Vulnerability and Power:
The Early Christian Rhetoric of Masculine Authority

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I cannot have remained in this tortured state for more than three months; it seemed impossible that anyone could bear so many ills together. I am amazed at myself now, and think of the patience which His Majesty gave me as a great mercy, for it clearly came from the Lord. It was a great help to my patience that I had read the story of Job in the *Morals* of St Gregory, which the Lord seems to have used to prepare me for this suffering.

_The life of Teresa of Avila by herself_ ¹

That Teresa of Avila should have suffered, both physically and spiritually, comes as no surprise to a modern audience. We expect her, indeed, to have played upon her vulnerability in recounting both her relationship with the divine and with her human friends and adversaries. A generation of work on female religious experience in the pre-industrial West has taught us that women often seek authority for their religious experience precisely, and paradoxically, by stressing their weakness.² What Teresa reminds us, however, is that the rhetoric of suffering was derived not only from a lexicon of frail womanhood: it was possible to appeal to the Fathers of the Church — specifically, to Gregory the Great and Augustine of Hippo³ — as paragons of vulnerability.

¹ *The life of Teresa of Avila by herself*, c.5, trans. J.M. Cohen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), 43. Abbreviations used in the notes are as follows: _CCSL_ = Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina; _PL_ = Patrologia Latina; _SC_ = Sources Chretiennes.


³ *The life of Saint Teresa*, c.9, trans. Cohen, 69 for Teresa’s reading of Augustine’s *Confessions.*
The Church Fathers appear to us, however, as authoritarian figures, spectacularly invulnerable. Opinions differ as to their merits: on the one hand, their towering role in the formation of Christian tradition has been venerated across the centuries, while on the other, in much contemporary discussion of religion and gender, the lasting influence of their apparent misogyny earns them regular condemnation. In either case, the fact of the Fathers’ subsequent ‘patristic’ status has lead to the unwarranted presumption that they wielded a similar authority in their own day. We are still surprised to learn of the extreme precariousness of an Ambrose or a Gregory the Great;\(^4\) and we lack a critical language in which to assess the ways in which the Fathers sought to articulate their sense of threat and exposure as office-holders in the Church. Quite as vividly as the female mystics of late medieval Europe, the bishops of the early Church sought refuge in the paradox that a public show of weakness might confer increased moral authority. The rhetoric of vulnerability which the female mystic Teresa invoked was, as she well knew, the classic language of male authority in the early Church.

\textit{Nolo Episcopari}

In February of 590, seeing that the Roman people intended to make him their bishop, the monk Gregory contemplated escape from the city — or so it was rumoured abroad.\(^5\) Certainly his hopes that the Emperor in Constantinople would refuse his nomination were dashed. Formal consecration ensued in September, an event which Gregory presented as an unmitigated personal disaster in a torrent of letters which he sent around the Mediterranean to friends and colleagues, both lay and clerical. Before, as a monk, he had been able to maintain himself in some kind of contemplative repose, Gregory averred: now he was a shipwrecked man, drowning on the sea of worldly affairs.\(^6\) That he was completing his \textit{Morals on Job} at this time seemed to him more than a coincidence: ‘And perhaps it was the design of divine providence that, stricken as I am, I should comment on the stricken Job — that by the blows raining on me I should enter more exactly into the mind of a man beaten down’.\(^7\)

In his emphatic protestations of reluctance to assume episcopal office, Gregory drew self-consciously on the example and language of earlier clerics. Gregory of Nazianzen, having been forcibly


\(^{5}\) See Markus, \textit{Gregory}, 13 for the sequence of events.

\(^{6}\) See e.g. Gregory, \textit{Ep. 1.5}; and Markus, \textit{Gregory}, 14 for further references.

