Acts of Care

Ritchey, Sara

Published by Cornell University Press

Ritchey, Sara.
Acts of Care: Recovering Women in Late Medieval Health.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/83168
Chapter 5

Salutary Words

Saints’ Lives as Efficacious Texts in Cistercian Women’s Abbeys

The Life of Ida of Leuven reports a curious incident in which young Ida, gravely ill and convalescing in the infirmary, witnessed the sudden death of her sister. In apparent shock and grief, Ida hurled herself over the body of the deceased sister, wailing in lamentation until a sizable crowd had gathered in observation of the pitiable scene. Thereupon, Ida shifted her internal disposition from lamentation to entreaty, praying for the restoration of life to her departed sister. The unidentified hagiographer noted the exact gestures and wording of Ida’s prayer for resurrection, providing the details of how she raised one knee at a time from their clutch on the dead sister’s body, then each arm in similar succession. He described how she prayed that the same power used by Elisha, Elijah, the daughter of Jairus, the boy from Naim, and Lazarus be summoned immediately through her words, infused into the corpse before her, restoring it to life as it had done in biblical times. Finally, he noted that Ida touched the mouth of the deceased girl,

1. A version of this chapter was previously published under the title "Saints’ Lives as Efficacious Texts: Cistercian Monks, Religious Women, and Curative Reading, c. 1250–1330," Speculum 92.4 (2017): 1101–43; the appendix of that article includes a complete list of the featured manuscripts’ contents and other codicological details. The powerful names that Ida cites serve as biblical precedents, suggesting a historiale that might have accompanied an orally circulating healing charm. Edna Bozóky has argued that historiales on charms provided historical context and worked to assure self and audience that a prayer offered real potential for efficacy. See Edna Bozóky, "Medieval Narrative
who, giving out seven breaths, quickened instantly. “Indeed these ancient miracles were renewed,” pronounced the hagiographer, who then portrayed the awe of the spectators who were affectively transformed from grief to joy by the healing performance.²

According to this story, the performance of Ida’s words yielded physiological and spiritual transformation of the deceased girl. They also generated changes in the audience who observed her ministrations. Moreover, I argue, the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century readers of Ida’s Life would have understood the transformational power of Ida’s words to extend even to themselves. In this chapter, I examine the role of the Life, the textual artifact, in the therapeutic process that first began with religious women’s living caritative actions and the orally circulating stories of their therapeutic power. The Life itself, the experience of its words as well as the physical presence of its manuscript inscription, often served therapeutic purposes. The manuscript materialization of the Life channeled the presence of the saint and became a therapeutic tool, just like her tomb or relics, her prayer, or her touch.

Readers of the living saint’s Life encountered it in what Judson Allen has called the reading “event.”³ The reading event established meaning through the tripartite relationship of the text, the audience (the readers and auditors), and the cultural space or circumstances in which the reading event unfolded. To capture the significations generated by the reading event, John Dagenais has proposed the study of “lecturature,” by which he means that we search for literary sense “not in the fixed points of the authorial work or ‘text’ (as edited by the printing press and modern readers) but in the fluid (but often quite concretely documented) interstices between them.”⁴ Such an approach requires close scrutiny of the material support for the reading event, that is, of the manuscript. But it also requires an understanding of manuscripts in

---

². VILeu, 169: “Ac huius facti mirabili novitiae.” The hagiographer describes their transformation as a washing over of pure serenity; their grief (tristesse) dissipated, and they were filled with joy (gaudium).

³. Judson Allen, The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982).

their social setting. Medieval readers understood their texts not as single, closed works, but through a multiplicity of material and cultural factors that mediated their reception of the text. These factors included the other texts within the manuscript, the readers who handled it, the formal elements of the manuscript, its emplacement in a specific library, and the lore, liturgy, relics, and other vital identity markers that were associated with its location and handlers. Taking account of the social setting of the complete codex helps to recreate the reading experience and to reevaluate the various ways that the corpus of Lives of religious women from the thirteenth-century southern Low Countries signified to their first generation of readers.

Viewing hagiographic texts from the vantage of their manuscript context suggests that the corpus of Lives were read as “efficacious texts” in the thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century Cistercian textual community. By “efficacious texts” I mean to indicate that the process of reading or hearing these Lives promised to precipitate physiological and spiritual transformation. The selection and arrangement of scripta (each individual inscription of a text) within these manuscripts shows that readers clearly associated the Lives with other texts that effected change, such as blessings, Mass formularies, indulgences, and charms. This association points to their significance as scripts designed for performance, all texts that promised spiritual and physical change: from affliction to grace, from bread to body, from sin to forgiveness, from illness to health. The texts with which these Lives were bound were largely scripts for performing or making grace present in objects in the material world. Like the audience who witnessed Ida’s efficacious words resurrect a sister, the reading and audition of her Life generated physiological changes, stimulating healthy passions and embodying grace.

While we have no early version of the Life of Ida of Leuven, other late thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century Lives of religious women in the corpus clearly circulated together. Two of the earliest extant manuscripts containing a cluster of these Lives—Brussels, KBR, MSS 8609–20 (mid- to late thirteenth century with some early fourteenth-century scripta) and 4459–70 (1320)—were produced within a matter of decades at the monastery of Villers and were created for use in women’s communities under their

---


6. The earliest extant scriptum of Ida of Leuven’s Life is preserved in a fifteenth-century manuscript from the Rooklooster, where it was copied alongside the Lives of several other Brabantine saints. Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Series Nova, MSS 12706–12707.
patrimony. They are our closest witnesses to the ways that these Lives were
experienced by their first generation of readers. After the deaths and first
posthumous miracles of the saintly mulieres religiosae of the southern Low
Countries, the text of their Lives carried on the work of the stories about
them that had circulated orally. These Lives continued to convince audiences
that certain religious women were capable caretakers of the sick, infirm,
weary, and distraught. Both manuscripts point to collaborative practices
between Cistercian women and supporters and petitioners beyond their
walls. Together these manuscripts demonstrate the extent to which those
social networks depended on Cistercian women’s intercession, and pro-
vide further indication of the kinds of therapeutic roles played by religious
women in this region.

