locus of madness. *Sawol* could also be one but at the time of the hagiographies that are in the scope of this article, *sawol* only represented the person in the afterlife. On the other hand, the names of the conditions themselves are e.g. *wod*, *fienda adl*, *deofol seocnys*, *bræcseoc*, *frenesis*, *demens*. After outlining the main characteristics and identifying the vocabulary that can serve us as flagpoles, the analysis of the hagiographies can now follow.

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<sup>35</sup> Bernhard BISCHOFF – Michael LAPIDGE (eds), *Biblical Commentaries from the Canterbury School of Theodore and Hadrian*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 404–405. “Lunatic [XVII. 14] is someone whose brain diminishes or changes as the moon wanes and, with a demon entering through his nostrils, makes him demented. Otherwise lunatics are said to be those who, with the moon waxing, full or waning, fall down and prostrate themselves”.

The four hagiographies analysed here were written in the eighth century: the lives of Cuthbert and Guthlac. We have two Latin versions of *Life of Cuthbert*, one of them written by an anonymous monk of Lindisfarne, the other by Bede. The source of *Life of Cuthbert* was the “floating tradition, ... the saga which grew up around the name of the saint, much of it probably during his lifetime or very soon after his death”.<sup>36</sup> It was most plausibly written between 699 and 705; while Bede’s version around 721.<sup>37</sup> The Latin *Life of Guthlac* was written between 730 and 740 at the request of King Ælfwald in East Anglia by a certain Felix of whom not much is known.<sup>38</sup> According to Colgrave, Felix was familiar with Bede’s and Aldhelm’s writings and “with those lives of saints which had much influence on all writers of saints’ lives of the seventh, eighth and later centuries”.<sup>39</sup> The *Life* was translated to Old English by the beginning of the eleventh century and two poems on him were also in existence, but later periods saw even more translations.<sup>40</sup> In order to identify the chapters relevant to the discussion of madness, expressions mentioned above relating to the mind, soul and insanity need to be located. The Old English *Life of Guthlac* contains *gewit*, *wodnys*, and *gemynd*, hence, chapters involving these expressions are analyzed to see whether they are madness-cases or not. Once the texts are assessed, they can serve as a basis to identify the sections of interest in the Latin texts too.

The two relevant chapters of the Old English *Life of Guthlac* tell stories of demon possessions. Chapter XII explains how Hwætred, a noble afflicted with a demon was cured by Guthlac, while chapter XIII mentions Ecga with the same ailment. Both cases are described with vocabulary relating to madness. An unclean spirit entered Hwætred, hence he lost his mind: “se awyrgeda gast him oneode þæt he of his gewitte wearð”, and his madness was so severe he inflicted self-harm: “hine se awyrgeda feond swa swyþe swencte mid þære wodnysse þæt he hys agenne lichaman mid irene ge eac mid his toþum blodgode

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<sup>36</sup> Bertram COLGRAVE, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert: a Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede’s Prose Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1940) 2007, 11.

<sup>37</sup> COLGRAVE, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, 13–16.

<sup>38</sup> COLGRAVE, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, 15–19.

<sup>39</sup> COLGRAVE, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, 16. These are Sulpicius Severus’ *Vita Martini*, Jerome’s *Vita Pauli*, Athanasius’s *Vita Antonii* and Gregory the Great’s *Life of St Benedict*.

<sup>40</sup> COLGRAVE, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, 9.