\(^{7}\) Gregory, \textit{Moralia in Job, Ep. ad Leandrum 5}, CCSL 143, 6. Note that, like Teresa’s, Gregory’s sufferings were both spiritual and physical (he had gout).
ordained to the priesthood by his father in 361, fled back to his hermitage: there he composed an apology, *On his flight*, arguing that evasion is an appropriate (initial) response when faced with the extraordinary challenge of pastoral office.\(^8\) This treatise — and exactly this argument — Gregory the Great invoked in composing his own *Pastoral Rule* in the months after his accession.\(^9\) From the Latin West, Gregory could look to the precedents of Ambrose and Augustine, both of them ambushed by consecration. In 370 Ambrose, governor of Liguria, attempted (unsuccessfully) to flee the city of Milan having been suddenly acclaimed bishop by a determined assembly of Catholic (as opposed to Arian) citizens.\(^10\) Augustine, having left Ambrose's Milan to live in ascetic brotherhood in his home town of Thagaste, went on a visit to a friend in the town of Hippo: he was seized upon by the crowd and compelled to accept ordination as a priest; four years later he was bishop. Over thirty years later, as we shall see, Augustine was still telling the story of his astonishment at this turn of events to his congregation in Hippo.\(^11\)

The combined example of all these bishops (and others) established the *nolo episcopari* tradition of the medieval Church. By the thirteenth century, the liturgy for the consecration of a bishop involved a ritual of repeated asking and refusing, before, at the third time of asking, the prospective candidate assented. This spectacle earned the bemused respect of early modern observers. Thomas More, in a famous passage in his *History of King Richard III*, likens the pantomime of Richard's as it were unwilling acceptance of the English throne to an episcopal consecration. No-one is really deceived by the reluctance of the soon-to-be incumbent, More comments, but the ritual of refusal, and the suspension of disbelief it requires, may be appropriate nonetheless. In More's words, 'men must sometimes for the manner sake not be aknown what they know'.\(^12\)

Modern scholars, however, have been unable to suspend their disbelief when confronted by the rhetoric of reluctance of the bishops of the early Church. For some, the protestations of an Ambrose or a Gregory represent simply *proforma* enactments of the rites of refusal commonplace for any man assuming civic office in the Roman Empire.\(^13\) Other commentators have seen here the

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\(^11\) See below nn.28, 29.


anguished pleas of men who had vowed themselves to the contemplative life, and who were now forced to immerse themselves in politics and administration — to the great detriment of their spiritual lives.  

Neither interpretation is entirely satisfactory: to insist that the rhetoric of reluctance must either be 'hypocritical' or 'heartfelt' is to miss Thomas More's point that here was a rite of passage, a fiction both transparent and necessary, by which those assuming power announced their change of status.

An ancient audience, by contrast, whether Christian or otherwise, would have had little difficulty in recognizing the meaning of the *nolo episcopari* tradition. In the actions of the Church Fathers, they would have discerned at once the profile of Plato's philosopher-king. In the *Republic*, Plato had argued that philosophers enjoyed the best claim to public power for the very reason that they were the least interested in public power. They of all people could be trusted not to confuse the satisfaction of their private desires with the service of the common good. The fact that a philosopher would have to be forced against his will to accept political office guaranteed the selfless terms on which he would in turn enforce obedience from others.

This was, self-evidently, a male political language. The philosopher who would be king had to stake his claim against those of the male heads of household who would normally expect to occupy public office. The moral advantage enjoyed by the philosopher was that he could claim to have risen above the cares of household management, and the pressures of dynastic ambition. As a man practised in virtue, he exerted greater self-control than other men, and this gave him an extra claim on the allegiance of his fellows. The politics of public office turned on this competitive language of male self-control (which does not mean to say that women were excluded from public life in the ancient world — only that this area of political discourse was gendered male).

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When the Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire, episcopal office became a prize to be won in the arena of civic politics, and bishops sought to appropriate the mantle of the philosopher-king. This was not altogether an easy task. The blatant opportunities for self-advancement now open to Christians left bishops in particular at the mercy of sceptical critics. The pagan historian Ammianus Marcellinus commented acidly on the number of bishops taking advantage of the imperial public transport system to hurry to Church councils.\textsuperscript{19} The so-called shepherds of the flock had seemingly become a bleating group of flatterers.