These early inscriptions of the Lives illuminate the ways that certain reli-
gious women continued to serve their communities in a therapeutic manner
even after their deaths. While in chapter 1, I discussed postmortem access
to the saint in her relics and at her tomb, here I focus on access to those
women in the experience of reading her Life. As Rachel Smith has shown in
an examination of the hagiographic writings of Thomas of Cantimpré, the
goal of hagiographic reading was to “take up” (suscipiant) the saint’s Life;
that is, for the reader or audience to be acted upon by their encounter with
the saint embodied in the text. Such reading was transformational, a physi-
cal process of altering the self to reflect the ideals represented in the saint’s
Life.” This transformational power of the encounter with the saint of the text
was promulgated in hagiographic tales that feature audiences as witnesses
to the saint’s life, as we read in the audience who witnessed Ida’s resurrec-
tion of her sister and thus experienced delight. Readers of the Life replicated

7. I know of only one other thirteenth-century manuscript containing multiple regional lives from the corpus of thirteenth-century saints’ Lives from the southern Low Countries. Berlin, Staats-
bibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz, MS Theol. Lat. Qu. 195 was also produced in the thirteenth-

8. Rachel Smith, Excessive Saints: Gender, Narrative, and Theological Invention in Thomas of Cantim-

9. Augustine models and theorizes this kind of transformative reading. On his method of read-
ing, see Brian Stock, The Integrated Self: Augustine, the Bible, and Ancient Thought (Philadelphia: Uni-
versity of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Rita Copeland, Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Interpretation in the
Middle Ages (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Geoffrey Galt Harpham, “The Fertile
the reactions of the original witnesses to the saint’s remarkable behavior. Hagiographers like Jacques de Vitry, Thomas of Cantimpré, and Goswin of Bossut worked to incorporate into their Lives details of the public’s witness to the saints’ overabundant grace, often describing a particular miracle or ecstasy in terms of precise liturgical time and communal setting, as well as providing the names and emotional reactions of the spectators. Such details emphasize the preservation and re-presentation of the living saint’s performance of grace to a fresh audience, a new community, one that did not know her personally or witness her spiritual effects directly. For example, Thomas of Cantimpré’s Life of Christina Mirabilis cites his source for a narrative anecdote, relating that “a venerable man whom I remember, Thomas, now abbot of Sint-Truiden but then a priest of that city, told me a very edifying story about Christina.” The hagiographer goes on to paraphrase the abbot’s story, in which he and another companion surreptitiously observed Christina. He underscores the men’s stupefaction as they saw Christina enter a trance-like state in which she sighed, wept, and alternately beat, then lovingly caressed the limbs of her body until she was so filled with grace that “one would believe her exterior body would burst.” Thomas describes Christina’s words and gestures; he records details of the setting and time of her ecstatic performance, thereby recreating the scene for his readers, allowing them to position themselves as witnesses whereby they might reexperience Christina’s performance. He remarks on the transformation to joy (gaudium) of Christina and her onlookers, and even himself as he experienced the story secondhand. Just as the abbot and his companion, convinced of her unusual holiness, were moved to a more positive affective state, so would the readers of her Life, inwardly transformed by what they heard or read, ideally experience a conversion process. More central than the moral or spiritual meaning of the narrative was the affective conversion it structured, the triggering of salubrious internal passions. The written text encoded the audience

12. VCM III.19; V.36.
13. Giselle de Nie has noted descriptions of affective transformation said to have taken place within readers, auditors, and witnesses of early medieval miracle stories. See her Poetics of Wonder: Testimonies of the New Christian Miracles in the Late Antique World (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012).
14. Mary Carruthers has described how readers imbued with emotional tenor the catena in monastic meditative texts; see her The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images,
experience of witnessing the original saintly performance; in this way, the reading process was oriented around the transformational effects of the Life. The manuscript context of the liégeois Lives reveals their encounter as stories that took effect in their very performance, narratives that soothed. Brussels, KBR, MSS 8609–20 and 4459–70 were framed by their makers as therapeutic books. Through close analysis of these codices, we can gather how the women whose Lives they transmitted continued to perform therapeutically in their communities long after their deaths, and how those who possessed and performed these books acted as their therapeutic agents.

**Efficacious Words at La Cambre**

Brussels, KBR, MS 8609–20 was produced at Villers in the mid- to late thirteenth century for La Cambre, a women’s community located about thirty-two kilometers to their north. It includes eight saints’ Lives, seven of which were of women, three of which had Cistercian affiliation, and five of which formed part of the liégeois corpus. In addition to the Lives, the manuscript includes miracles, sermons, prayers, hymns, instructions on the Eucharist, and healing charms. Despite the seeming miscellaneous quality of these assembled texts, the codex is by no means random. Each of the texts copied within it works with the others to create a medium for efficacious action, for devotional acts that anticipate the transformation of material bodies by means of an infusion of divine grace. As a whole, the manuscript conditioned its users to expect personal transformation through the reading process.

Manuscript 8609–20 opens with a cluster of hagiographic scripta on three saints who were not from Brabant, but who nevertheless held significance.

---


16. The saints Lives are Mary Magdalene (*BHL* 5439), Elizabeth of Hungary (*BHL* 2507), Lutgard of Aywières (*BHL* 4950), Christina Mirabilis (*BHL* 1746), Alice of Scharbeek (*BHL* 264), Ida of Nivelles (*BHL* 4146), Odo ( liégeois priest; *BHL* 6286), and Margaret Contracta (*BHL* 5322).
for its mulieres religiosae. These scripta include the Life, translation, and miracles of Mary Magdalene, a model of lay penitence for the mulieres religiosae; Caesarius of Heisterbach’s Life of Elizabeth of Hungary (d. 1231), the royal widow who founded a hospital in Marburg, was canonized in 1235, shortly after her death, and after whom no less than thirteen beguinages were named; and a miracle cure attributed to the Virgin Mary. ¹⁷ Capping Mary’s healing miracle are a few paragraphs from the Cistercian Guerric of Igny’s sermon IV on Palm Sunday. ¹⁸ It is likely that the later compiler of the manuscript only wanted to include the text from Mary’s miracle, as, following Guerric’s sermon, there begins the hymn to Mary, Ave sponsa insponsata, composed by the bishop-saint Germanus, but it is cut off on the final folio in the quire. ¹⁹ The scribe has included a catchword, indicating that the hymn is not a fragment but rather, in its original inscription, would continue onto the next folio of a different quire. Instead of continuing with Germanus’s hymn, however, the manuscript’s compiler introduced new material. This later authority inserted into the midst of the volume a series of extended expositions that, although they are in fact four separate eucharistic texts, are labeled uniformly as “de sacramento” in the table of contents. The compiler therefore made a deliberate effort to disrupt the flow of the original assemblage with these eucharistic texts. They were not randomly chosen; I would suggest that he made an explicit association between the salutary effects of the Eucharist and the Lives of religious women in this region.