and wundode”.<sup>41</sup> The condition is named by the term *wodnys* and it is also stated that it inflicts the *gewit*. Hwætred’s madness is also referred to as *adl*, sickness: “him næfre syþþan þa hwile þe he leofode seo adl ne eglode”.<sup>42</sup> The condition is described as involving irrational aggression: “he hine woldon gebindan and don hine gewyldne: he þa genam sum twibil, and mid þan þry men to deaðe ofsloh, and oþre manige mid gesarode” with a certain kind of altered state of consciousness where the subject is almost unconscious in a state similar to slumber “and he þa se ylca man swa he of hefegum slæpe raxende awoce”.<sup>43</sup> This semi-unconscious state is only dispelled when Guthlac shatters the demon’s power over Hwætred with the help of prayer, holy water and blowing into his face. Similarly, Ecga in Chapter XIII was also plagued by an unclean spirit and his state was also described by the word *adl* and involved unconsciousness: “he wæs fram þam awyrgeðan gaste unstill; and swa swyþe he hine drehte þæt he his sylfes nænig gemynd ne hæfde”.<sup>44</sup> As mentioned above, *gemynd* mainly denoted memory, hence the phrase “he his sylfes nænig gemynd ne hæfde” can mean that he did not remember who he was, he had some sort of an amnesiac condition. We can infer from these texts that demons were thought to have the power to cause a state that was considered a sickness and was also referred to as madness, and its symptoms included irrational aggression and a trance-like condition that affected the subject’s intellect and behaviour.

Having identified the chapters of interest in the Old English text, the Latin version can now be analyzed. Chapters in the Latin text that are equivalents to the ones above are XLI and XLII. In Hwætred’s story, similarly to the Old

<sup>41</sup> ANONYMOUS, *The Anglo-Saxon Version of the Life of St Guthlac* (transl. Ch. W. GOODWIN), London: William Pickering, 1848, 56–57, “The accursed spirit entered into him, so that he went out of his wits, and the accursed spirit afflicted him so severely with this madness, that he bloodied and wounded his own body as well with iron as with his teeth”.

<sup>42</sup> ANONYMOUS, *The Anglo-Saxon Version of the Life of St Guthlac*, 60–61, “the illness never ailed him afterwards so long as he lived”.

<sup>43</sup> ANONYMOUS, *The Anglo-Saxon Version of the Life of St Guthlac*, 58–61, “They might bind him and bring him into subjection. Thereupon he took an axe, and with it smote three men to death, and wounded many others with them ... this same man was as though he had awoken from a deep slumber”.

<sup>44</sup> ANONYMOUS, *The Anglo-Saxon Version of the Life of St Guthlac*, 60–61, “[he] was disquieted by the accursed spirit. And he plagued him so severely that he had no recollection of himself”.

English text, he is said to have been suddenly attacked by an evil spirit: “subito illum nequam spiritus grassari coepit”.<sup>45</sup> The symptoms are self-destructive behaviour and extreme strength, as already described in the Old English text:

[i]n tantum autem inmensa dementia vexabatur ita ut membra sua propria ligno, ferro, unguibus dentibusque, prout potuit, laniaret; non solum enim se ipsum crudeli vesania decerpebat, quin etiam omnes, quoscumque tangere potuisset, inprobi oris morsibus lacerabat. Eo autem modo insanire coepit, ut eum prohiberi aut adligari nullius ausibus inpetraretur.<sup>46</sup>

The terms used to describe Hwætred’s condition are *dementia*, *vesania* and *insanire*. Involvement of the mind is not articulated so openly as in the Old English text (“he of his gewitte wearð”), although the terms speak for themselves as they are strongly associated with madness in various glossaries. The frenzied phase of Hwætred’s condition lasted for four years during which his energies were slowly drained, then his parents could manage to transport him to various holy places in the hope of getting him cured. The attempts were of no avail, and in the end it was only Guthlac who could restore Hwætred’s health: Guthlac prayed and fasted for him for three days and on the third day he drove out the demon by washing Hwætred in the holy font and blowing into his face: “tertia vero die, orto sole, sacrati fontis undis abluit, et inflans in faciem eius spiritum salutis, omnem valitudinem maligni spiritus de illo reppulit”.<sup>47</sup> Blowing is not a common healing method in the Scriptures in the strict sense; the breath has somewhat different purposes. Jesus blew on the disciples once in order for them to receive the Holy Spirit, while the breath of God usually bestows life. Bearing this analogue in mind,

<sup>45</sup> FELIX, *Vita Sancti Guthlaci Auctore Felice*, in B. COLGRAVE (ed. and transl.), *Felix’s Life of Saint Guthlac: Introduction, Text, Translation and Notes*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956, 126.