To the charge that being a Christian in the fourth century was simply a matter of currying imperial favour, the ascetic movement, as personified by the recluse Antony and his biographer Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, had a stringent answer.\textsuperscript{20} Ascetics sought to demonstrate that the end of persecution for Christians did not mean the cessation of their moral effort. It was the specific goal of ascetics who became bishops (like Athanasius) to establish themselves as trustworthy sources of authority in late Roman city. A bishop who showed that he lived a life at least as disciplined as that of a philosopher might persuade his fellow citizens that the episcopal court, for example, was a reliable source of justice.\textsuperscript{21} By the turn of the fifth century, the prominent success of bishops such as Ambrose had lent plausibility to episcopal claims to authority: in publicly rebuking the emperor for his conduct of power, Ambrose had nullified the accusation that all bishops were fawning careerists.\textsuperscript{22} Across the fifth and sixth centuries, episcopal power in the West grew of necessity as the institutions of imperial civic government collapsed — but bishops could never take their situation for granted.\textsuperscript{23} The development and maintenance of episcopal authority was a slow and unremitting task of persuasion.

A closer look at the consecrations of Augustine and Gregory illustrates the kind of political pressures under which a bishop might labour. The people of Hippo knew that Augustine, a brilliant orator who had been at the imperial court, was ‘a catch’: this was why they set upon him to become their priest. But they also knew him to be a self-made man, who had worked his way


\textsuperscript{20} From an extensive literature, see now D. Brakke, \textit{Athanasius and the politics of asceticism} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).


up from relatively humble provincial origins. His enemies might well point out the respects in which episcopal office served his interests and those of his family who followed him to Hippo. Our source for this is Augustine himself, who remained sensitive to the possibility of this accusation deep into the dusk of his career.

In the 420s, when Augustine was in his seventies, a series of scandals in the Church at Hippo threatened to undermine the old man’s credibility. To his dismay, Augustine discovered that, under his nose, clerics were exploiting the monastic institutions of the Church at Hippo for their own ends. In one case a young man had used Augustine’s monastic patronage to acquire himself a bishopric in the North African countryside, which he proceeded to exploit as a petty tyrant. Or again, it came to light that a member of Augustine’s clerical household — who were not supposed to have any private property — had disinherited his sister for the Church at Hippo. Augustine went to the greatest possible lengths to refuse the legacy and to submit all the clergy to an interrogation regarding their financial affairs. The Church at Hippo, which Augustine promoted as a model community of charity based on the example of the first Christians at Jerusalem, could not afford to emit the scent of profiteering.

In the event, no other infractions came to light. In issuing this news to his congregation (itemized cleric by cleric) Augustine took the opportunity to offer a retrospective account of his own tenure of office in the town from the beginning. ‘I am a poor man, born of poor people’, he reminded his audience. He acknowledged the revenues of the Church at Hippo to be twenty times that of his family’s income. But he could not be seen to have sought out consecration:

I came to this town to see a friend, whose soul I thought I could gain for God, so that he could be with us in the monastery. I thought I was safe: this place already had a bishop. I was seized, made a priest, and by this route I arrived at the episcopate.

Once bishop, he had spurned the opportunity to wear silk robes. Augustine’s point was definitively to scotch the accusation that he had taken advantage of clerical office to elevate his social status. In another sermon, delivered on the anniversary of his consecration, most probably in these final years of his life,
Augustine outlined the grave responsibilities of the episcopal office, and the importance of trust between a bishop and his people. As we shall see, this sermon was to receive a wide readership in the Latin West.  

Gregory the Great’s situation was somewhat different. His own family was already of the highest rank; he himself had been prefect of the city before choosing to retire and convert the family mansion on the Caelian Hill into a monastery. Gregory’s return to public office — he was appointed papal ambassador to Constantinople, then, on his return, deacon and papal notary to Pelagius II whom he was to succeed as pope — was only to be expected, and did not leave him open to the charge of social climbing. Gregory was vulnerable, however, in being the first professed ascetic to be elected pope: the carefully ordered ranking system of the Roman clergy usually did not envisage monks vaulting ahead of priests. The normal order of things had been disrupted in 590 by the plague epidemic which carried off Pelagius II and created an atmosphere of crisis. The intrusion by a high-ranking aristocrat and his ascetic companions, however much welcomed by the Roman people, was never accepted by the Roman clergy: they did their best to oust Gregory’s disciples from the Lateran in the generations after his death.  