The texts that follow elucidate the connection between these saintly women and the Eucharist. Scholars have long associated religious women in this region with bombast piety, characterized by the frequency with which they communicated at Mass and the eucharistic content and character of their visions. ²⁰ While substantiating that association, this manuscript also offers some nuance. It connects the mulieres religiosae with

¹⁷. The narrative of the discovery of Mary Magdalene’s body at Vezelay is also included (BHL 5489).


the consecrated host not through their devotional practices but through their similar salutary effects. For example, Guiard of Laon’s sermon, *On the Twelve Fruits of the Sacrament*, is copied here (fols. 60r-73r). As we saw in the previous chapter, this sermon enjoyed widespread Latin and vernacular circulation in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.\(^{21}\) Guiard was the bishop of Cambrai, the chancellor of the University of Paris in 1237, and a well-known supporter of the women’s religious movement in the southern Low Countries.\(^{22}\) Dubbed the *doctor eucharisticus* for his contributions to sacramental theology, Guiard appears in the *Life* of Lutgard of Aywières, where he engages Lutgard in a spiritual conversation.\(^{23}\) He also makes an appearance in the *Life* of Margaret of Ypres, in which he voices his concern for her health during a period of fasting.\(^{24}\) Guiard had traveled throughout the Diocese of Cambrai instructing locals on the role of the transubstantiated host in the confession of faith, and he was a vocal advocate for celebrating the eucharistic sacrament by adopting into the universal Christian calendar the feast of Corpus Christi as designed by Juliana of Mont-Cornillon.\(^{25}\) By choosing to bind together a eucharistic sermon by one of the region’s greatest supporters of the mulieres religiosae with examples of their *Lives*, the compiler of MS 8609–20 implicitly instructed users on how to make meaning of this manuscript. Guiard’s sermon offered a theology of the Eucharist that focused closely on the sanctifying and salubrious effects of communion that were propelled by the physiology of mastication.\(^{26}\) The twelve “fruits” of his treatise were twelve effects of grace made visible through ingestion of the consecrated host. He imagined the Host as a medication (*digestivum*; *aromata apothece*) that took effect on the communicant’s soul, dispersing grace that animated and revivified the sinful body, conforming it to the body of Christ.\(^{27}\) Guiard discussed the manner in which the Eucharist conformed the recipient to

---


23. VLA II.40.


Christ through medical action. He was particularly interested in digestion, which dispersed comforting and conforming passions throughout the body. For Guiard, the medicine of the Eucharist worked in tandem with the generation of imitative passions within the communicant. He called attention to the grief experienced by Mary, requiring his audience to conjure similar affective states in order for the medicinal host to take effect. At the same time, Guiard conceived of the Eucharist as the *verbum dei*, the word that fused divinity with matter. This therapeutic word, for Guiard, had profound physical and psychological effects. His conception of the Eucharist as the word of God emphasized the verbal mediation of the sacrament’s efficacy, consecrated and thus transformed at the moment the priest uttered those efficacious words *Hoc est corpus meum*. Guiard’s sermon is followed by a second sermon on the Eucharist. Rubricated as *Sermo de sacramento altaris*, this sermon bears all the rhetorical trappings of a lively performance, so that its lessons were presented through the persuasive language and charismatic presence of a priestly authority, one who claimed the power to effect sacramental change. Together, these two sermons reflect performed speech.

An anonymous treatise on the body and blood of Christ strengthens the association between eucharistic medicine and local female saints in MS 8609–20. Rubricated as *Incipit tractatus de corpore et sanguine Domini*, the treatise established a direct connection between the Eucharist and the mulieres religiosae. The treatise specifically cites the example of Marie of Oignies, asserting that she considered the Eucharist as medicine, and used it as her personal healing unguent that nurtured her through an illness lasting many days. His exhortation on the transformational power of the Host praises the sacrament as the premier pharmaceutical, the “preferred remedy” for all wounds. The manuscript’s section on eucharistic texts concludes with a cascade of miscellaneous songs on the sacrament, including Hildebert of Lavardin’s *De sumptione sacrae Eucharistiae* (On Taking the Holy Eucharist)

29. *Incipit*: *sanctorum virtus permaxima humilitas est*. Fols. 66v–73r.
31. Fol. 79v.
32. Fol. 76r: ”remedia potius”; fol. 96r: ”medicais virtus memorati sacramenti.”
and others that serve as poetical homage to its effects as a “powerful medicine” and “sacred medicine.” The songs elicit communal participation, as the women of La Cambre would have gathered together, most likely in the presence of a clerical visitor, to perform this tribute to the Eucharist as a sacred medicine. As performed words, the songs elicited a therapeutic process that required the nuns to gesture, emote, and transform themselves in a manner that embodied the words on the page. The nuns synchronized their gestures and affects when they performed these songs as a community. The nuns were not seen as the sole beneficiaries of this practice, however; by offering their songs of praise as a communal therapeutic praxis, as I will show, the women of La Cambre could also aid the members of the laity who sought their prayers.

In its emphasis on the physical and hygienic transformation attendant upon reception of the Eucharist, the texts copied in this manuscript reflect long-standing Christian teaching. Ignatius of Antioch had described the Host as “the medicine of immortality,” and Christ himself had long been depicted as healer or doctor, patterned on images of Aesclepius and Serapis. But the healing power of the Eucharist had assumed a new theological urgency in the thirteenth century, when sacramental efficacy became canonically linked to bodily health at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. As we have seen, in the required confession that preceded Mass, according to Canon 21, the priest was likened to a doctor who healed the sick with the Host. The council’s decrees clarified that the Eucharist was no mere metaphorical medicine, nor the priest a base analogue of the physician. Rather, their practices had real bodily effects. And thus Canon 22 ordered that physicians seek the accompaniment of priests when attending the sick so that the state of the soul, which conditioned the health or sickness of the body, might be properly cared for, “for when the cause ceases so does the effect.” The healing power of the transubstantiated host underwrote the power of the saints whose Lives

---

33. Fol. 99v.


were collected in the manuscript. This cluster of eucharistic texts rationalized the therapeutic efficacy of saints’ Lives: Guiard’s sermon and pastoral activity throughout the region linked theological discourse on the therapeutic efficacy of the sacrament with hagiographic literature and the performance of living sanctity. Both the Eucharist and living saints contained an overabundance of grace, with the potential to trigger physiological change.

It is from this therapeutic appreciation of sacramental theology in the region that we should understand the reading event established by the Lives that follow in succession, only disrupted by a brief paragraph of text, a fragment from a treatise on the grace of the Eucharist (137r): five Lives of regional saints, four of whom were among the mulieres religiosae of Liège. They include the Lives of Lutgard of Aywières (100r-128v), Christina Mirabilis (128v-137r), Alice of Schaerbeek (138r-146v), and Ida of Nivelles (147r-178r). The fifth Life in this section is devoted to the liégeois priest Odo (178r-179v), who served the mulieres religiosae in his parish. The fragment on the grace of the Eucharist appears in the limited space remaining after the conclusion of the Life of Christina Mirabilis, and it features a curt enumeration of the sacrament’s salubrious effects, including the remission of sin, the subjugation of demons, and defense against temptation, which enabled plentiful bodily goods such as the “cure for infirmity,” provision of optimal health (valetudinem), and deterrence of death. The inclusion of this excerpt suggests that the scribe(s) considered it relevant to address the benefits of the Eucharist while reading from this series of Lives, thus linking them once again to sacramental considerations.