<sup>46</sup> FELIX, 126–129. “He was affected with so great a madness that he tore his own limbs, so far as he could, with wood and iron, with his nails and his teeth; and indeed not only did he wound himself with cruel madness, but all whom he could reach he fiercely bit and tore. He began to be so mad that no one could succeed by any efforts in checking him or binding him”.

<sup>47</sup> FELIX, 130–131. “On the third day at sunrise he washed him in the water of the sacred font and, breathing into his face the breath of healing, he drove away from him all the power of the evil spirit”.

the text gives the impression that Hwætred's condition was not a usual disease: he needed to be reborn with the help of the Holy Spirit. The Old English text describes the moment of his healing as awakening from slumber, but the Latin text emphasizes the distress he suffered and the relief he finally got: "Ipse autem, velut qui de aestuantis gurgitis fluctibus ad portum deducitur, longa suspiria imo de pectore trahens, ad pristinae salutis valitudinem redditum se esse intellexit".<sup>48</sup> Blowing out the sighs from the depth of his bosom parallel to Guthlac's breath not only symbolizes his relief after his long torment but also that the demon left his body: Guthlac's breath is the Holy Spirit that expelled and replaced the evil spirit in the form of breath in Hwætred's bosom. As the text states, the demon never disturbed Hwætred anymore, so the Holy Spirit took lodging in him and never let in demons anymore.

The Latin version of Ecga's story reveals more about his mental state under the demon's influence than the Old English text: "ita ut quid esset vel quo sederet vel quid parabat facere nesciret. Corporis autem et membrorum vigor inlaesus permansit, facultas vero loquendi, disputandi intelligendique penitus defuit".<sup>49</sup> The Old English text described an amnesic state; the Latin version indicates that the condition was more serious. He could not speak and he even lost his faculty of understanding, hence it seems that all his mental capacities were paralyzed by the demon. Contrarily to Hwætred, he did not exhibit signs of aggression or supernatural strength, nonetheless, his whole mind was under the influence of the demon, as if it had conquered his whole *mod*. His state is named as *vesania* and *amentia*, both associated with madness in glossaries. Ecga was healed by Guthlac's girdle: "Quadam die propinqui sui formidantes perpetuam vesaniam sibi venturam, ad praefati viri Guthlaci limina duxerunt; confestimque, ut se cingulo eius succinxit, omnem amentiam de se ablatam animumque sibi integre redditum persesit".<sup>50</sup> Apparently Guthlac's girdle imbibed enough holiness that

<sup>48</sup> FELIX, 130–131. "And the youth, like one who is brought into port out of the billows and the boiling waves, heaved some deep sighs from the depth of his bosom and realized that he had been restored to his former health".

<sup>49</sup> FELIX, 132–133. "so that he did not know what he was or where he dwelt or what he was about to do. Although the strength of his body and limbs remained unharmed, yet his powers of speech, discussion, and understanding failed him entirely".

<sup>50</sup> FELIX, 132–133. "One day his relatives, fearing that perpetual madness would come upon him, took him to the abode of this same Guthlac, and as soon as he bound himself with

it was sufficient to drive away the evil spirit from Ecga. As the demon left, his madness left too and his mind cleared.