In such fraught political circumstances, the reluctance of ascetics such as Augustine and Gregory to assume episcopal office was intended to draw on the moral capital of the philosopher as the man detached from the pursuit of self-advancement or advancement for his family. Disdain for power was of a piece with the celibacy of these men and their studious dissociation from money. While in practical terms there is no doubt that episcopal appointment kept a man like Gregory from spending more time in reading or contemplative prayer, it is not the case that assumption of office was incompatible with sustaining an ascetic commitment. On the contrary, the asceticism of these men already constituted a claim to moral authority, which, on consecration, received official ratification.  

The tradition of nolo episcopari appealed to a model of masculinity that was almost a millennium old. Reluctance to power was a gesture universally understood, among the ruling elite at least, and it remained so in succeeding centuries. That it was clerics who managed largely to appropriate the rhetoric of reluctance does not mean to say that the early medieval laity found priestly moral culture uninteresting or unconvincing. The arrival of the barbarian peoples in the Western Empire did not diminish the importance of the ancient discourse of male self-control — if

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30 See below, n.41.
31 See Llewellyn, 'The Roman Church in the seventh century'.
anything, institutional uncertainty increased the social value of this system of moral calibration. Too many accounts of masculinity in the Middle Ages instinctively overestimate the extent to which the world of laymen and their swords was separate from the bookish world of priests and ascetics. We might be safer in assuming that these men inhabited the same moral universe.\textsuperscript{32}

**Vulnerability in Power**

Not content with protesting their reluctance to assume office, Christian bishops stressed the lonely, burdensome, and inalienable responsibility that was involved in its exercise. In seeking to extend the demonstration of reluctance to power into a continuing avowal of vulnerability, bishops again drew upon a classical tradition of lamenting the cares of office;\textsuperscript{33} but they went further than any senator pining for the seclusion of his country estate. Bishops wrote into the definition of their office their sense of endangerment.

A bishop was a watchman, high up and exposed. The very word for bishop in Greek — *epi-skopos* — carries the sense of a man on the look-out, whose solitary duty it is to espy the sins of others. From apostolic times, bishops found their task described by the Lord’s commission to the prophet Ezekiel.

> Son of Man, I have made thee a watchman of the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me. When I say to the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life; the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity. Yet if thou warn the wicked, and he turn not from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul.\textsuperscript{34}

In the Latin West the term *episcopus* when transliterated from the Greek, lost its semantic association with the ‘scopic’ responsibilities of the watchman. To restore this meaning, Latin authors developed a tradition of commentary on the *speculator* of Ezekiel.\textsuperscript{35} By the early fifth century, the liturgy for episcopal consecrations seems to have included a reading of the passage from Ezekiel to remind bishops and their flocks of the challenge ahead. Around the figure of the watchman of the house of Israel, the bishops of


\textsuperscript{34} Ez. 3:17–19, in King James Version, repeated at Ez. 33:7–9.

the early Church collected their thoughts on the vulnerability of those in power.

Modern readers may be more struck by the authoritarianism of the image of the watchman than by the sense of weakness it conveys. The influence of Michel Foucault on contemporary hermeneutics has been such that some find it hard to resist the analogy between the episcopal watchman in his tower with the regime of surveillance — ‘panopticism’ — which Foucault memorably saw to be at work in the modern prison. Some bishops clearly did interpret their role in such a way as to bear out this interpretation: a prime example is Caesarius, bishop of Arles in the early sixth century. Addressing an assembly of clerics in the 520s, Caesarius dramatized the kind of vigilance that a bishop should maintain.

Bishops are called watchmen because they are placed in a higher position, as if at the highest citadel of the Church, namely the altar. From this place, they must watch over the city and the field of God, namely the whole Church. They must not only guard the disposition of the great gates — that is, prevent capital sins with their most wholesome preaching — they must also guard the small doors behind, the little underground passages. In other words, they must continually warn the people to watch the tiny sins that creep up every day, and to purge them with fasting, almsgiving and prayer.

This was not an idle threat. Caesarius’s homilies and in particular his Rule for Virgins exemplify his concern for the minutiae of behaviour and deportment, and his desire to establish what one scholar, borrowing from Foucault, has called ‘the microphysics of power’.

