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Flush with traces of the nuns' heady self-importance, the Helfta writings, although they again and again praised God as source of all rewards and all joys, never compromise the importance of the nuns' contribution to a joint endeavor with God. The *Book of Special Grace* instructed readers that there is no action, however small, that if performed on earth in God's praise does not increase the joy of all the saints.⁶¹

While the notion that the saints rejoice in right actions of the living is widespread in the Middle Ages,⁶² the religiosity of the nuns stands apart for the *unabashed enthusiasm* with which they projected themselves onto the particulars of Mary's and the saints' experience of heaven. We can attribute this fervor in part to the nuns' notion that heaven is an unending increase in bliss, that Mary and the saints perpetually share in one another's joys, that the nuns were themselves already integrated into the celestial society, and that Christ exulted in the pleasure the nuns gave to him. Joined to an unremitting sense of that all who are or will be saved in some sense really *are* Christ, the Helfta authors elaborated on the joy with which their community streaked the heavens.



⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 1:31, 106.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 1:19, 79.

LEPROSY, CHASTITY, AND DESIRE IN MEDIEVAL HAGIOGRAPHY

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Readers of medieval hagiography are unlikely to be surprised by the image of a saint kissing or embracing a leper, as these were among the ultimate acts of charity and bodily mortification that a person could perform.¹ But while the impetus for a saint to caress a leper might be easy to grasp, the layers of meaning that contribute to the significance of the leprosy topos in hagiography and literature require more reflection. This is largely because the leper as a recognizable construct within the medieval imagery is itself difficult to reduce to a simple, static archetype.

From the dehumanized, hyper-sexualized masculine menace deployed as a plot device in medieval romance, to the leper-as-Christ, leprosy-as-holiness analogue, lepers find a fluctuating and often ambiguous place in the annals of medieval literature, and one that is significantly influenced by the characters with whom they interact. This essay focuses on how leprosy tropes are deployed in the *vitae* of a series of chaste holy women. The lives of Catherine of Siena, Margery Kempe, and Alice of

¹ A note on the use of the terms "leper" and "leprosy": the disease that was once known as leprosy is today referred to as Hansen's Disease. This terminology is used in large part to dispel the stigma attached to the term "leper," which we now recognize as an ableist slur. It is important to maintain this distinction in modern medicine and speech as a consideration for the people who live with the disease today. However, in keeping with recent scholars who have focused on the disease in the Middle Ages, including Carole Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England* (Rochester: Boydell, 2006) and Julie Orlemanski, I am choosing to continue using the terms "leper" and "leprosy" in order to maintain consistency with the terminology in the primary texts that I am analyzing, and to highlight the force of "leper" as an othering and marginalizing social category in pre-modern life.

Schaerbeek all dramatize the resonance between performing chastity and performing charity when faced with leprous bodies.

In analyzing how saintly women embody and embrace this tension, the study will consider how sexuality, and especially chastity, finds itself at the intersection of conceptions of the holy and the transgressive in constructions of leprosy. These miraculous interactions center on bodily disease and holy charity; yet the specters of moral leprosy and dangerous sexuality are not entirely absent. Through analysis of these sources, it will be argued that the desires of the flesh are constantly implied by the presence of leprosy, illuminating the virginal chastity of the saint through stark contrast, and emphasizing her erotic love for her Bridegroom all the more sharply. The intimate moments of contact and exchange highlighted in these texts intensify and complicate expressions of gender, sexuality, and piety, providing a unique look at saints and lepers both as symbols and as performing subjects.

Modern scholars have broadly explored and complicated the relationship between leprosy and sexual transgression in medieval texts. Saul Brody's formative 1974 study, *The Disease of the Soul*, foregrounds the primacy of literary traditions that center leprosy as a bodily manifestation of sin, and especially sexual sin.² This work has been deeply influential for subsequent studies of medieval leprosy while also proving widely contentious.³

As later literary scholars like Byron Grigsby and Alexandra Houston have argued, moral leprosy was associated with a broad

² Saul Brody, *The Disease of the Soul: Leprosy in Medieval Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974).

³ Scholars whose studies of leprosy rely on the relationship between leprosy and sexual sin include R.I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Authority and Deviance in Western Europe 950-1250* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Mark Pegg, "Le corps et l'autorité: la lèpre de Badouin IV" in *Annales: Economies, sociétés, civilisations*, 45/2 (1990) 265-87; Mary Douglas, "Witchcraft and Leprosy: Two Strategies of Exclusion," *Man, New Series* 26/4 (1991) 723-36; Peter Lewis Allen, *The Wages of Sin: Sex and Disease, Past and Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Christina Welch and Rohan Brown, "From Villainous Letch and Sinful Outcast, to 'Especially beloved of God': Complicating the Medieval Leper Through Gender and Social Status," *Historical Reflections* 42/1 (2016) 48-60.

range of sinful activities, from pride and avarice to gluttony, and was sometimes simply used as a metaphor for original sin.⁴ Grigsby even suggests that any significant link between leprosy and sexual sin was more early modern than medieval. Another contingent of scholars have decried the focus on moral leprosy more generally, suggesting that it paints an unbalanced picture of how the disease was experienced by real people. Brody's argument leads to the bleak conclusion that people with leprosy in the Middle Ages were generally regarded as untouchable sinners, and that they were locked away in prison-like leprosaria in order to protect the general populace from both physical *and* spiritual contagion.

Carole Rawcliffe has argued that such misconceptions stem from nineteenth-century anti-medieval polemic in scholarship, along with an uncritical emphasis on leprosy in literary sources. She claims that "the treatment of fictional characters ... as if they were real historical case studies has further consolidated the intimate relationship between sexual licence and leprosy that now features so prominently in mainstream scholarship."⁵ Social and medical historical studies in the past three decades have emphasized leprosy as a physical disease rather than a moral one, and explored the ways that it manifested in medieval society as a lived reality that necessitated systematic care.⁶ Historians like Rawcliffe, François-Olivier Touati, Françoise Beriac, Luke Demaitre, and Elma Brenner provide evidence that people with leprosy received significant support from a range of religious, secular, and medical institutions and individuals. These scholars

⁴ Byron L. Grigsby, *Pestilence in Medieval and Early Modern Literature* (New York, 2003); Alexandra Houston, "'Seiknes Incurabil': The Evolution of Literary Representations of Leprosy in Medieval and Early Modern English Narratives," *Chicago Journal of History* 7 (2016) 30-41.

⁵ Carole Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2006), 87.

⁶ For more on leprosaria and institutional charity for lepers in the Middle Ages see, Rawcliffe; Anne Lester, *Creating Cistercian Nuns: The Women's Religious Movement and Its Reform in Thirteenth-Century Champagne* (Ithaca, 2011); Elma Brenner, *Leprosy and Charity in Medieval Rouen* (Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 2015); Elma Brenner, "Between Palliative Care and Curing the Soul: Medical and Religious Responses to Leprosy in France and England, c. 1100 - c. 1500," in *Medicine, Religion and Gender in Medieval Culture*, ed. Naoe Kukita Yoshikawa (Cambridge: 2015) 221-235;

have posited that lepers were important figures in the economy of charity and penitential prayer, and that they often continued to operate as functioning members of the Christian body politic.⁷

In order to reconcile the range of literary sources that center on moral leprosy with the vast body of historical evidence that people with leprosy were not at all considered to be sinners, it helps to clearly separate the idea of leprosy into two classifications: leprosy of the body, and leprosy of the soul. While the two categories inevitably inform each other, they also do meaningfully different, and largely oppositional (spiritual) work. Leprosy of the body was thought to serve as a purgatory on earth, cleansing the soul from sin, and allowing the sufferer to ascend directly to heaven after death. Leprosy of the soul, on the other hand, was the manifestation of sin itself that required penance lest it lead to damnation.