Searching for the same vocabulary and context in the Cuthbert texts, we can find two chapters that are of interest: the story of Hildmer's wife and a demoniac boy. Both victims fell prey to demons without any specific reason, they were innocent. In the anonymous *Life of Cuthbert*, Hildmer's wife is described as being vexed by a devil, "[i]lla namque multum uastata et usque ad exitum mortis coangustata, frendens dentibus gemitum lacrimabilem emittebat".<sup>51</sup> In his version, Bede adds to the cries and gnashing teeth "brachia uel caetera sui corporis membra in diuersa raptando".<sup>52</sup> The description of the symptoms is based on the biblical topos of demon possessions: grinding teeth, groaning, agitated movements. The condition is named as "insania" in both texts, and according to the text, Hildmer did not have any doubt that this madness was in fact demon possession. Instead of doubt, what Hildmer felt was shame: when he sought Cuthbert's help, he was ashamed to tell him that his wife's deathly sickness was caused by a demon as "[n]esciebat etiam nec intellegens, quod talis temptatio frequenter christianis accidere solet".<sup>53</sup> In the anonymous text, Hildmer's mourning was twofold: on the one hand, it was the loss of a wife, of a mother; on the other hand, it was her disgraceful physical condition "maxime pro ignominiosa insaniae, in qua horribiliter redactam et inpudenter confractem et saliuam pollutam".<sup>54</sup> Whereas in Bede's text, Hildmer feared that Cuthbert would think that his wife feigned her faith: "[t]imebat enim ne cum eam demoniosam inueniret, arbitrari inciperet, quia non integra Domino,

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the saint's girdle, he felt that all his madness had disappeared and his mind had wholly returned to him".

<sup>51</sup> ANONYMOUS, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, in B. COLGRAVE (ed.), *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert: A Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede's Prose Life*, Cambridge, 1940 (2007), 90–91, „She was greatly ravaged and afflicted to the point of death, grinding her teeth and uttering tearful groans”.

<sup>52</sup> BEDE, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, in B. COLGRAVE (ed.), *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert: A Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede's Prose Life*, Cambridge, 1940 (2007), 204–205, “flinging her arms and limbs about in agitation”.

<sup>53</sup> ANONYMOUS, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, 92–93, „...neither knowing nor understanding that such a trial is wont to fall frequently upon Christians”.

<sup>54</sup> BEDE, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, 204–205, “and more especially because of the disgraceful insane condition in which he knew that she was about to be seen by the man of God, whereby she was horribly degraded and shamelessly destroyed and polluted with spittle”.

sed ficta fide seruisset”.<sup>55</sup> The dread inspired by the husband can be interpreted in two distinct ways. Firstly, madness and possession may be perceived as retribution for insincere devotion: individuals attempting to deceive both God and society are consequently punished by divine forces. Alternatively, an insincere faith suggests that the individual remains an unbeliever or adheres to pagan beliefs, rendering them more susceptible to demonic influence and therefore “rightfully” targeted by such malevolent forces. To dispel any uncertainties, Bede clarifies that contrary to such beliefs, devout Christians too may undergo demonic assaults: “[n]eque enim tali tormento soli subiciuntur mali, sed occulto Dei iudicio aliquotiens etiam innocentes in hoc saeculo non tantum corpore sed et mente captiuntur a diabolo”.<sup>56</sup> Both texts describe the moment of healing as waking up from a deep sleep, similarly to the Guthlac texts: “Cuius soluta uinculis mulier, quasi graui experrecta de somno surrexit continuo, ac uiro Dei gratulabunda occurrens, iumentum quo sedebat per frenum tenuit”.<sup>57</sup> While Guthlac’s breath implicitly symbolized the Holy Spirit, Bede boldly states that it is indeed the presence of the Holy Spirit within Cuthbert that chased away the demon: “fugit repente spiritus nequam, aduentum spiritus sancti, quo plenus erat uir Dei ferre non ualens”.<sup>58</sup>

Lastly, the story of the demoniac boy healed by Cuthbert’s remains also describes the typical symptoms: “a demonio fatigatum uociferantem et lacrimantem, lacerantemque corpus suum”;<sup>59</sup> furthermore, “insanus ululando, ingemiscendo et frendendo dentibus nimio cunctorum uisus et auditus horrore concuteret”.<sup>60</sup> Again,

<sup>55</sup> BEDE, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, 204–205, “For he feared that when Cuthbert found her possessed of a devil, he would begin to think that she had served the Lord with a feigned and not a real faith”.