How, exactly, the makers of MS 8609–20 understood the experience of the Lives of these saints to be therapeutically efficacious is suggested by a meditative scriptum on the passion of Christ and the mourning of the Virgin Mary. This meditation, known as Quis dabit, was imagined as the words Mary uttered after the death of Christ. It was one of the most widely circulated devotional texts of the later Middle Ages. The meditation provided rich visual images for the reader, taking her through every scene as she transitioned from the point of view of Christ to Mary to other onlookers. The

37. Fol. 137r. Incipit: Mare non habundat tot guttis . . . quantum habundat sacramentum altaris karismatibus.
38. Fol. 137r: “curat quondam infirmitate.”
39. Incipit: Quis dabit capiti meo aquam, Jeremiah 9:1. This meditation on tears has a complex textual history with many borrowings; see Thomas Bestul, Texts of the Passion: Latin Devotional Literature and Medieval Society (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 136–40. According to Bestul, the meditation lacks a fixed text and is found in several recensions.
40. Bestul, Texts of the Passion, 136.
text, like the others copied throughout the manuscript, trained the user to conjure appropriate emotions—namely, grief and compassion; it engineered an effect, leading its reader to be transformed, physically in the form of posture and the production of tears, as well as emotionally by arousing certain affects. Like the songs on the medicinal sacrament, this meditation was likely designed for a group effort, producing a communal therapy. The Cistercian adviser to La Cambre would lead the nuns in the meditation so that, together, they conjured these feelings and gestures in a performed practice that promised affective and physiological transformation.

Mary Carruthers has shown that many monastic authors used textual meditations to cultivate tears as a physical preparation for scholastic thought. Medieval monastic meditative texts inherited the Galenic model of humoral theory in which the optimal balance of the body’s natural qualities (hot, cold, wet, dry) determined the health and functioning of the rational capacity of the soul. 41 Scholastic authors such as Thomas Aquinas and Peter of Celle generated tears by physically prostrating themselves in certain strained positions while meditating on texts that aroused grief, fear, and anxiety; doing so, they believed, prepared the mind, clearing it for rational cogitation. 42 It is unlikely that Quis dabit was copied into MS 8609–20 for such purposes, as it was made for a women’s community that was not trained to engage in scholastic disputation; however, we might still understand this text within the long monastic tradition that hailed the physiological effects of meditation. Even in nonclerical communities, passion meditation could take the form of medical regimen by fostering the affective disposition that made eucharistic reception more efficacious, more salubrious. 43 Bartholomaeus of Montagnana, for example, recommended meditation for a young patient roiled with strong emotion. 44

That the Quis dabit meditation in MS 8609–20, like the other texts copied into this manuscript, was used as a technique for fostering physiological change

43. Daniel McCann discusses English passion texts and paraprofessional lay readers in his “Heaven and Health: Middle English Devotion to Christ in Its Therapeutic Contexts,” in Devotional Culture in Late Medieval England and Europe: Diverse Imaginations of Christ’s Life (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 350; on lay readers of medical texts, see also Michael Solomon, Fictions of Well-Being: Sickly Readers and Vernacular Medical Writing in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).
44. Bartholomaeus de Montagnana, Consilia CCCV (Venice, 1564), fol. 19v; cited in Naama Cohen-Hanegbi, Caring for the Living Soul: Emotions, Medicine, and Penance in the Late Medieval Mediterranean (Leuven: Brill, 2017), 118.
is borne out by the scripta that surround it, creating a powerful textual inter-
play that linked reading on the life and passion of Christ with verbal processes of
healing, with efficacious words. Much of the detail for Mary’s lament in
*Quis dabit* was taken from the Gospel of Nicodemus. This adaptation is useful
for further decoding the manuscript, as an excerpt from the Gospel of Nicodemus appears several folios later, in a series of fragmentary texts dedicated to the healing capacity of Christ and his cross. The Gospel of Nicodemus was a fifth-century apocryphal passion narrative that became popular in the thirteenth century. In the particular selection from the Gospel that is copied here, Pilate asks the company of Jesus’s followers about his healing miracles. The crowd reports that Jesus healed a leper, repaired a paralyzed leg, and raised Lazarus from the dead. The scribe followed this excerpt with copies of the legends of the finding of the cross and its exaltation, both appealing to the cross as an agent of physical healing: in the story of its finding, the true cross is distinguished from two other crosses by its capacity to revive a dead youth, and the exaltation narrative included two important miracle stories in which salubrious water and blood gushed from a wounded image of Christ that was painted by Nicodemus. This cluster of scripta brings together Christ’s passion with the healing effects of the Eucharist—his bodily death on the cross is featured as the remedy for sin and sickness. The passion had therapeutic effects that were textually mediated in the process of reading the manuscript. Just as ingesting the sacrificial body in the consecrated host carried hygienic effects within the communicant, so also did the process of digesting the words of the passion narrative compel therapeutic effects for the reader. The therapeutic effects of reading meditations on the life of Christ were not unlike those promised by the process of reading saints’ *Lives*. As constructed by MS 8609–20, both served to arouse salutary passions.

Following the exaltation of the cross, the scribe copied a series of texts that can only be described as incantatory. First, he included a litany of worthies

---

47. Fol. 199v.
49. McCann, “Heaven and Health,” 346. McCann explains that the *Priking of Love* fashions Christ’s body into a pharmacy while at the same time articulating the body as a book for study and meditation.
who suffered with Saint Ursula, essentially a cast of characters in the narrative of her life. The community at La Cambre possessed relics from Saint Ursula and her band of virgins, suggesting the possibility that this scriptum served as a mnemonic for recounting her legend as one meditated before the sacred materials.  

The Ursuline names should be read in conjunction with another inscription, the Ursuline visions of Elizabeth of Schönau, which appears at fol. 185r. The account reports on Elizabeth’s prophetic authentication of the relics of Ursula and her troupe of virgin martyrs, which had been discovered in Cologne in the early twelfth century. The hagiographic material from Elizabeth’s visions in MS 8609–20 thereby endorses the intercessory power of Ursula’s relics housed at La Cambre. Thus, the manuscript provided its own certificate of authentication in the copy of Elizabeth’s visions, which served to affirm the salvific work accomplished by the nuns’ recitation of the litany in the presence of the relics. Another miracle-working object at La Cambre suggests that such a practice might be quite routine, and would envelop the local lay community. In the nuns’ custody was a “certain image of the mother of God” at which many blind, deaf, and diseased individuals found cure. The local sick could access these therapeutic objects through the abbey church, which may have been open to the parish, as is suggested by archaeological evidence revealing the presence of a chapel on the north side of the abbey church. The chapel was separated from the nuns’ enclosure and open to the public through a walk along the north side of the nave.