The theological effects of the two conditions couldn't be more distinct. Yet, as with any theoretical binary, one must also recognize these terms as largely dynamic, shifting, and sometimes overlapping categories. Though this essay focuses on leprosy of the body – and on people who interact with bodily lepers – ideas about leprosy of the soul continue to inform these narratives and relationships (and vice versa). Julie Orlemanski, who usefully divides leprosy rhetorics into affective and moralistic modes of representation, suggests that “Moralistic leprosy is semiotic, or metaphorical in the etymological sense of the term, in that it “carries over” or “transfers” meaning from the corporeal to the spiritual level.”⁸

It may be suggested that the reverse is also true, and that both categories impact and inform each other at a conceptual

⁷ François-Olivier Touati, *Maladie et société au Moyen Âge: la lèpre, les lépreux et les léproseries dans la province ecclésiastique de Sens jusqu'au milieu du XIV^e Siècle* (Paris: De Boeck Université, 1998); Françoise Bériac-Lainé, *Histoire des lépreux au Moyen Âge: une société d'exclus* (Paris: Imago, 1998); Luke Demaitre, *Leprosy in Premodern Medicine: A Malady of the Whole Body* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); Brenner, *Leprosy and Charity*.

⁸ Julie Orlemanski, “Desire and Defacement in *The Testament of Cresseid*,” in *Reading Skin in Medieval Literature and Culture*, ed. Katie Walter (New York: Palgrave, 2013) 161-81, 163.

level, even as they do different work at a theological level. Though it is useful to mark these discourses as distinct, it would be specious to suggest that they weren't significantly in dialogue. As complex as one finds the line between body and soul, so blurred is the line between moral and physical leprosy.

With this in mind, one place where leprosy of the body and leprosy of the soul do seem to have influenced each other is, indeed, on the question of sexuality. Setting aside the moral problematics of fornication, it is clear that the relationship between leprosy and sexuality was a question of physical transmission and symptoms, of medicine, and of ideas about disease and embodiment. Medical texts did indicate that the malady could be transmitted congenitally or through intercourse. Moreover, the idea that leprosy could produce an unnaturally strong libido endured in popular rumor.⁹ This assessment was made early on by Greek scholars like Aretaeus of Cappadocia and Rufus of Ephesus (c. first or second century CE).¹⁰ While their sources don't seem to have been translated into Latin until the later Middle Ages, echoes of their claims were still found in romance literature – works that largely contributed to the conflation of leprosy with sexual immorality.¹¹

While acknowledging that the relationship between leprosy and sexuality has been widely exaggerated in modern

⁹ Modern medical research has largely disproven the link between leprosy and heightened sex drive, indicating that libido is actually significantly reduced during flareups of the disease. Scholars like Stephen Ell have suggested that this might account for the notion of heightened sex drive in medieval medical literature: one's libido might seem particularly strong by contrast in periods of remission. Stephen R. Ell, “Blood and Sexuality in Medieval Leprosy,” *Janus: Revue Internationale de l'Histoire des Sciences de la Médecine, de la Pharmacie et de la Technique* 81/1-4 (1984) 153-54, 160.

¹⁰ For more on the history of leprosy and lust in Byzantine medicine, see Timothy Miller and John Nesbitt, *Walking Corpses: Leprosy in Byzantium and the Medieval West* (Ithaca, 2014) 60-64.

¹¹ One often cited example is Beroul's adaptation of the Tristan story. It is also a factor in Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*, and the Occitan Arthurian tale *Jaufre*, among others. Beroul, *The Romance of Tristan*, translated by Alan S. Fedrick (New York: Penguin Classics, 1970); Robert Henryson, “The Testament of Cresseid,” in *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. Robert L. Kindrick (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997); *Jaufre: An Occitan Arthurian Romance*, trans. Ross Arthur (New York: Routledge, 1992).

scholarship, it cannot be suggested that it was nonexistent in the medieval mindset. In the narratives explored, sexuality is an undertone, but one that is invariably present. It is also an undertone that the saintly caretakers use to their advantage; it does the work of enhancing qualities and expressions of virginal chastity and charity, rather than affronting them.

The following sections analyze three examples of women for whom the mingling of charity, chastity, and leprosy served as a recipe for stirring a unique form of saintly desire.

Catherine of Siena: Patience, Charity, and Loving the Leper as the Heavenly Bridegroom

Catherine of Siena's treatment of a leprous woman named Tecca is remarkable in medieval hagiography because of the detail about both women, saint and patient. Raymond of Capua (c.1330-1399) crafted *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena* with an eye to such evidence, in an attempt to prove the authenticity of her miraculous charity.¹² For Raymond, Catherine's deep compassion and desire to care for the poor and sick stems from her charitable saintliness and love for Christ, her Bridegroom. While other stories of saints embracing or caring for people with leprosy are brief and impersonal, Raymond makes a point of stressing the long interval over which Catherine cared for Tecca, and the self sacrifice involved in providing such protracted palliative support.¹³

¹² Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, Trans. Conleth Kearns (Wilmington: Dominican Publications, 1980). All English translations for Raymond's *Life of St. Catherine* will be drawn from Kearns.

¹³ Many earlier *vitae* incorporate leprosy in miracle stories or in examples of saintly charity. For instance, the kiss that St. Martin shares with a leprous man results in a miraculous cure. St. Radegund treats and feeds a group of women with leprosy who arrive at her door against the protests of her attendants. Neither of these cases focus on the characters of the sick people, nor do they provide drawn out interactions with them. Even in the *Life of St. Francis*, who famously lives in a leprosarium for a short time after his conversion, we find little specific detail about the people with leprosy whom he served. Sulpicius Severus, *The Life of Saint Martin*, trans. Richard J. Goodrich (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2015); Venantius Fortunatus, "The Life of the Holy Radegund," in *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, ed. Jo Ann McNamara, John E. Halborg, and E. Gordon Whatley,

The detail he supplies about Tecca's hospice – and the simple consideration of including her name – do the work of authenticating her story for the purposes of his *Vita*; but they also give insight into the life and frustrations of a woman suffering with leprosy. While her experiences are detailed primarily for the purposes of extolling Catherine's virtues against Tecca's own vices, one is also provided with a rare look at how a real woman with leprosy reacted to being cared for by a saint. Though their relationship is fraught, Catherine's interactions with Tecca highlight her holy commitment to charity and show how this virtue is inextricably linked with her love for the Heavenly Bridegroom. Her expressions of charity and devotional care towards Tecca's leprous body become pathways for highlighting the erotic chastity of her virginal soul's commitment to Christ – even as Tecca herself struggles with the hardships of her disease and confinement.

As her confessor, Raymond was close to Catherine in her later life, and knew the particulars of her character and context intimately. Unlike the many hagiographers who were distanced from their subjects by decades or centuries, he was able to collect firsthand data from a range of witnesses to her miraculous piety. Raymond's attention to specifics speaks to a process of canonization in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that placed greater emphasis on extensive and unequivocal proof of sainthood. He understood that the burden of proving Catherine's saintliness lay on himself as her spiritual director and biographer; it was necessary to provide as much detail about her pious way of life and the miracles she performed as possible.¹⁴

Yet although Raymond supplies more historical detail to Catherine's interaction with Tecca than is found in most

trans. Jo Ann McNamara (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992); Thomas of Celano, *The Francis Trilogy of Thomas of Celano*, ed. Regis Armstrong, Wayne Hellmann, and William Short (New York: New City Press, 2004).