<sup>56</sup> BEDE, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, 206–207, “for it is not only the wicked who are subjected to such torments, but sometimes also in this world, be the inscrutable judgement of God, the innocent are taken captive by the devil, not only in body but also in mind”.

<sup>57</sup> BEDE, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, 206–207, “And the woman, being loosed from the demon’s chains, thereupon rose as if wakened from a deep sleep and, running to greet the man of God, she took the horse on which he was seated”.

<sup>58</sup> BEDE, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, 206–207, “the evil spirit suddenly fled, not being able to endure the coming of the Holy Spirit which filled the man of God”.

<sup>59</sup> ANONYMOUS, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, 132–133, “[he] was afflicted with a demon, and was shouting and weeping and tearing his body”.

<sup>60</sup> BEDE, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, 288–289, “the insane boy horrified all who saw and heard him by howling, groaning and gnashing his teeth”.

the texts echo the biblical topoi of demon possessed people: howling, groaning, gnashing of teeth and aggression in the form of self-harm. In Bede's words, the demon tormented the boy so much so "ita ut sensu rationis funditus amisso clamaret, eiularet, et uel sua membra uel quicquid attingere posset, morsibus dilaniare niteretur".<sup>61</sup> Bede uses the word *insanus* describing the boy and he articulates that his demon possession coincides with losing his reason. Despite various attempts at curing the boy, his tormenting demon remained persistent. According to Bede, the holy martyrs whose help was sought did not grant relief in order to show Cuthbert's greatness amongst them: only Cuthbert's aid was fruitful. The demon fled as soon as the boy drank holy water that was sprinkled with earth where water was poured in which Cuthbert's body was washed after his death: in the words of the the anonymous author, "[p]uer uero degustata aqua benedicta, a garrula uoce nocte illa desinit".<sup>62</sup> The phrase *garrula uoce* (chattering voice) might sound surprising in the context of demon possession, considering the fact that the symptoms imply an aggressive, self-destructive condition with growling and and howling. However, the lemma *garritores* (chatterers) is flanked by various madness-related expressions in various glossaries. For instance, in the Harley Glossary, it is interpreted with *comitiales* (one of the terms Isidore mentions meaning epilepsy), *ylfie* (which can roughly be rendered as "possessed by an *ælf*") and *monapseoce* (which literally means "moon-sick" and is the equivalent of "lunatic").<sup>63</sup> According to Hall, this chattering did not merely mean speaking but had a prophetic or divine tone to it, presumably attributed to possession.<sup>64</sup> Bede narrates the moment as "Statim autem ut attigit aquam, continuit clamorem, clausit os, clausit et oculos qui sanguinei et furibundi patebant, caput et corpus totum reclinauit in requiem".<sup>65</sup> The boy calmed down, fell asleep and "mane de somno

<sup>61</sup> BEDE, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, 288–289, "that he had completely lost his reason, and cried out, howled and tried to tear in pieces with his teeth both his own limbs and whatever he could reach".

<sup>62</sup> ANONYMOUS, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, 134–135, "As soon as the boy had tasted the holy water, he ceased from his ravings that very night".

<sup>63</sup> ROBERT T. OLIPHANT, *The Harley Latin-Old English Glossary*, The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1966, 85.

<sup>64</sup> HALL, "Elves on the brain", 238.

<sup>65</sup> BEDE, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, 290–290, „But as soon as he touched the water, he restrained his cries, shut his mouth and his eyes which before were wide open, bloodshot and furious, while his head and his whole body sank into repose".

simul et uesania consurgens”.<sup>66</sup> The condition of demon possession is named again as madness (*uesania*) and it is again associated with sleep, while abatement of the possession is likened to waking from sleep. Bede further emphasizes the delirious state during possession: “qui pridie prae insania mentis nec se ipsum quis esset uel ubi esset poterat agnoscere”,<sup>67</sup> which suggests an amnesic condition, as well as an almost unconscious state of mind. Apparently the demon takes hold of the mind so much so that the subject’s personality and consciousness is almost completely shut down and is severed from the outside world. This state is a stark contrast to what Bede calls *sanissimus mens*, when the boy, healed, goes around showing his gratitude to the saints. The locus of the determining factor here is clearly designated as the *mens*.