Furthermore, we know that the nuns of La Cambre maintained a porteress who distributed


53. Philippe Numan, *Miracles Lately Wrought by the Intercession of the Glorious Virgin Marie, at Mont-aigu*, trans. Robert Chambers (Antwerp: Arnold Coinings, 1606), 8. Although the collection was printed in 1606, it refers to a Jewish man attacking the image with a boar-spear in 1232, thus positing its presence at La Cambre at this time. That the author of the miracle collection could imagine the space of La Cambre as available to Jewish people, among others, suggests that the abbey maintained certain points of access, at which visitors could see their relics and images, here most likely in the church.

alms to the poor, because in 1234 they received a donation for this very purpose from the castellan of Brussels, Lionnet I.  

It is possible that the relics of the Ursuline virgins worked to attract sick pilgrims and generated cure while hearing the story of their heroic travails. These components of the manuscript place it clearly within the physical space of the cloister and reveal the production of the codex as a response to the specific circumstances of the women at La Cambre, whose prayers extended their service beyond the cloister.

The nuns’ service beyond the cloister is also made clear in a series of healing charms copied into the manuscript (figure 10). The charms were not marginal, but were rather included as part of the scribal planning, rubricated, and marked with crosses. These charms are particularly helpful for understanding the relationship between the Cistercian nuns of La Cambre and their social networks outside the cloister. The presence of a series of charms copied centrally into this manuscript provides evidence that the women who used MS 8609–20 wanted a textual source to support their healing prayers. While we may have little evidence that women read formal medical treatises, the charms here provide yet another glimpse into processes of oral transmission of therapeutic knowledge. Some of the charms have no known textual exemplars, suggesting that they represent a moment of oral communication in the creation of this manuscript. Because so many of the charms were obstetric, they also suggest that the nuns of La Cambre, many of whom likely lived as beguines before taking permanent vows as Cistercians, maintained their healthcare ties to the community they previously served.

The first charm copied into MS 8609–20, on fol. 199r, promised to assist against *caducus morbus*, or epilepsy. The charm asked its user to create a

---


57. What was the exemplar for these charms? The booklists of Villers include only one obvious medical work, *textus phisicorum et methafisice in uno volumine*, but this codex likely arrived at Villers after the production of MS 8609–20. See Albert Derolez, ed., *Medieval Booklists of the Southern Low Countries* (Brussels: Palais der Academiën, 2001), 4:227. Derolez notes that this book would have arrived about 1328, when Gislenus of Binche transferred to Villers from Aulne, bringing with him a number of books.

58. Yvette of Huy, for example, dressed as a Cistercian nun and maintained ties with her family members at Villers, Orval, and Trois-Fontaines. Although she never took vows as a Cistercian, Yvette served the leperous while living as a recluse.
Figure 10. A series of charms, with markings of later censure. Brussels, KBR, MS 8609–20, fol. 199r.
ligature, tying it around the neck of the infirm and calling on the magi Gaspar, Balthazar, and Melchior. It was a well-known charm, commonly called the “Three Kings Charm,” and was included in Bernard of Gordon’s *Lily of Medicine* as well as Roger Bacon’s *Opus majus*. The remedy for epilepsy is followed by a series of four charms for assistance in childbirth, clearly rubricated with the words *ad partum mulieris*. These include a commonly used charm, *Panditur interea domus olympi*, which was based on the opening to the tenth book of Vergil’s *Aeneid*. This charm is followed by a less familiar one, *Terra terram accusat meum autem est judicium*. The line is related to a story from the Gospel of John (8:1–11) in which a crowd asked Jesus how to punish a woman who was accused of adultery; he responded by writing in the dirt of the earth. Though the content of what, exactly, he wrote is not indicated, theologians beginning with Ambrose of Milan were undeterred from speculation, with one of the most favored responses being *Terra terram accusat* (Earth accuses earth). Offered without commentary as a charm in this manuscript it evoked the power of words. The content or significance of Jesus’s words was unimportant; it was their effect that mattered. The third birthing charm echoes another line from Vergil, *[En]nova progenies cello demittitus alto* (A new generation is let down from heaven above). This phrase was part of the well-known “peperit charm” in which, after the invocation of a series of “holy mothers,” these words were to be copied on a slip of parchment and attached to the leg of a parturient woman. And the final charm, *In exitu Israel de egypto domus Jacob de populo barbaro* (When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a barbarous people) derives from psalm 113, which was commonly used as a funerary song. While I have found no


other textual analogues for this birthing charm, as we saw in chapter 4, psalm texts played a significant role in religious women’s caritative practices.  

The charms in MS 8609–20 are highly condensed. In those charms with a known textual tradition, such as the “peperit charm,” the Vergilian phrases appear as one component of a more elaborate, multistep charm that included instructions for gesture, invocation of holy figures, and specific prayers. Here, however, only the Latin words, apparently meant for inscription, were provided. This condensed version of the charms points to an oral tradition that would have communicated the totality of the procedure. The text of all four charms derives from literary or biblical traditions that would have been well known within the cloister. Appearing as charm texts, then, they represent appropriations of culturally significant texts for the purpose of healing. That they were in fact appropriated as charms indicates that these traditional texts were reinscribed with meaning through the act of performing them. If performed properly, they were understood to bring about physiological transformation, from illness to health, from struggle to ease in labor.

Bearing in mind the oral and performative expositions that stood behind the text of these charms, we can imagine how they would have interacted with other texts in MS 8609–20 and with other material objects at La Cambre. The charms in MS 8609–20 are embedded among prayers, meditations, and saints’ Lives, suggesting the possibility that the manuscript as a whole was consulted during the birthing process. The nuns of La Cambre may have read from its Lives and sung its chants, perhaps also making use of the Ursuline relics, while attending to laboring women or to other caregiving needs. That ecclesiastical authorities sought to terminate and erase the memory of their caritative outreach to pregnant women is indicated by the later marks of censure that scratched through the charms’ text.

64. Other amuletic charms that included psalm texts can be found in Hebrew tradition; see Carmen Caballero-Navas, The Book of Women’s Love and Jewish Medieval Medical Literature on Women: Sefer ahavat nashim (London: Kegan Paul, 2004), 174–76. I thank Carmen Caballero-Navas for assisting me with this scriptum. Another ritual for speeding up birth directs the practitioner to write a verse from Psalm 115 on parchment and then to read it over the head of a woman, tying it with a seal and binding it to her finger with a red silk thread. Jones and Olsan, “Performative Rituals,” 14.

65. In other cases of the “peperit” charm, for example, there is a brief historiale, the invocation of a series of holy mothers, instructions to write the Latin phrase on parchment and affix it to the laboring woman, and an adjuration for the child to come out, as well as, in some cases, an exorcism of demons. See Marianne Elsakkers, “In Pain You Shall Bear Children: Medieval Prayers for a Safe Delivery,” in Women and Miracle Stories: A Multi-Disciplinary Exploration ed. Anne-Marie Korte (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 179–210.