¹⁴ Indeed, he makes a point of noting the trustworthiness of his sources and witnesses to Catherine's deeds, which for this account included the writings of Fra Tommaso, the words of Fra Bartolommeo di Domenico da Siena (whom he notes is now a Master of Sacred Theology and Provincial of the Roman Province), Lapa and Lisa (along with a number of other women), "worthy of all credit" (*The Life of Saint Catherine of Siena*, 138).

hagiographic leper stories, one must still read this evidence with an eye to his interests in canonization and the spiritual trends of the time. John Coakley has suggested that Raymond's chief struggle in validating his argument for sainthood was finding a way to reconcile Catherine's very active and political life with the current emphasis on women's passivity and contemplation in spiritual matters. Along with her mystical experiences, he therefore focuses on the virtues of patience and charity that she performed while actively serving her community. Coakley argues that Raymond "is asserting the necessary pairing of contemplation and action, the simultaneity of the inward life of love for Christ that finds expression in the spirit and the outward life of love for her neighbor that finds expression in the body."¹⁵

Of course, Raymond's inevitable attempts to shape and manipulate evidence from Catherine's life do not invalidate the historical significance of the detail that he supplies from her interlocutors and eyewitnesses. There is no debate that she cared for a woman called Tecca, and no reason to doubt that the experience strengthened her devotion to Christ. Whether or not elements of the story were embellished, Raymond certainly provides a contemporary portrait of idealized female piety that centered patience, chaste eroticism, and devotion to the sick. With a discerning eye to Raymond's interests and innovations, one can find in the story of Catherine and Tecca certain useful kernels of possibility for understanding what it meant for a saintly woman and a woman with leprosy to interact in fourteenth-century Siena.

The incredible bodily and social devastation wrought by leprosy largely accounts for its centrality in the lives of saints, who are called to care for the world's most destitute. Raymond's initial portrait of Tecca thus largely reduces her to her various complaints. He claims that she is a poor and sick woman who, "Lacking all means of support ... found herself compelled to look about for some hospital where she would find those remedies for her sickness which she could not provide for

¹⁵ John Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and their Male Collaborators* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) 178.

herself."¹⁶ Already her situation appears bleak: her poverty exacerbates her illness because she is unable to receive the proper care. Raymond adds that "her sickness took a turn for the worse and leprosy broke out all over her body."¹⁷ This compounds her sufferings because, as Raymond notes, "no one could be found to attend to her in her sickness through fear of infection,"¹⁸ and instead locals attempted to send her into exile "as was the rule with lepers."¹⁹

Tecca's suffering and exile provide a stark background against which to highlight the miracle of Catherine's charity. When Catherine hears of her plight, she seeks her out immediately, "afire with the fire of charity," and embraces her.²⁰ Her desire is not slowed by hesitation or concern for her own bodily health; she only knows that she must care for this woman with compassion, patience, and above all, touch. Where others shunned and avoided Tecca, Catherine's first instinct is to embrace her. Where others feared the contagion of her illness, Catherine is drawn to it. Her relationship to Tecca reflects Matthew's parable of the sheep and the goats; the righteous are those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and care for the sick, for, as Christ says, "as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me."²¹

As Raymond elucidates Catherine's strong and immediate desire for Tecca, something significant arises in the language of their gender dynamics: Catherine sees the woman not simply as an invalid in her care, but as "her Spouse himself."²² Her impetus to care for Tecca comes in part because she sees her not as Tecca, but as the Heavenly Bridegroom – as "one of the least of these," and as the figure for whom her vow of virginity was made. Her virginal chastity – the absence of sexuality that defines her sexuality – is directed towards Christ. She abstains from marriage and sex and lust so that she might eventually be

¹⁶ Raymond of Capua, 138.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 139.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Matthew 25:40.

²² Raymond of Capua, 139.

intimate with the Heavenly Bridegroom. Hence her desire to embrace, touch, and care for Tecca cannot be separated from the desire for a husband.

Tecca, on the other hand, surely does not see herself as Catherine's "Spouse." Her poverty, illness, and other sufferings necessitated care, but this did not mean that she felt a mutual, eroticized desire for the attentions of an eccentrically devout woman. Such a relationship must have been an awkward one. On the one hand, it is hard to imagine that Tecca was not grateful that at least someone came to care for her. On the other hand, as the text makes clear, Tecca's relationship with Catherine was clearly fraught: "she began to wound with caustic words the one who had become her servant, and to sarcasm she added insults when the service rendered her did not answer her every whim."²³ Raymond claims that Catherine's kindness filled Tecca with "the vices of pride and ingratitude," as it often happens "with souls which are not well founded in the virtue of humility."²⁴ He suggests that it is Tecca's lack of humility that causes her to abuse Catherine, though surely the anguish of her disease played a part as well. It is easy to imagine the frustration of living in constant pain and humiliation while being tended by, quite literally, a saint.

For Raymond, Tecca's "caustic words" and abuse only highlight Catherine's holiness in continuing to look after the leprous woman. His investment in emphasizing Catherine's saintly patience is apparent here: despite Tecca's cruelty and lack of gratitude, Catherine never shows her anger or frustration. Rather, she spends so much time with Tecca that her own hands begin to show signs of leprosy:

The Ancient Enemy was taking note of all of this, and now he tried another trick, one which the Lord, to make all the more triumphant the eventual victory of his spouse, permitted him to carry out. He infected Catherine's hands with leprosy. Those hands, with which she used to handle the body of her leprous patient, began themselves to show signs of the disease; so

²³ *Ibid.*, 139.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

plainly, indeed, that anyone who looked closely at them could see for certain that she was herself a victim of it. For all that, she did not deviate a hairsbreadth from the holy path she had marked out for herself. She deliberately chose to be eaten up by leprosy rather than to abandon the work of charity to which she had bound herself.²⁵

Where Tecca suffers from a corruption of the body that, though not stated explicitly, seems to reflect a corruption of the soul, Catherine takes on a corruption of the body as a means of highlighting the *purity* of her soul.²⁶ The leprosy of her hands is an extension of the body to which she is devoted; she suffers both for and with Tecca, as if they have become one flesh. Her desire for Tecca – as invalid, as leper, and as Christ – is deeply tied up in her desire for her own mortification, and is part and parcel with her holy virginity.

When Tecca dies, Catherine washes her body and buries her. Soon after, the leprosy of her hands miraculously disappears. The disease which tied the two women together has departed with Tecca's interment. The timing of this miracle suggests that Catherine's own leprosy is not simply a result of contagion, but a mark of her chosen connection with Tecca, fostered through touch and care. At the same time, one can also read Catherine's own body as performing *imitatio Christi*. If she sees Tecca as Christ, then her body is taking on an aspect of Christ. If Christ was shunned and treated like a leper and now appears to her in the body of a leper, it makes sense that her body too longs to be like the body of her Heavenly Husband. She cares for the poor and the sick as Christ did, and in doing so she both cares for Christ himself, and becomes a Christ figure. With

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 144.

²⁶ While generally speaking leprosy of the body was not a marker of a corrupt soul, Raymond makes it clear that Tecca suffers a range of vices exacerbated by the pains of her disease. This is not to say that she did not still reap the theologically expected benefits of direct access to heaven after her death, but rather to highlight the contrast her cruel behaviors provide to Catherine's patience and charity.