To summarize the phenomenon of mental disorders in hagiographies, it can be stated that conditions referred to as *vesania*, *insania*, *amentia* and *wodnys* are demon possessions. Thus, madness is essentially equal to possession, at least vocabulary-wise. It has been highlighted above that the symptoms were confusingly similar so much so that even members of the Church sometimes could not tell them apart. Both bodily and mental symptoms are described as indicators of madness. The signs of madness induced by demonic forces encompass a wide range, spanning from psychological collapse and aggression to the loss of basic bodily control. These symptoms, as depicted in hagiographies, use archetypal illustrations derived from Scriptural texts. Afflicted individuals frequently demonstrate tendencies towards self-harm and towards assaulting others, often accompanied by incoherent shouting and groaning, and an unnaturally heightened physical strength. Fury emerges as a prominent characteristic of madness, serving as a defining trait with notable physical manifestations such as e.g. aggression, while it also affects the cognitive faculties, leading to impaired reasoning and exaggerated reactions. Furthermore, the bodily manifestations of possession often mirror those of seizures, drawing parallels from Scripture: victims experience groaning, teeth grinding, abnormal motor functions, limb jerking, and excessive salivation. As for the mental signs, the afflicted person exhibits symptoms of altered states of consciousness, amnesia, and a “severed” self: they appear as not being in control of their body and their

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<sup>66</sup> BEDE, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, 290–291, “in the morning awoke from both sleep and madness”.

<sup>67</sup> BEDE, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, 290–291, “on account of his insanity, he did not know who he was or where he was”.

will, in fact, it seems as if their soul and mind were cut off from the outside world and the demon took control of their personality. Although other Old English sources show that a natural-organic understanding of madness was also present in Anglo-Saxon culture, in the hagiographies demon possession and madness is blurred together. In addition, the Bible, which exerted significant influence on Anglo-Saxon culture, also implies a certain confusing similarity between demon possession and madness: on the one hand, “lunatics” are mentioned as a different category beside demoniacs (e.g. Matt 4,24) and they are referred to by different terminology in Old English translations (*monod-seoc* are lunatics instead of *deofol seoc* who are the demon-possessed); on the other hand, a “lunatic” boy is cured by expelling a demon (Matt 17,15). Furthermore, the Anglo-Saxon perception of *mod* made possession and madness *practically* the same. Practically in the sense that even though a theoretical knowledge was present which acknowledged the difference between madness and possession; nonetheless, the fundamental aetiologies and symptoms were the same: the *mod*, which is the core of one’s personality is malfunctioning; and this malfunctioning is manifested in typical behavioural patterns (e.g. aggression and impaired cognitive faculties). It is always an “unclean spirit” that causes madness: a *spiritus inmundi*, a *nequam spiritus*, an *awyrgeda gast* in Old English versions. The possessed person has various horrible symptoms, physical, mental and behavioural alike, and even gets to the verge of death when the saint saves him or her by putting the demon to flight. The cases are analogous to scriptural instances in many respects: the symptoms, the wording and the purpose of the narrative (i.e. to demonstrate the Christian power over demons) show a strong resemblance to the cases described in the Scriptures. The reason for the possessions is not attributed to God’s punishment or testing: the cases happen casually almost like accidents and the victims are even pictured with a certain degree of sympathy. The demon possessions do not have an articulated reason: madness in the hagiographies is not a punishment or a consequence of any sin. Rather, it is an opportunity to reveal the saints’ greatness, the victory of the Holy Spirit over the unclean spirits, and the power of God over evil.

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