66. The same black line appears earlier in the manuscript, in the Life of Lutgard next to marginal comments that read: “vacat . . . vacat.” The section corresponds to chapters 25 and 26 in the AASS
Similar in form to the five charms in MS 8609–20 are a string of incantatory verbal utterances with a medical Latin patterning, but no clear significance: *lacrimae balneum, mors vita, lingua doctor, oculus dactor, facies speculum, cor hospicium*. The words express illocutionary force, but contain no obvious meaning.\(^\text{67}\) Thirteenth-century grammatical theory conceived of such interjections as emerging from the passions of the soul. Considered in this light, these words of interjection were “vessels of affect.”\(^\text{68}\) Their very incompleteness managed the expression of inexpressible feelings.\(^\text{69}\) These gestural interjections provide another example of the performed communal utterances that the manuscript structured for its readers. Here, they strike the reader as pleas for immediate therapeutic action.

By embodying the saint’s life textually, the manuscript copy of the *Life* became a verbal relic.\(^\text{70}\) The manuscript copy of the *Life* was part of the version of her *Life*. The first tells of how a young nun of the Cistercian order who was very ill and could not properly fast or follow the Rule languished in the infirmary until Lutgard assisted her with prayers. This healing, declared a miracle by Thomas, provides an important temporal dimension to the layers of mediation of Lutgard’s textual *Life*. Thomas reports that the woman who was assisted by Lutgard was now a *vetula* and had affirmed the veracity of this anecdote. In this way, Lutgard’s past actions were brought closer to the present by recording the *vetula*’s memory of her interaction with and bodily transformation at the hands of Lutgard. The second rescinded miracle relates that another young nun, Hespelendis, suffered from a pathological depression. She requested that Lutgard pray for her, and, assenting, Lutgard gave very specific directions as to when her cure would be delivered—on Good Friday, during the adoration of the cross, at the moment when the priest lifted the cross, saying, “Behold.” Thomas reports that, indeed, at this exact moment in the liturgy, Hespelendis experienced an infusion of grace comforting her body.


68. This is Daniel McCann’s phrase; McCann explores nonverbal prayer in the *Cloud of Unknowing*, viewing its interjections through the grammatical theory of Hugh of St. Victor, John of Garland, Roger Bacon, and Thomas Aquinas. These authors insist that interjections express affections of the soul. McCann, “Words of Fire and Fruit: The Psychology of Prayerwords in the *Cloud of Unknowing,*” *Medium Aevum* 84 (2015): 223.

69. John of Garland asserted that emotions are “expressed better in an incomplete sentence (*per oratione imperfectam,*)” in a chapter on word order, suggesting that interjections be placed at the beginning of sentences. The *Parisiana Poetria of John of Garland*, ed. and trans. Traugott Lawler (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974). On John of Garland’s observations about affective interjections, see McCann, “Words of Fire and Fruit,” 214. McCann notes also that many liturgical expressions, such as *amen, alleluia, deo gratias*, were seen as interjections that express pure affect, no reason. Aquinas compared human interjections to the bark of a dog or the roar of lion—sounds that signified internal pleasure and pain with immediacy. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Politics*, I.1.1/b, in McCann, “Words of Fire and Fruit,” 217.

70. Skemer, *Binding Words*, 236 and 50. Skemer borrows the term “verbal relics” from Raymond Van Dam, who used it to describe the exchange of hagiographic stories about Gregory of Tours. Van Dam noted that healing miracles took place during public recitations of the stories from Gregory’s *Life*, so that the reading of the *Life* was an occasion in which audience/hearers expected Gregory to reenact miracles. Raymond Van Dam, *Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 138.
saint’s material identity, just like her relics and tomb.71 In its presence, and through its utterance, the power of the saint revivified and was made present to a fresh audience. Listening to the narratives of cure, auditors imagined the process of miraculous healing, the “transformational patterns” made visible in them.72 These narratives were culturally understood as therapeutic texts. For example, the Italian physician Gentile of Foligno recommended to a woman suffering from the pain of an ulcerous bladder that she engage the memory of astonishing stories as a means of transforming sorrow to delight.73 And the English theologian Thomas Chobham praised the beneficial effects made possible by musicians who performed narrative songs recounting the lives of saints.74 The scripta within MS 8609–20 linked the reading and hearing of Lives of mulieres religiose with the infusion of grace that was believed to fuel sacramental change, to effect physical transformation. The process of reading, or actively hearing these Lives read, prepared audiences for similar transformation. When audiences heard the dramatic performance of reading, they learned to expect the kind of conversion and physiological transformation the original eyewitnesses to the living saint had experienced.

Efficacious Performances at Vrouwenpark

A second book produced at Villers further demonstrates that the Cistercian community in the thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century Low Countries experienced this corpus of Lives as efficacious texts. Brussels, KBR, MS 4459–70 was copied in 1320 for the Cistercian women’s community of Vrouwenpark.75 A colophon inscribed on a half sheet after the front flyleaf
indicates that the manuscript was created by a brother John of St. Trond from Villers, who was appointed as the confessor to the nuns of Vrouwenpark. It conveys that, for brother John, the use of this manuscript could wield intercessory power. In his message, John of St. Trond prays that those who read this book might assist his soul’s journey to heaven by performing the texts within it. That is, he expected that the encounter with this book might effect the transmission of divine grace, that his sins might be purged and his soul ferried to heaven. The creation and use of this codex were a means of facilitating access to grace, to salvation.

Manuscript 4459–70 is an omnibus text, but one with internal coherence. The manuscript includes seventeen different fourteenth-century hands and eleven codicological units. The codicological units were produced at roughly the same time and in the same scriptorium. A table of contents on the recto of the half sheet was written c. 1330, and the texts within the book reflect the order described in the table, so that it has remained in its current composite form since that time. The contents are not foliated, which suggests that they acted as more of an inventory than a navigational aid. The codex was likely used by John or other Villers advisers as they communed with the nuns of Vrouwenpark. There are signs that the nuns may have had some role in selecting its contents. For example, the book includes a birth indulgence that would seem appropriate only for a women’s community with explicit ties to the healthcare of people outside their walls. Further evidence of collaboration between John and the religious women of Vrouwenpark are two scripta said to be transcriptions directly from religious women. These include fifteen brief notes on visionary experiences reported by a Cistercian nun and a short text describing a mystical conversation reported by a beguine from Tongres between herself and Christ. Although the book was a miscellany produced by numerous hands, in its reception and use among

---

76. On a half-sheet, after the flyleaf: “Quamobrem precatur lecturos in eo quod dicere velint anima eius cum animabus omnium fidelium defunctorum per Dei misericordiam et per Ihesu Christi sanguinis aspersionem et per intercessionem beate Marie ac omnium sanctorum sanctorumque requiescant in pace. Amen, amen.”