Our own sensitivity to the subtle operations of power, however, should not lead us to miss the salient characteristic of the watchman for contemporaries: his terrifying vulnerability. Of the verses from Ezekiel, Caesarius’s teacher in rhetoric, the African ascetic Julianus Pomerius, commented: ‘Who is there, whose heart is so flinty, who is so made of iron who is not terrified of these words?’ This was a lesson Caesarius learned also from Augustine, and sought to pass on to his clerical colleagues. In the sermon delivered on the anniversary of his consecration, Augustine had dwelt at length on the reading from Ezekiel: it was in turn this Augustinian passage that Caesarius excerpted and adapted for inclusion in a

37 Caesarius, Sermones 1.20, CCSL 104, 16.
39 See Maier, ‘Manicheel!’, 442.
40 Julianus Pomerius, On the contemplative life, 1.20.3, PL 59, 435B.
homiliary of fifty sermons of the bishop of Hippo. Augustine’s response to the Lord’s instruction to Ezekiel to ‘give them warning from me’ was as follows:

What shall I do? [...] Can I keep silent? I am afraid to keep silent. I am forced to preach. Terror struck as I am, I must myself strike terror. [...] Lord, see what I say. Lord, you know that you have struck terror into me, when the words of your prophet were read out.41

Faced with the dire accountability for the sins of those in his charge, Augustine throws himself on the mercy of his congregation. ‘Be afraid with me, that you may rejoice with me’.

We may be safe in assuming that Caesarius absorbed these lessons in vulnerability. As Caesarius’s sixth-century biographers and his most recent modern exegete all make clear, the strident assertiveness of the bishop of Arles must be understood in the context of his tenuous hold on power in the city.42 He had forced his way into office as a young man, exploiting family connections, and displacing a local candidate from the city clergy. He was exiled twice from the city, and was constantly prey to the accusation of treason. With his own stewardship of the Church at Arles under such hostile scrutiny, small wonder that Caesarius went to extraordinary lengths to emphasize the meticulousness of his pastoral gaze.

The tradition of episcopal identification with the speculator culminates in the writings of Gregory the Great.43 Having completed his Morals on Job, Gregory turned to the figure of Ezekiel. He was fascinated by the obscurity of the prophet’s vision of the Temple (ch.40), but he was, equally, compelled by the passage on the watchman. Its spiritual pertinence was no doubt heightened by its timely and literal aptness: as he composed his homilies, Gregory had to keep an eye open for the advance of the Lombards across the Po and towards Rome. For all that he may have drawn on earlier writers in framing his exegesis,44 Gregory offers a highly wrought personal meditation on the rhetorical exposure of the watchman, understanding him to be a man who was forced to condemn himself out of his own mouth.

Gregory’s exegesis of the passage starts confidently enough. ‘The man entrusted with the care of others is called a watchman, that he may be seated in the spiritual heights, and that he may take the

41 Augustine, Serm. 339.8, Miscellanea Agostiniana (Rome, 1930), 199.
43 The following summarizes the argument of C. Leyser, “Let me speak, Let me speak”: vulnerability and authority in Gregory the Great’s Homilies on Ezekiel’ in Gregorio Magno e il suo tempo (Rome: Institutum Patristicum ‘Augustinianum’, 1991), 169–82.
44 Gregory is likely to have known of Augustine’s sermon, and possibly the comments of Pomerius and Caesarius.
How hard this is for me: my own utterance! Even as I speak, it is as though I beat myself. My tongue does not keep to preaching as it should, neither does my life follow my tongue, try as I might to make it. I am often drawn into useless chat. Becoming sluggish and negligent, I stop encouraging and edifying those around me. In the sight of God, I am struck dumb and turned garrulous: dumb to say the things that matter, garrulous when it comes to trivia. But here is the word of God about the life of the watchman, and it makes me speak. I cannot keep silent, and yet I am afraid to cut myself down by speaking. Let me speak, let me speak: let the sword of God’s word lodge in the heart of my neighbour, even if it passes through me. Let me speak, let me speak: let the word of God sound through me, even as it sounds against me.45

At this point, Gregory returns to the point he had so often made before: when he was in the monastery, his tongue was less wayward, his mind more focused on the divine. It is the round of worldly business that has unbalanced him so. He concludes: ‘What sort of watchman can I be? I do not stand tall on the mountain of good works — I languish in the valley of my weakness’.