Tecca's bodily death and burial, her Husband's form no longer appears in the guise of leprosy, so her bodily imitation ceases.

Despite his citation of sources and his close personal relationship with Catherine, it cannot be forgotten that this anecdote fits well within Raymond's schema of Catherine's simultaneously public/charitable and private/contemplative spirituality. But was there any reference to Tecca, or to lepers in general, in her own writing? Unfortunately, Catherine's letters do not reflect on her time with Tecca, nor do they indicate that she ever saw her heavenly Spouse in the body of a leper. Indeed, every reference that Catherine makes to the disease concerns moral leprosy – leprosy of the soul – that she hopes will be washed in the blood of Christ. While she returns several times to this metaphor (employed at least 19 times in her extant 380 letters), it does not necessarily reflect her relationship to the actual disease and patients she treated. Interestingly, she does make reference to the leprosy of God's Bride (the Church) in her *Dialogue of Divine Providence*, but this again serves to show the corruption within an allegorical body, and not the body of an actual individual.²⁷ Of course, the fact that she deploys the "leprosy of the soul" metaphor throughout her own writings might suggest that she subscribes to a more literal connection between sinful behavior and leprosy bodies. Yet, as already seen, the concept of "leprosy" never fit into one clear definition for all medieval authors. Lepers could be both holy and sinful, leprosy could be both punishment and blessing; a person with a leprosy body might have a "clean" soul, and a person with a leprosy soul might have an unmarked, healthy body. Catherine may very well have written about the leprosy souls of her interlocutors while embracing and loving the physical bodies of the leprosy. Whatever her actual relationship to lepers, it is clear that Raymond, and the case for Catherine's sanctity, had something to gain by illustrating this encounter with Tecca.

Perhaps the most significant questions to be asked about the relationship between Catherine and Tecca are also the most difficult to answer. Would Catherine have had the same reaction

²⁷ Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, trans. Suzanne Noffke (New York: Paulist Press, 1980) 50.

if Tecca had been a leprous man? When Catherine sees Christ in Tecca, is she seeing Christ as woman, or woman as man?²⁸ Tecca is a woman, and it is notable that she is introduced first as a woman and second as a leper. Yet it is her leprosy that, for Catherine, makes her like Christ, who can be ambiguously read as man and woman.²⁹ Also to be taken into account is Tecca's own view: while Tecca appears to Catherine as a suffering Christ, no reason is ever given to believe she sees herself as anything other than a suffering woman. And while the fact that Catherine sees her Spouse in the body of a leprous woman is significant for Raymond's hagiographic project, one cannot forget that Tecca's own understanding of her identity might have been (and likely was) drastically different from Raymond's portrayal. That Tecca was a real, suffering woman with interiority and subjectivity is paramount, despite the fact that her story was only preserved to bolster another woman's holiness.

Margery Kempe: Desiring Lepers, Desiring Christ

Catherine's relationship with Tecca raises as many questions as it answers about the relationship between gender, sexuality, and leprosy. With these questions in mind, the study will now turn to the fifteenth-century life of the English holy

²⁸ The same question can be asked about the moment when Raymond sees the bearded face of Christ looking back at him from Catherine's sickbed: "Suddenly it became the face of a bearded man, gazing fixedly at me and filling my soul with awe. It was an oval face, that of a man of middle age, with a beard of medium length and of wheaten colour. The whole countenance bore a stamp of majesty which unmistakably marked out its owner as a lord amongst men. And whilst I gazed on it, no other face was visible but it alone. Quaking with fear I threw up my hands in terror to shoulder level and cried out: "Oh, who is this who is looking at me"? And Catherine answered: "It is He Who Is." (Raymond of Capua, 82). While it is Catherine who speaks, it is Christ who looks back at Raymond: The image of man shines through the body of woman.

²⁹ For more on the ambiguous gendering of Christ in female spirituality, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984); Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).

woman and eccentric, Margery Kempe.³⁰ Unlike Catherine, Margery is neither a virgin nor, in the canonical sense, a saint. She is a wife and a mother who, after a mystical vision of Christ, dedicates herself to a life of devotion. Margery's newfound commitment to chastity leads her to emulate the popular biblical saint Mary Magdalene who, according to her medieval legend, gave up her life as a prostitute to minister to the sick, preach the word of Christ, and eventually reach perfection as a contemplative living alone in the forest. Mary Magdalene became an exemplar for many non-virginal women who, like Margery, aspired to a devout and holy life. More notably, Mary was associated with leprosy because her presumed brother, Lazarus, was thought by medieval exegetes to suffer from the disease; many medieval *leprosaria* were dedicated to her name. As Margery works to overcome the sins of her past and dedicate her own life to Christ, she too finds a strong desire to care for people with leprosy, and particularly to kiss their faces.³¹

In keeping with Lynn Staley's formative work, a distinction will be made between "Margery" as the subject of the *Book* and "Kempe" as its author.³² While focusing here more on the experiences of Margery than on the literary strategies of Kempe, it is important to note the ongoing debate over the identity of her chronicler(s). Since Kempe could not write, she had to dictate her work to a pair of anonymous scribes, possibly her son and then her confessor.³³ How much influence these scribes had on

³⁰ Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Rev. ed. Lynn Staley (Kalamazoo, 1996). All translations from the Middle English for *The Book of Margery Kempe* are mine.

³¹ For scholarship on saints kissing people with leprosy, see Catherine Peyroux, "The Leper's Kiss" in *Monks and Nuns, Saints and Outcasts: Religion in Medieval Society: Essays in Honor of Lester K. Little*, ed. Sharon Farmer and Barbara H. Rosenwein (Ithaca, 2000): 188; Jonathan Hsy, "'Be More Strange and Bold': Kissing Lepers and Female Same-Sex Desire in the *Book of Margery Kempe*," *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 5 (2010) 189-99; Julie Orlemanski, "How to Kiss a Leper," *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 3/2 (2012) 143-144.

³² Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* (University Park, Penn.: Penn State University Press, 1994).

³³ Spearing has argued that the scribe was Robert Spryngolde, her longstanding confessor. A. C. Spearing, "Margery Kempe," in *A Companion to Middle English Prose*, ed. A.S.G. Edwards (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004) 83-98.

the structure and content of the book has been open to debate. Nicholas Watson argues that Kempe was responsible for the bulk of her text, and that her scribes had little influence in dictating language, structure, and argumentation; this would suggest that Kempe's voice and Margery's experiences are primarily separable by the lens of autobiographical retrospect.³⁴ Felicity Riddy, though agreeing that the text is autobiographical in nature, advocates for a continued distinction between author and scribe, suggesting that author, narrator, and protagonist resist conflation.³⁵ While tending to agree with Watson that Margery Kempe wrote her own story (through some unknown scribe) and represented her own views, this essay focuses more on the character Margery than the author Kempe.

Kempe's tactics in portraying Margery's life as holy can easily be read in the context of her saintly predecessors. Like St. Francis, Margery initially lives a life of relative luxury, focused on material goods, before she undergoes an intense experience of conversion that causes her to give up her pursuit of worldly things and commit herself to chastity. As a married woman who does not fit the virginal mold, Margery struggles to establish and maintain her vow of chastity, knowing that she owes a conjugal debt to her husband. After receiving a visionary blessing to pursue chastity from Christ, she manages to negotiate a sexless marriage with her husband and embark on a life of penance and prayer in keeping with the choices of married saints like Mary of Oignies (d. 1213).³⁶

³⁴ Nicholas Watson, "The Making of *The Book of Margery Kempe*" in *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages*, eds. Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005) 395-434.

