Identities of various kinds have been a popular topic for some time now in Anglo-Saxon studies. Ethnic identities and concepts of the gens or nation have probably garnered most attention, with important contributions from Susan Reynolds, Patrick Wormald, Nicholas Howe and others. Old English poetry has provided material for investigations of the individual and the subject. The study under review, however, opens up an important new angle by addressing the question of agency. This is a term we tend to take for granted, but as Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe convincingly shows, we cannot afford to do so.

Focusing on texts produced in the milieu of reformed Benedictine monasticism, she examines how agency is expressed through obedience—to the Rule, monastic superiors and God-ordained destiny—and how this in turn produces monastic and sometimes saintly identity. In a series of detailed close-readings she finds that the celebration of obedience produces various tensions to do with personal will and choice, but she also teaches modern readers to beware of our common-sense assumptions about what it means to be an agent.

The introduction begins with a provocatively strange incident from Wulfstan Cantor's "Life of Æthelwold. The saintly archbishop has asked a monk, Ælfstan, to provide food for the craftsmen, but Ælfstan has exceeded the letter of the order by fetching water, cleaning and lighting the fires as well. Æthelwold tells him that 'you have stolen this obedience from me, in which you employ yourself without my knowledge', and challenges him to take out a morsel from the bottom of a cauldron of boiling water. Ælfstan obeys and passes the ordeal. The surprisingly severe reaction of Æthelwold to actions that seem on the face of it to show exemplary obedience allows O'Keeffe to tease out key issues that will recur through the book: the role (or lack of a role) of personal initiative within obedience; the relationship of abbot and monk and the dependence of those identities on each other; the need to test and interpret both the meanings of commands and the motives behind actions, making obedience a much less simple matter than may at first appear; and the fact that, while obedience involves the sacrifice of choice in day-to-day matters, it is itself seen as the product of choice and the expression of a right will. From this brilliant opening the introduction proceeds to sections expounding the theoretical terms 'agency' and 'agent action' and discussing the thought on free will, choice and obedience in the works of Ælfric, the Rule of St Benedict and commentaries on the Rule.

Chapter two examines a series of different versions of the Life of St Dunstan and how they present the saint's entry into monastic life. Anglo-Saxon saints' lives tend to pay little attention to conversion, emphasising rather obedience to God's plan and a destiny for holiness that is often manifested in childhood. The earliest Life of Dunstan, that of 'B', pays more attention to conversion than most, but it presents the alternative to monasticism, marriage, as a temptation to sin rather than a valid choice. Dunstan is moved to obey the advice of Bishop Oda and become a monk when he has been chastened by a severe illness. The version of Osbern, however, avoids the language of predestination in this section; Osbern even has Dunstan argue that there is more virtue in the goodness of a secular man than of a monk, since the former acts freely (in libertas) but the latter through compulsion (necessitas). Osbern presents self-will as the supreme temptation for Dunstan but also 'wrestles' (93) with the idea that Dunstan's submission is nonetheless a completely free choice. Dunstan's speech on libertas...
Chapter three continues to explore the problematics of obedience with a discussion of how Ælfric's *Colloquy* addresses oblatory child-monks. How can their obedience to the Rule, a duty imposed on them when their parents gave them to the monastery, also be framed as their own choice? The key phrase is the Consiliarius's admonition to the boys to ‘be what you are’ (*Esto quod es*): this phrase ‘speaks to the need for forming identity while claiming that identity is always already formed’ and also betrays ‘anxieties over the wills of oblates, whose religious commitments were made by others’ (95). The chapter contextualises a subtle reading of the *Colloquy* in a wider discussion of monastic education, arguing that the monastic identity formed for the oblates is one both conferred on them and needing to be acquired through the laborious entry into a particular textual culture.

Chapters four through six are shorter than those preceding and all concern one-time inhabitants of the female community at Wilton. Chapter four concentrates on how Goscelin frames St Edith's oblation at the age of two as simultaneously her parents' choice and her own (the child, presented with an array of royal finery on the one hand and a veil, psalter and communion vessels on the other, portentously picks up the veil). Chapter five deals with Gunhild, abducted from Wilton by Count Alan Rufus, and how Anselm's letters to her view her as an agent in her own abduction and exhort her to abandon her wrong love and return to the veil. Chapter six analyses Goscelin's *Liber confortatorius*, addressed to his one-time pupil Eve after her departure for seclusion at Angers. All three show us male authors constructing images of female obedience and choice and seeking to diagnose particular kinds of religious identity (saintly or monastic) in the women they portray. All three deal with the symbolism of wearing the veil and the extent to which identity as a religious--as diagnosed by those around them--is acquired through dress and by performing the routines of religious life. Anselm views Gunhild as a nun because he has seen her wear the habit, whether or not she ever took formal vows; on the other hand, in a case discussed in chapter four, Edith/Matilda vigorously asserts, in Eadmer's account, that she wore the veil by no choice of her own and--significantly--also against the will of her father, and is therefore no nun. Another key discussion that runs across chapters addresses rites of consecration and the way they present the woman both as 'an object of transfer' and one who gives 'free consent' (201). These chapters convey a powerful sense of what could be at stake, both politically and personally, in reading a woman's religious commitment. Chapter five in particular demonstrates how (in the phrasing of the Afterword), ‘since the wills of individual Christians were understood to be free by definition, it was possible to attribute praise or blame… on the basis of intentions inferred from observing those individuals' performances’ (247). In the case of Gunhild a modern reader is likely to be depressed by the injustice of this procedure. In the case of Eve, however, O'Keeffe is able to detect between the lines of Goscelin's account an instance of free agency as moderns might celebrate it, her personal choice of a form of religious life, reclusion, that lacked the 'props and signs' of the nunnery (245).

There is far more in this book than I can summarize in this review. In particular it is hard to exemplify the play of contradictions that is uncovered by the close-reading technique, or to do justice to the many delicate insights into particular authors and texts. The book is theoretically sophisticated but wears this learning lightly, making it highly readable (although I felt the chapter on the *Colloquy* was slightly repetitive). I finished reading with a desire to think further about how the conjunction of free will and obedience plays out in relation to other questions, such as (my own particular area of interest) the representation of emotion, which can function in texts of the Reform as way of signalling sincere conformity or the lack of it. The focus of *Stealing Obedience* is largely on late and Latin texts, and clearly more could be done with these ideas in relation to the vernacular corpus and works of Bede, Alcuin and others. One might also want to search for examples of writers discussing their own obedience; it is noticeable how overwhelmingly the texts analysed here construct the obedience and agency of others. As it stands, however, *Stealing Obedience* is an innovative and illuminating study addressing a coherent body of literature; the way it straddles the traditional divide of the Norman Conquest is a particularly productive feature.
In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content: Stealing Obedience opens with a scene from Wulfstan of Winchester’s Vita of St....  Stealing Obedience: Narratives of Agency and Identity in Later Anglo-Saxon England by Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe. Justin Haar. Published: 1 January 2013. Stealing Obedience explores how a Christian notion of agent action - where freedom incurs responsibility - was a component of identity in the last hundred years ... While concerns about will and obedience figure widely across the centuries of Christian thinking on individual responsibility, I have been interested to study agency and its interconnections with identity and obedience in the last hundred years of Anglo-Saxon England, marked as that time span was by two dissimilar but culturally transformative events – the Benedictine Reform and the Norman Conquest.