77. Folkerts, *Vorbeeld op schrift*, 126.

78. Distinct black and red decorative elements are scattered throughout the manuscript. Folkerts, *Vorbeeld op schrift*, 126.

79. Folkerts, *Vorbeeld op schrift*, 126. Some fragmentary texts and insertions are not included in the contents.

80. At fols. 148v-50r; 252r-v. M. Nuyttens has suggested that the author of the conversation was William, abbot of Affligem, and that the beguine was Beatrice of Dendermonde; see his “Abbaye de
the nuns of Vrouwenpark and their Cistercian advisers we can see it as one with internal logic and coherence. That logic, I argue, hinges on the reading event as a performance of grace, a technology for transmitting divine grace through prayer to humans and other material objects in Vrouwenpark and its surroundings.

Manuscript 4459–70 contains the Lives of four local Cistercian saints from the liégeois corpus: Alice of Schaerbeek, Beatrice of Nazareth, Walter of Bierbeek, and Prior Werric of Aulne. It also includes the Lives of four, non-Cistercian saints from the region, two of whom were in the liégeois corpus: Margaret of Ypres, Christina Mirabilis, Elizabeth of Hungary, and Anthony of Padua. In addition to the Lives of saints, the manuscript presents descriptions of mystical experiences, collations, prayers, charms, benedictions, spiritual letters, and a papal bull. Nearly all of the texts are what we might consider “efficacious”—they either provide ritual words to effect change, offer theological explanations for physical and spiritual transformation, or demonstrate through narrative the power of words. In the century prior to the creation of MS 4459–70, theologians had fiercely argued the distinction between official church sacraments and the broader realm of sacramental activity. While Peter Lombard reduced the sacraments to seven (from as many as twelve, according to Peter Damian) based on the certainty of their efficacy, a whole array of sacramental blessings, rites, and incantations continued to proliferate and remained in use by both priests and laypeople. Theologians beginning with Alexander of Hales made room
for sacramentals, that is, objects that might be lifted through the power of formulaic verbal blessings into a state of physical efficacy. The texts copied into MS 4459–70 provided not only the scripts for efficacious reading performances, but also numerous guarantors of their efficacy. The manuscript appears to promise readers that, through performance, their words could be made to move, persuade, or transform the material world.  

The character of the texts copied in MS 4459–70, their concern for transforming action, becomes apparent in a series of benedictions that follow the manuscript copy of the Lives of Elizabeth of Hungary and Alice of Schaarbeek. They were common benedictions, found in various monastic missals in use through the fourteenth century. The first blessing in the series of four is for water (benedictio aque), which would have been confected by the visiting priest. One would suspect that a priest would know the formula for blessing water and that he would carry his own more complete missal. The presence of the blessing in this manuscript thus raises the possibility that it was inscribed for use by the women of Vrouwenpark. The blessing requests the water’s hallowing because only through “celestial benediction” can it be rendered “effective” in warding off diabolic temptation and providing health to the whole community who made use of it. A second benediction involves bread and salt and expresses a wish for grace to enter these materials for the benefit of human and animal health, stating that the person or animal ingesting the foodstuff, once endowed with grace through this ritual blessing, would encourage healing in heart or eyes, nostrils, hands or feet. The third benediction (benedictio domus vel loci) was a standard in the Roman rite, requesting the endowment of grace among the inhabitants of the monastery.  

---

virtus inhered in the material of the sacraments that caused them to be vehicles of grace; others insisted that the efficacy of the sacrament stemmed from a pact with God whereby certain conditions (proper words, ordained minister, faithful audience) satisfied the occasion of an effect. On this debate, see Irène Rosier-Catach, La parole efficace: Signe, rituel, sacré (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004).  


86. Three of the benedictions were part of the Germano-Roman pontifical. They were copied throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in monastic settings. Examples can be found in the Chester-le-Street additions to Durham Cathedral Library A.IV.19; Leofric Missal, Bamberg Lit. 53; and in the missal of Robert of Jumièges, MS Rouen Y6.  

87. Fol. 57v: “Facias efficatem”; “sanitatis dulcedine.”  


89. Fol. 57.
its collective inhabitants, in this way also including the conversae in the health-securing plea of the benediction.\textsuperscript{90} The final blessing in the series, \textit{benedictio aque contra vermes segetum} (blessing for water against grain worms) seeks to expel vermin from crops.\textsuperscript{91} All four blessings are listed in the table of contents, suggesting their importance among the collected scripta in MS 4459–70. The benedictions are one of many examples in this codex demonstrating that the inhabitants of Vrouwenpark were interested in gathering together efficacious texts—readings that promised physical transformation and changed status, that assisted in channeling divine grace into the elements of their environment.

We can understand these benedictions as “factivite utterances,” statements that were meant to infuse the materials of the environment with grace. As such, the benedictions cast significance on the scripta that follow, so many of which combine gesture, word, and objects to effect transformation in the physical environment or in members of the community at Vrouwenpark. For example, the liturgy for a \textit{commune sanctorum} (a “common of the saints,” used for a whole category of saints such as martyrs or apostles) commences with a line from Proverbs, \textit{Mulierem fortem quis inveniet?} (31:10) and resembles the commune sanctorum for virgin martyrs in the primitive Cistercian breviary. It is noteworthy that this liturgical cursus differs slightly in its readings and responsories from the standard Cistercian breviary.\textsuperscript{92} The rubricator indicates to readers that the Mass formulary is for use with multiple female saints, including the “feast of Saint Elizabeth, Marie of Egypt, and the other chosen ones.”\textsuperscript{93} This variation indicates that the makers and users of this manuscript were interested in celebrating Mass for a wider range of female saints, in making their liturgical performances meaningful to the local community by addressing their preferred saints.\textsuperscript{94}

A prayer for Saint Audoenus, Frankish miracle worker and bishop of Rouen, suggests additional dimensions for the use of efficacious words at La Cambre. Audoenus’s reputation for effecting miracles was enhanced in

\textsuperscript{90} Rivard, \textit{Blessing the World}, 80.

\textsuperscript{91} Vogel and Elze, \textit{Le pontifical romano-germanique du dixième siècle}, Ordo 214b.