³⁵ Felicity Riddy, "Text and Self in *The Book of Margery Kempe*" in *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages*, eds. Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005) 435-53.

³⁶ Mary shared a chaste marriage with her husband in service of leprosy patients. See Margot H. King, "The Life of Mary of Oignies by James of Vitry," in *Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation*, ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, 34-128 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006). For more on the sexless marriages of saints, see Dyan Elliott's exploration of how "spiritual marriage" was a means for women to attain "autonomy in marriage through chastity, which is represented as a way of more closely aligning themselves with celestial favor." Dyan Elliott, *Spiritual*

Margery's newfound independence from her marriage bed allows her greater movement throughout the world and a deeper relationship with the divine, but at the same time it also makes her a source of gossip. She makes a project of drawing attention to herself by wearing white clothes and weeping excessively in public. The fact that this attention causes her so much persecution – she is accused of heresy, gossiped about, and regarded as an annoying oddball throughout her home country – forms the basis for her holiness. Her public shame becomes her personal form of flagellation. Christ's mystical presence even encourages Margery to lean into these behaviors in order to intensify the rejection of her peers. Indeed, Margery's eccentricities largely operate as performances of *imitatio Christi* (and, relatedly, *imitatio leprosi*). Just as Christ was treated as a leper and shunned by the people he sought to save, so too does Margery act in ways that cause her neighbors and fellow Christians to shun her.

Margery's specific desire to kiss and care for people with leprosy likewise mirrors the saints who came before her. Like Catherine, she sees Christ in the lepers she meets.³⁷ While Margery does not take on the traditional role of Bride of Christ (as she is not a virgin), her strong desire to be married to Him – and her visionary marriage to the Heavenly Father – solidify her attraction to people with leprosy. As has been seen, it also aligns her with Mary Magdalene, who was not a virgin, but who was particularly loved by Christ because of her devotion to Him. Indeed, Margery's zeal to care for lepers develops after a

Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 11-12.

³⁷ After a conversation with her Lord in which she confesses her desire to be like Mary Magdalene, for instance, Christ tells her that he loves her just as much as Mary and the saints in heaven. Mary Magdalene herself is, of course, often associated with lepers and leprosy houses. Just as Mary washed the feet of Christ and later witnessed this, Margery too begins to see the passion of Christ in the sick and wounded for whom she wishes to care: "Thus our merciful Lord Crist Jhesu drow hys / creatur unto hys lofe and to mynde of hys passyon that sche myth not duryn to beheldyn / a lazer er an other seke man, specialy yyf he had any wowndys aperyng on hym. So / sche cryid and so sche wept as yyf sche had sen our Lord Jhesu Crist wyth hys wowndys / bledyng" (*The Book of Margery Kempe*, Book 1, Ch. 74.4178-4182).

meditation on Mary. She begs to know how she might become more like her saintly model and mentor:

A, blysfyl Lord," seyd sche, "I wolde I wer as worthy to ben sekyr of thy lofe as Mary Mawdelyn was." Than seyd our Lord, "Trewly, dowtyr, I love the as wel, and the same pes that I gaf to hir the same pes I geve to the. For, dowtyr, ther is no seynt in hevyn displeyd thow I love a creatur in erde as mech as I do hem. Therfor thei wil non otherwyse than I wil." Thus our merciful Lord Crist Jhesu drow hys creatur unto hys lofe and to mynde of hys pas syon that sche myth not duryn to beheldyn a lazer er an other seke man, specialy yyf he had any wowndys aperyng on hym. So sche cryid and so sche wept as yyf sche had sen our Lord Jhesu Crist wyth hys wowndys bledyng. And so sche dede in the syght of hir sowle, for thorw the beheldyng of the seke man hir mende was al takyn into our Lord Jhesu Crist.

["Ah, blissful Lord," she said, "I wish that I were as worthy to be sure of your love as Mary Magdalene was." Then our Lord said, "Truly, daughter, I love you as well, and the same peace that I gave to her is peace that I give to you. For daughter, there is no saint in heaven displeased that I love a creature on earth as much as I do them. Therefore they will not do otherwise than I wish." Thus our merciful Lord Jesus Christ drew his creature so much into his love and into the remembrance of his passion so that she might not endure to behold a leper or any other sick man, especially if he had any wounds appearing on him. So she cried and so she wept as if she had seen our Lord Jesus Christ with his wounds bleeding. And so she did in the sight of her soul, for through beholding a sick man her mind was all taken into our Lord Jesus Christ.]³⁸

Margery's visionary conversation with Jesus asserts the image of the leprous body as analogous with the wounded body

³⁸ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Book 1, Ch. 74.4174-4183.

of Christ. Having been told that she is loved as much as all of the saints in heaven, especially Mary Magdalene, Margery begins to long even more ardently for the bleeding body of her Divine Lover. Christ has planted the image of His passion in her mind, forging a link between His suffering flesh and that of the sick and destitute on earth: once again, "the least of these." Whenever she sees the body of a leprous person, then, her mind is overcome with desire.

It can be seen in more ways than one that Margery's newfound desire to be among lepers strongly recalls the conversion of St. Francis. Once a wealthy businesswoman, she has given up her earthly pursuits to wander and care for lepers. Where she had once found lepers loathsome and avoided them with the rest of her peers, she now yearns for them:

"Now gan sche to lovyn that sche had most hatyd befor tyme, for ther was no thyng mor lothful ne mor abhomynabyll to hir whil sche was in the yerys of werldly prosperité than to seen er beheldyn a lazer, whom now thorw owr Lordys mercy sche desyryd to halsyn and kyssyn for the lofe of Jhesu whan sche had tyme and place conveyent."³⁹

[Now she began to love those which she had most hated before, for there was nothing more loathsome or abominable to her while she was in her years of worldly prosperity than to see or behold a leper, whom now through our Lord's mercy she desired to embrace and kiss for the love of Jesus when she had a suitable place and time.]

During her "yerys of werldly prosperité" (her moral leprosy) she avoided lepers just as she avoided the full realization of the love of Christ (much like St. Francis). Now, having become His devotee, she wished to pursue Him in every form. Yet unlike Francis, a chaste woman constantly under the supervision of a confessor could not simply follow her unconventional desires without permission, hence the necessity

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Book 1, Ch. 74.4185-4189.

of waiting for a "tyme and place conveyent" to fulfill them. Margery's many exploits, from wearing white clothes to going on pilgrimage, are almost always filtered through the engine of clerical overview. Though the ultimate authority that gives Margery permission to act as she does is the visionary figure of Christ, she must still work within the confines of earthly jurisdiction lest her actions seem to flout orthodoxy and she cross the line between holy eccentric and transgressive heretic.

Thus, she is not initially able to act on the overpowering need that she suddenly feels when viewing people with leprosy. Margery's unsurprising response is to grieve at her separation from them: "Than had sche gret mornynge / and sorwyng for sche myth not kyssyn the lazerys whan sche sey hem er met wyth / hem in the stretys for the lofe of Jhesu"⁴⁰ [Then she had great mourning and sorrow because she might not kiss the lepers when she saw them or met with them in the streets for the love of Jesus]. When the image of Christ was before her, what anguish she must have felt to be separated from Him by the strictures of decorum and clerical authority! Yet bending to the necessities of pastoral permission, she seeks guidance and authorization from her confessor.