To insist that the experience of Augustine, Caesarius and Gregory in power was one of vulnerability is not to say that these men were close to abdication. Their laments on the watchman are not the words of men who are about to walk away from office. Theirs is rather a charter for a public rhetoric of vulnerability in power. The point is not that the bishops cannot begin to speak or that they about to fall silent — because they evidently are speaking and will continue to do so. Far from being a resignation speech, the effect of their declaration is to elicit the complicity of their hearers in their exercise of power. The bishops appear to throw themselves at the mercy of public sympathy — but the effect is in some ways the reverse. Their flocks are shown to be at episcopal mercy, because theirs is the ineluctable authority of the watchman.

There are two aspects to this paradoxical assertiveness. First, the bishops’ self-representation as ready to accept condemnation in order to save their hearers publicly guarantees their good faith. All must recognize their authority as a sacrifice of their own wellbeing for the common good, not a selfish abuse of power. Secondly, by announcing their own shortcomings, the bishops forestall the possibility of criticism from anyone else: they are their own sharpest critics.

In suggesting that a declaration of vulnerability functions as an assertion of authority I do not mean to imply, however, that these men are being ‘insincere’, or that theirs is a ‘manipulative’ rhetoric. With barbarians outside the gates, and factional politics inside, we may well believe these men when they say they are vulnerable. To

45 Gregory, Homiliae in Hiezechiæm, i. Il. 5-6, CCSL 142, 170-72.
hold power in any situation is to be vulnerable, to stand in the exposed and isolated position of the watchman. What the bishops did was to turn vulnerability to their own advantage, to make it the ironic basis for their exercise of power. A responsibility to eke out the chances of their political survival, not the luxury of *Realpolitik*, lay behind their public display of fear and weakness.

*Powers of Correction*

The adumbration of the rhetoric of vulnerability was, at least in part, a strategy forced on bishops in the early medieval West, isolated as they were by the collapse of secular government. Pope Gregory's successors had to wait for well over a century before they could be confident in the friendship and protection of a secular regime — that of the Carolingians. It is also the case, however, that ascetic bishops chose to accent their isolation in authority. Integral to their representation of themselves was the idea that they alone could accept the commission of the watchman. When the Carolingians finally arrived in Italy to receive royal and then imperial coronation from the bishop of Rome, they undertook also the challenge of this episcopal, and specifically Gregorian, conception of moral rule.46

In the ancient world, the man who ruled alone was a tyrant: the mark of the moral ruler was his willingness to accept correction from his (philosophical) advisors. It was conversely the task of those around the ruler to produce frank speech, not the deceptions of flattery. This symbiosis changed when bishops took over as philosopher-kings. As *speculatores* they gave out correction to others — and they themselves were somewhat equivocal about the terms on which they would accept it from others.47

The Lord's commission to Ezekiel was an injunction to dispense correction by any means necessary. Here the bishops could summon up the tradition of discernment of temperament that had been honed for centuries in the philosophical schools. A teacher of wisdom would always be able to perceive what it was that was troubling his disciple, and what remedy to prescribe. In all of his writings (and most obviously in the *Pastoral Rule*), Gregory the Great sought to codify the kinds of advice that should be given to all sorts and conditions of people.48

Studious vulnerability allowed bishops to avoid hesitation in their administering of correction. By continually affirming their own failings they ensured that their words of correction could always


47 A shift discussed in an unpublished paper by K. Cooper, 'Late Roman advice on late Roman advisors'.

be seen to be offered in a spirit of humility. If in doubt, however, it was better to err on the side of zeal than of caution. Augustine so instructed those in charge of monastic communities:

Requirements of discipline may compel you to speak harsh words to young people. Even if you feel your criticism has been immoderate, you are not obliged to ask their pardon; too much attention to humility in their regard would undermine their ready acceptance of your authority.49

Augustine’s emphasis on the community of charity, especially in a monastic context, did not prevent him from establishing a clear line of command.

Gregory is even more explicit: a subject was not necessarily the best person to correct a ruler. While it was possible to find precedents in sacred scripture for such events, it was not advisable to push these precedents too far.