Margery's confessor grants her request but provides a significant caveat: "he warnyd hir that sche schulde kyssyn no men, / but, yf sche wolde alगतys kyssyn, sche schuld kyssyn women"⁴¹ [he warned her that she should kiss no men, but if she would kiss anyhow, she should kiss women]. By caring for the sick, Margery finds a way of caring for the body of Christ and fits herself within a familiar framework of female charitable spirituality. Yet her confessor's concern over the gender of the people for whom she cares is unique; none of the saints previously mentioned were faced with the same prohibitions from religious authorities or, at least, their hagiographers did not make a point of highlighting them. Margery's particular situation as a non-cloistered, formerly sexually active married woman drives the necessity of this stipulation. Coupled with the potential lingering sexual danger associated with leprosy

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Book 1, Chapter 74.4184-4185.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Book 1, Chapter 74.4190-4191.

masculinity, kissing male lepers crosses a threshold of propriety in Margery's case. Her confessor's solution, to limit her to kissing female lepers, allows her to express her eccentric wish while avoiding the potential scandal of intimacy with men. Of course, as Johnathan Hsy has pointed out, the confessor is perhaps naively ignoring the possibility of same sex-attraction on the part of the female lepers.⁴² More significantly, Margery's own sexual desire should not be overlooked: the eroticism in her longing for lepers is as explicit as it was with St. Catherine. Whether kissing men or kissing women, she desires to embrace them as embodiments of her Divine Lover. A kind of chaste sexual yearning is implicit.

Clerical anxieties in this case highlight the gender of both Margery and the lepers she kisses, marking sexuality as a significant concern tied to the act of the kiss. Yet, for Margery, whose interests are often quite different from her confessor's, the lepers' gender seems less important: all that matters is that they represent Christ. When she is finally given the go-ahead by her confessor, she takes to her new task with great zeal:

Than was sche glad, for sche had leve to kyssyn the seke women and went to a place wher seke women dwellyd whch wer ryth ful of the sekenes and fel down on hir kneys befor hem, preyng hem that sche myth kyssyn her mowth for the lofe of Jhesu. And so sche kyssyd ther two seke women with many an holy thowt and many a devowt teer, and, whan sche had kyssyd hem and telde hem ful many good wordys and steryd hem to mekenes and pacyens that thei schulde not grutchyn wyth her sekenes but hyly thankyn God therfor and thei schulde han gret blysse in hevyn thorw the mercy of owr Lord Jhesu Crist..."

[Then she was glad, for she had leave to kiss the sick women, and she went to a place where sick women who were full of the sickness dwelled, and she fell down on

⁴² Jonathan Hsy, "Be More Strange and Bold": Kissing Lepers and Female Same-Sex Desire in the Book of Margery Kempe," *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 5 (2010) 189-99.

her knees before them, begging them that she might kiss their mouths for the love of Jesus. And so in that place she kissed two sick women with many a holy thought and many a devout tear, and, when she had kissed them and told them many good words and guided them to humility and patience, telling them not to grumble about their sickness, but thank God for it greatly, and they would have great bliss...]⁴³

Margery greets the women as a lovesick suitor might greet his own darling, falling to her knees and begging to kiss them. The scene at once evokes the secular love of romance literature and the sacred love of the Song of Songs; her specific desire to kiss their mouths recalls the deeply erotic line "let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth."⁴⁴ Margery not only cares for these women with bodily touch, but also with spiritual words. Just as she sees within them the image of her lover's passion, so too does she attempt to rouse within them a zeal for the words of Christ, encouraging them to love their suffering bodies as gifts that will lead them to the bliss of heaven. These words are in keeping with the theological notion that people with leprosy suffer their purgatory on earth in order to directly enter heaven after death; however, they also speak to Margery's own view of the women as earthly representations of Christ. In her eyes, it is only right that they should embrace their pain with "mekenes and pacyens," as Jesus did on the Cross.

Of course, while this zeal may reflect Margery's own passions and ideals of charitable faith, it is set against the realities of the pain and suffering of the women whose involuntary leprosy of the body cannot be cured by the voluntary preaching of one eccentric woman. While Kempe claims that two sick women accepted Margery's kisses, and that one in particular sought her spiritual guidance about evil thoughts and

⁴³ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Book 1.4191-4198.

⁴⁴ Song of Songs 1:1. Indeed, it is likely that either Margery or her scribe was familiar with Bernard of Clairvaux's famous sermon on the Song of Songs, and his protracted exegesis of this line as a representation of the soul as bride and Christ as the Bridegroom. See Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs I*, trans. Kilian Walsh (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Studies, 1971).

temptations, there is even less access to their feelings at being kissed by a saint than in the case of Catherine and Tecca. Were these leprous women stirred by the same feelings of religious passion and chaste desire as the women who attempted to kiss and care for them? Was there any potential for holy eroticism to be found in the actual experience of being leprous? The final example will address this very question.

Alice of Schaerbeek: Mystical Love and the Suffering Bride

Catherine and Margery are devout, chaste women who develop strong desires to embrace and care for lepers. While their texts lend a certain visibility to people with leprosy in the Middle Ages, their exploits inevitably focus on the saint, not the sufferer. Because they are not the heroes of the stories, leprous women are painted as individuals with little agency or interiority; they become plot points, defined by their disease and little else. To acknowledge this is not to discredit the deeds of holy women and saints who sought to cure people with leprosy. In the eyes of medieval audiences, to kiss a leper was a saintly act, pure and simple. Yet the occlusion, or manipulation, of the leprous voices in these sources leaves much to be desired when considering their own experiences with saintly care.

Unlike the other women discussed in this essay, Alice of Schaerbeek (d. 1250) does not care for lepers; rather, she develops the disease herself.⁴⁵ Alice lives the contemplative life of a Cistercian nun at La Cambre (a part of modern Brussels), maintaining a virginal body and mind, and focusing her time on study, devotion, and prayer. Her *vita* was composed by an

⁴⁵ Relatively little has been written on the life of St. Alice. For additional background information see Martinus Cawley O.C.S.O., introduction to *Life of St. Alice of Schaerbeek*, ed. Martinus Cawley O.C.S.O. (Lafayette, OR: Our Lady of Gaudalupe Abbey, 2000), v-xxx, at xiii; Eleanor Campion, "Bernard and Alice the Leper: An Odor of Life for Some," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 39/2 (2004) 127-39; Shawn Madison Kraemer, "Redemptive Suffering: the Life of Alice of Schaerbeek in a Contemporary Context" in *Maistresse of My Wit: Medieval Women, Modern Scholars*, ed. Louise D'Arcens and Juanita Feros Ruys, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004) 267-93; and Alicia Spencer-Hall, "Christ's Suppurating Wounds: Leprosy in the Vita of Alice of Schaerbeek († 1250)" in *'His brest tobrosten': Wounds and Wound Repair in Medieval Culture*, ed. Kelly DeVries and Larissa Tracy (Leiden: Brill, 2015) 389-416.

unknown hagiographer, most likely an abbot of Villers (the patrons of La Cambre), some years after her death; it is unlikely that he would have known her personally. Some evidence has been presented for Arnulf II de Ghisteltes (abbot from 1270-1276) as a likely candidate, though no scholarly consensus has been met.⁴⁶ Though the chronicler does not suggest that Alice spends time caring for sick bodies like St. Catherine and Margery Kempe, she cares for the souls of Christians through prayer and devotion. That Alice should contract leprosy, therefore, seems difficult to account for. Tending to lepers would have provided a reasonable explanation for how she might have contracted the disease; yet it would hardly have enhanced the miraculous quality that the author ascribes to it. Just as Margery Kempe encouraged the leprous women to whom she ministered to see their disease as a boon, it is told that Alice's leprosy is indeed a benefaction, granted directly by God Himself.

That leprosy should be rendered as a gift is not especially surprising in religious writing. The disease served in ancient and medieval texts as a punishment from God for bad behavior, but it also operated as a pitiable state designed to draw the charity of saintly figures. In these sources, the major "gifts" were the very salvific kisses and caring caresses of the saints who took pity on them. Yet as early as the fourth century, bishops in Byzantine Christendom referred to leprosy as a "holy disease" gifted to the beloved of Christ, as suggested by his particular care for them in the Gospels.⁴⁷ Indeed, Alice's hagiographer makes a point of stressing that the ailment is given "not in any vindictiveness, nor as if blaming her of some crime."⁴⁸ Rather, her leprosy is rendered as a reward for her bodily and spiritual virginity. She is given the disease as a visible and embodied mark of the love of Christ so that she might ascend ever higher in that love. It is in this relationship of virginal love between the Bride and

⁴⁶ Martinus Cawley asserts the likelihood of Arnulf in the introduction to his translation, but nevertheless maintains his uncertainty. Translations from the Latin *Life of Alice* are from: Cawley, x-xi.

⁴⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, "Oratio 14: On Love for the Poor" in *St. Gregory of Nazianzus: Select Orations*, trans. Martha Vinson (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003) 39-71.

⁴⁸ *Life of St. Alice of Schaerbeek*, 9.

Bridegroom that the entanglement of leprosy with sexuality becomes at once so convoluted and so clear.

The hagiographer writes that God grants Alice her leprosy "as might a Bridegroom, minded to pay his bride a visit and bring her a token of his perfect love for her."⁴⁹ The idea of leprosy as a love token might seem strange; yet for devout monastic women like Alice, bodily suffering and torment were often integral to experiences of Divine Love. The author claims that "God longed that his Bride be free, be at leisure for him alone; that she linger with him in the bedroom, the bridal chamber of her mind; that there she be soothingly inebriated with a fragrance all his own."⁵⁰

Through leprosy, Alice would be sequestered from society, even the society of her fellow nuns. Free from the distractions of the outside world, she would "be at leisure" to focus inwardly on God in the "bridal chamber of her mind." The sexual undertones of this passage, as has been seen, should not be surprising; love mysticism and the visionary topos of erotic experiences with Christ had been growing in communities of monastic women. Yet the sexual imagery has an additional connotation, derived from the nature of her oncoming affliction.

While leprosy was thought to be contracted through a range of means, it has been noted that one possible avenue was transmission through sex with an afflicted person. Of course, it is difficult to know for sure whether Alice's hagiographer was aware of this medical theory; yet the possible undertone of profane sexuality adds a layer of meaning to the fact that she contracts the disease from her Heavenly Spouse. Alice receives a malady often associated with transgression, but she receives it through communion with the Lord as a sign of His love for her, and His plan for her continued devotion. Alice sits on the cusp of a situation that can fall into either the holy or the deviant: because of her leprosy she could either be read by her community as sinful and impure, or saintly and hyper-pure. The potential for sin only highlights her holiness all the more keenly.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Alice's *Life* inevitably focuses on the holiness of her sufferings as a form of purgatorial piety and charity, born out of love for the souls of sinners and for Christ. Her unimaginable pain is always directed towards the salvation of others. Her suffering, though involuntary, aligns her with a growing relationship between the torment of the living, and the salvation of sinners and the dead. Barbara Newman's exploration of women's purgatorial piety outlines this dynamic, arguing that "any suffering accepted in union with Christ for the relief of souls – even the involuntary suffering of illness or persecution – could make the sufferer a co-redeemer."⁵¹

Whether or not Alice chose to suffer as a leper, her pain and isolation become her spiritual vocation as a "co-redeemer" of sinful souls alongside her lover, Christ. She directs her personal pain towards the pain of those in sin. As the *vita* puts it, Alice:

... suffered within her such a violence of charity, and carried upon her such a burden of solicitude for the welfare of the human race, that she aspired to relieve the purgatorial penalty of all the dead, and likewise to purge the living of all their sins.⁵²

Some of her suffering receives specific direction. For instance, when she loses the faculty of her left eye, she dedicates her sight to the King of France, who was on crusade at the time, "that he might himself have an eye divinely bright to enlighten him."⁵³ Though confined to a small hut near the convent, constantly in pain and now having lost her sight, Alice is still able to participate in both the earthly and the heavenly battles of Christendom, saving the souls of the sinful and ensuring the victory of the righteous. She becomes both warrior for God and lover in Christ.

Though she has become the embodiment of a person in need of charity, Alice still maintains her own charitable spirit. This is paramount for highlighting her saintliness: that a leper, living as

⁵¹ Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, 120.

⁵² *Life of St. Alice of Schaerbeek*, 19-20.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 20.

an outcast and suffering incredible pain, might give more charity than she receives. Newman puts it best:

The intricate connection between illness and women's piety becomes especially clear in such cases: if sickness is offered as a gift, then pain can be transmuted into the complex pleasure of generosity, amplifying the erotic pleasure of union with Christ.⁵⁴

Yet despite the pleasure that Alice might have gained from using her pain to save the souls of her fellow Christians, the fearful realities of leprosy were not lost on her chronicler, nor should they be lost on today's reader. In Alice, one does not see merely a pious, devout, and saintly woman accepting her penance and bearing it for the salvation of souls in purgatory and for the edification of her own soul. Rather, the chronicler stresses the fear, alienation, and pain that accompanied the discovery of her condition. When she is segregated from her community, he speculates that Alice spends her first night alone in deep distress: "her emotions were marked with such grief, her heart was so severely crushed and bruised, that her spirit fainted away and her mind remained forcibly in shock."⁵⁵ While Alice soon begins to regard her affliction with patience and use it as a means to deepen her relationship with God, the weight of her disease lies in this brief admission from her chronicler. Leprosy may have been seen by some as a gift, but it came with an incredible cost.

Of course, it would also have been in the chronicler's interests to highlight the anguish of alienation and sequestration. The more Alice suffered with patience, the more holy she might seem. But how historically likely is it that she would have been shunted aside by her sisters, ignored and isolated? Anne Lester's discussion of Cistercian women's charitable piety in the thirteenth century suggests an alternate narrative. Communities of Cistercian women often had close connections with lepers and *leprosaria*. As Lester demonstrates, thirteenth-century Cistercian women in the rural region of Champagne were known for caring for people with leprosy, even choosing to live in communities of

⁵⁴ Newman, *Virile Woman*, 122.

⁵⁵ *Life of St. Alice of Schaerbeek*, 9-10.

lepers. Cistercian convents were sometimes founded in leper houses and hospices in an effort both to reform the hospital communities and place them under monastic rule, and to deepen the vocational ideal of apostolic charity in the order. Lester argues that by the thirteenth century, "active charity, manual labor, and service for those who suffered in this world became fundamental components of a distinctive kind of Cistercian female spirituality."⁵⁶

Of course, Flemish Alice does not fall within the purview of Lester's study of Cistercians in rural Champagne. Yet contextualizing Cistercian piety in charitable care for the sick helps to better understand how Alice might have viewed her affliction as a gift: given to supplement her earthly works in preparation for the heavenly life of her soul. Moreover, one can assume that Alice maintained some kind of relationship with her sisters at La Cambre after sequestration, accounting for the surviving detail about her life. Her isolation was unlikely to have been total, even if it kept her from living and worshipping with her fellow nuns.