David willingly harkened to the reproof of a subject. But in this regard the office of ruling must be tempered with such great art of moderation, that the minds of subjects, when demonstrating themselves capable of taking right views in some matters, are given freedom of expression, but freedom that does not issue into pride; otherwise, when liberty of speech is granted too generously, the humility of their own lives will be lost.50

The high tower of the watchman has space for one man only: no others can share in the frightening assumption of his duties.

That this was a message not lost on men in power in the early Middle Ages emerges as soon as we begin to hear regularly from these men in the sources, from the ninth century onwards. The clearest example is furnished by King Alfred of Wessex (d. 899), the one Anglo-Saxon leader who managed to withstand the assaults of the Vikings. Alfred was exceptionally well-versed in the patristic language of authority, and wished his aristocracy to be so too. Not content with commissioning translations of Gregory the Great’s works into English, he himself undertook to translate Gregory’s Pastoral Rule. At least one of his circle, his chaplain and biographer Asser, was fully receptive to Alfred’s enthusiasm. Asser’s Life of Alfred presents its subject as a perfect study in Gregorian vulnerability and authority.

‘King Alfred has been transfixed with the nails of many tribulations, even though he is invested with royal authority’, begins Asser.51 He then describes the king’s ‘unknown illness’, the


51 For this and what follows, see Asser, Life of King Alfred 91, trans. S. Keynes, M. Lapidge, Alfred the Great (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 101–2.
afflictions of which are random 'such that he does not have a single hour of peace in which he does not suffer from the disease itself or else, gloomily dreading it, is not driven to almost despair'. The king's bodily illness runs in parallel to the afflictions of the kingdom. 'Moreover, he was perturbed — and not without good reason — by the relentless attacks of foreign peoples, which he continually sustained from land and sea without any interval of peace'.

Alfred's weaknesses stated, Asser can rally to assert the strengths they conferred upon him.

Yet once he had taken over the helm of his kingdom, he alone, sustained by divine assistance, struggled like an excellent pilot to guide his ship laden with much wealth to the desired and safe haven of his homeland, even though all his sailors were virtually exhausted. [...] For by gently instructing, cajoling, urging, commanding, and (in the end, when his patience was exhausted) by sharply chastising those who were disobedient [...] he carefully and cleverly exploited and converted his thegns most dear to him [...] to his own will and to the general advantage of the whole realm.

The ruler's dispensation of correction was vouchsafed, not infected, by his vulnerability. Asser's Life of Alfred begins to demonstrate the ways in which the episcopal discourse of suffering in authority had permanently raised the ceiling of moral expectation for those in power in western Europe.

In Jesus as Mother, Caroline Bynum offers to explain why it was that twelfth-century Cistercians, in startling fashion, elaborated a whole range of physical and affective imagery in which to describe a lactating, maternal Christ. It was not because they were especially interested in developing religious opportunities for women. They sought rather for new language in which to describe the exercise of their own authority, to distinguish it from that exercised by men in the world. As Bynum goes on to show, however, whatever the intentions of Bernard of Clairvaux and his peers, by the end of the twelfth century, religious women had appropriated this language of Jesus as Mother for their own devotional purposes. 52

So it was with the male language of vulnerability. Well before the twelfth century, Christian men in positions of public power had developed a language with which to express and, if possible, turn to their advantage, the precariousness of their position. Trading on already established notions of moral masculinity, these men were unafraid to depict themselves as weak, inadequate, and continually suffering rulers — because they knew that their political survival

52 C. Bynum, Jesus as mother: studies in the spirituality of the high Middle Ages (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 110–69, 170–262.
depended on their demonstrating their absolute disinterest in personal gain from their office.

Teresa of Avila was not at all the first to invoke the patristic language of vulnerability. In the ancient and late ancient world, moreover, it was not only laymen and clerics who spoke this language: it could also be used by Roman noblewomen.\textsuperscript{53} Parsing female vulnerability is beyond the scope of the present study: what we can say is that in invoking the language of weakness, aristocratic women were not necessarily attempting to differentiate themselves from men. Frailty was a language in which powerful men were fluent.

\textsuperscript{53} See Clark, 'Authority and humility', and Cooper, \textit{The virgin and the bride}. 