The work of textualizing Alice as a kind of super-human – a saint – also largely functions to mark her simply as *human*. Alice is not relegated solely to the one-dimensional category of the hagiographic "leper." Her interiority, her thoughts and feelings, her fears and joys, are addressed in the text unlike any of the other people with leprosy seen thus far. She is a nun and a woman who happens to suffer from leprosy, and her leprosy has provided an additional conduit to God. The hagiographic project, in this case, does not only highlight the saintliness of a human; it also recalls the humanness of a leper.

Such an account was indeed a rarity in a textual culture so accustomed to using lepers as mere plot points. They became topoi and foils, but not individuals with agency and subjectivity. Though one must read Alice's *vita* with an eye to the authorial distance and genre interests of her hagiographer, it still provides a crucial example of the complexity of leprous identity in medieval life. Alice stands as an example of how leprosy could

⁵⁶ Lester, 119.

hold multiple layers of meaning for the people who lived with it. While her disease at times feels like a curse, it overall serves as a blessing that allows her to commune with God in holy, erotic ecstasy.

Conclusion: Recalling the Human in the Saint and the Leper

Alice is not the only leprous saint in medieval hagiography. As Rawcliffe points out, several other saints were recorded as suffering from – and even begging for – the disease to atone for their own sins and for those of others.⁵⁷ Hagiographers focused on this desire for leprosy as a sign of saintliness. After spending years in a leper hospital caring for the sick, anchoress Yvette of Huy (1158-1228), for instance, prayed that she might “be given the grace to become leprous so that she would lack nothing that could give her consummate grace by becoming as vile and despicable as possible in the world.”⁵⁸ Yvette’s biographer makes a point of asserting her humility in this desire, while elevating the deep holiness of the choice to live among and serve people with leprosy. He claims that “it suffices that she lived with the lepers; it abounds that she served them; it superabounds that she prayed to become leprous.”⁵⁹ This early thirteenth-century surge of holy lepers aligns itself with the proliferation of leprosy and leprosaria across Europe, but it also reveals a growing tendency to find holiness in the most abject of human conditions. Leprosy was at once a process of bodily deterioration and a mark of the saint.

Those who desired to become lepers did so because they wanted to suffer outwardly for their inward sins. Recognizing the behaviors they inherited through original sin – pride, lust, covetousness – they sought atonement through one of the most painful, isolating means possible. This suffering, brought about

⁵⁷ Rawcliffe specifically mentions the eleventh century English life of the Irish saint Finian Lobhar and the life of Ralph of Marmoutier (d. 1062). She also notes that leprosy as a “religious vocation” did not survive beyond the mid-thirteenth century (59), though as we can see in the case of St. Damien of Molokai (1840-1889), devout Catholics continued to care for people with leprosy (and eventually contract the disease) well beyond the Middle Ages.

⁵⁸ Hugh of Floreffé, “The Life of Yvette, Anchoress of Huy,” 94-95.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 95.

through recognition of their own faults, then becomes their greatest virtue: to be a leper was to be tortured, spurned, ridiculed. Could anything be more holy than volunteering for such an existence? As Rawcliffe says, “The moral is unambiguous: leprosy may begin as atonement for worldly pride in physical and intellectual achievements, but can end in a state of grace.”⁶⁰

Alice’s story exemplifies the importance of remembering the human when re-imagining the role of leprosy in medieval life. For her, leprosy was neither a mark of condemnation nor a straightforward tool for holiness. It was at once a burden and gift; it caused her fear and shame and anguish, but it also empowered her to enter heaven as an eternal Bride of Christ. As a saint, one expects Alice to bear her leprosy with the patience that Catherine showed Tecca at her sickbed. Rather, the reader is encouraged to sympathize with her affliction and pity her pain. Her humanity in this text makes her all the more saintly, just as her leprosy makes her all the more human.

The texts explored in this essay highlight a telling convergence of anxieties in medieval conceptions of leprosy, gender, and devotional desire. In the midst of these complex interactions, a particular kind of chaste eroticism arises as a hallmark of the relationships between lepers and saints. The zeal for kissing and caring for people with leprosy was by no means relegated to female saints; indeed, the first such recorded interactions were between male saints and male lepers.⁶¹ Still, leprosy arouses the symptoms of a specific trend in female spirituality, characterized by devotion to the body of Christ as a Heavenly Lover. Any dangerous, sinful sexual potential that might be assumed by the presence of leprosy only serves in these stories to enhance the holiness of communion between Bride and Bridegroom. The threat of transgression only makes the sacred more radiant.

⁶⁰ Rawcliffe, 59.

⁶¹ See, for example, the life of St. Martin: Sulpicius Severus, *The Life of Saint Martin*, 43.

On the other hand, what somehow stands out in these texts is the very thing that seems least important to their authors: the lost or occluded subjectivities of the lepers themselves, forcibly sexed and gendered by the saints who interact with them. Even when leprosy was highlighted as a state of holiness or a representation of divine love, it was still exploited as a means of underscoring (usually someone else's) saintliness. The degree to which attentions from women like Catherine and Margery actually aided in the lives and public images of people with leprosy is hard to judge; what is known, however, is that people with leprosy aided the lives and public images of these saintly women. To be kissed or embraced by a saint is sometimes to be healed, sometimes to be affronted, certainly to be recorded and remembered, but always to remain marked as just that: a leper who is desired by a saint.



EUCCHARISTIC THEOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY IN GERTRUDE OF HELFTA AND WILLIAM OF SAINT-THIERRY: ON THE SENSE OF TASTE¹

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Inspired by the language of Scripture, writers throughout Christian history have drawn extensively from vocabulary of the five bodily senses to discuss how human persons know and love God.² When it comes to the sense of taste, in particular, authors from the Latin tradition, like William of Saint-Thierry and Gertrude of Helfta, made use of the fact that, in its Latin verb form, *sapere*, is the root for the Latin word for wisdom, *sapientia*. When exploring their writings, it becomes clear that more is at stake in their correlation of wisdom and taste than a catchy pun based on a shared etymological root. There is also an anthropological point at work. Union with Christ's body is accomplished through the human person's physical taste

¹ I presented an earlier version of this paper in the *Magistra* session at the 56th International Conference on Medieval Studies. I am grateful for the discussion that ensued from that paper, especially that with F. Tyler Sergent, which helped me clarify my thought on William's gendering of the soul, discussed below.

² On the importance of the doctrine of the spiritual senses in religious writing and theology in the later Middle Ages, see Boyd Taylor Coolman, *Knowing God by Experience: the Spiritual Senses in the Theology of William of Auxerre* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004); Rachel Fulton, "'Taste and See that the Lord is Sweet' (Ps. 33:9): The Flavor of God in the Monastic West," *Journal of Religion* 86, no. 2 (2006) 169-204; Rosemary Drage Hale, "'Taste and See, for God is Sweet': Sensory Perception and Memory in Medieval Christian Mystical Experience," in *Vox Mystica: Essays on Medieval Mysticism in Honor of Professor Valerie M. Lagorio*, ed. Valerie Marie Lagorio and Anne Clark Bartlett (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995) 3-14; Gordon Rudy, *Mystical Language of Sensation in the Later Middle Ages*, *Studies in Medieval History and Culture*, vol. 14 (New York: Routledge, 2002). For an important recent study in early Christianity, see Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination*, *Transformation of the Classical Heritage*, vol. 42 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).