\textsuperscript{93} Fol. 64r: “Iste cursus potest dici in festo bte elyzabus, marie egypciache, et aliorum electarum. Missa Gaudeamus.”

the eleventh century when two separate miracle collections dedicated to his work began circulating.\footnote{On the spread of his cult, see Felice Lifshitz, “Eight Men In: Rouennais Traditions of Archepiscopal Sanctity,” \textit{Haskins Society Journal}, 1990, 63–74.} The prayer included here is nonnarrative, requesting blessings and grace. The words of the prayer are highly incantatory, falling like staccato exhortations: “Jesus of Nazareth”; “King of the Jews”; “Kyrie Elysion”; “Christi Elysion.”\footnote{Fols. 64v-65r.} As we glimpsed in MS 8609–20, there is also here a penchant for affective exclamation. Liturgical patterns such as these, Augustine held, were verbal interjections that expressed healthful joy.\footnote{McCann, “Words of Fire and Fruit,” 218–19.} The words of the oratio provided the community with a medium for modulating their affective states, for stimulating internal joy. The oratio also includes gestic instructions to the user to make the sign of the cross with her hands while chanting the antiphon, “Adesto Deus unus omnipotens.” The user would perform these gestures while uttering a new series of injunctions, such as “Sanctificas” and “Benedicas.” The string of utterances and gestures in this prayer worked together as “spoken actions” that begged for transformation, rendering the supplicant into a likely candidate for grace, commanding benediction that promised to transform the self through sanctification and grace.\footnote{“Spoken actions” refers to theatrical speech in which uttered language, rather than descriptive language, propels the action in a story; Manfred Pfister, \textit{Theory and Analysis of Drama} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). J. L. Austin referred to the phenomenon as a “performative utterance,” in which the uttering of a statement is tantamount to the doing of an action; J. L. Austin, \textit{How to Do Things with Words}, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisá (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 5–8.} It is in this context of the manuscript’s multiform performative texts that the \textit{Lives} within it take on the tenor of performances or “presentations” of the saint. Just as the blessings, oratio, and Mass formulary required communal participation in paraliturgical performance wherein biblical time (here, the crucifixion) is made present, so too did the \textit{Lives} gain this present performative meaning from the texts with which they were embedded.\footnote{Mary Suydam, “Visionaries in the Public Eye: Beguine Literature as Performance,” in \textit{The Texture of Society: Medieval Women in the Southern Low Countries}, ed. Ellen Kittell and Mary Suydam (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 131–152, 136.} Within this manuscript, the reading event is performative in that it reanimates, or makes present, the saint. Only by viewing the \textit{Lives} from their reception within the context of the complete manuscript can we understand them as having operated this way. Embedded with liturgical and sacramental scripts, the \textit{Lives} promised to effect parallel transformations in their participants.
Scripted word and gesture are brought together again in a series of verses attributed to Arnulf, abbot of Villers.¹⁰⁰ The verses are rife with references to the salubrious work of prayer. Playing on the verbal resonance of salve, meaning both “Be well” and “Hail,” the opening line of each song entreats the healing power of Christ: salve meum salutare / salve, salve, Ihesu chare.

Like the prayerful meditation in the coda to the Lambert-le-Bègue Psalter (British Library, MS Additional 21114), this one leads the user from the feet of Christ on the cross, up to his knees, then his hands, side wound, breast, heart, and finally, his face. At the start of each canto the song directs its performer to utter “Salve,” as simultaneously a greeting to Christ’s limb, an exhortation for salvation, and a plea for cure. “Sweet Jesus, heal everything, restore, make full like pious medicine,” it demands. “Cure me and I will be saved.”¹⁰¹

Arnulf’s songs are disrupted on fol. 150v by an indulgence, two additional prayers (or hymns), and a drawing of Christ’s side wound, bordered above and below by illustrations of the arma Christi (see figure 8 in chapter 4). The indulgence is placed inelegantly at the top of the page, as an introduction to or explanation of the illustrations and words under it. The indulgence, authorized by Pope Leo, granted forty days to those who contemplated the arms of Christ.¹⁰² Below the indulgence is a horizontal row of instruments of the passion, under which is the wound and the inscription of two prayers dedicated to the wound, Salve plaga lateris and O fons aque paradisi. Like Arnulf’s song, the prayers call specifically for the therapeutic intervention of the blood that flowed from Christ’s side wound, the “true medicine” (vera medicina) and “medicine of people” (medicina populi). The wound is situated directly in the center of the manuscript page; around its periphery, the scribe has written a verbal claim that it represented the actual size of Christ’s side wound.¹⁰³ This claim strengthened the link between the manuscript page, the words that it supported, and the salvific sacrifice of body and blood that was celebrated.

¹⁰⁰ Although this codicological unit of the manuscript (fols. 145–52) contains Richard of Saint Victor’s discussion of nature and grace, an account of the visionary experiences of a virgin, an oratio, and two indulgences, only Arnulf’s oratio is listed in the contents.

¹⁰¹ Fol. 150r: “Salve meum salutare salve meum Jhesu care . . . dulcis Ihesu totum sana tu res- taura tu complana tam pio medicamine . . . me sanibis hic spero. Sana me et salvus ero.”

¹⁰² Fol. 150v: “Quicumque hoc cotidie inspexerit in commemoratione passionis et armorum Iesu Christi XL dies indulgentiarum datas a Leone papa et ab eodem confirmatas.”

in the sacrament. The exactitude of measurement asserted the power of the image, rendering it a sort of contact relic. The practice of measuring the length of a tomb, a person’s body or limb for a candle, the distance to a shrine, or the size of Christ’s wound was thought to materialize and thus re-present the thing measured, so that the measurement absorbed the power and personhood of the template. The wound image in MS 4459–70, in its authentication through measurement, rendered the crimson parchment into a real, bloody wound. The image made present its exemplar, just as the scriptum of the Life made present the saint. In the presence of this relic of Christ, the manuscript provided the words of prayer for users to petition for health, thereby enhancing the power of those words to take effect.

Arnulf’s carmina, the two prayers, the side wound and arma Christi illustrations, and the written indulgence provided a brilliant multimediality by which the user was transformed into one freed from sin, one received of grace, one healed. The songs, then, may have acted as a vehicle for contemplating the pictured arms, moving the reader to each of Christ’s broken limbs, imagining the force of injury, and beseeching personal healing through the wounded body before them. The indulgence provided to those who completed the round of prayers acted as proof of efficacy. Through the specular, gestic, and verbal performance of this text, time in purgatory was reduced, the punishment from sin was diminished, and thus humans were recuperated. The “medicine of Christ” referred to in Arnulf’s song was the avenue for redemption of sin and thus for bodily health. The chanting of these carmina was the medicine that generated physiological change.

104. Surrounding the wound are the words “Hec est mensura vulneris lateris domini nostri Christi. Nemo dubitet quia ipse apparuit cuidam et ostendit ei vulnera sua.” On the illustration, see Rudolf Berlener, “Arma Christi,” in “The Freedom of Medieval Art” und andere Studien zum christlichen Bild (Berlin: Lukas Verlag, 2003). Berlener has argued that MS 4459–70 was the oldest literary indulgence for viewing the arma Christi.

105. Caroline Bynum, Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2001), 97–99. Bynum’s discussion of “the measure of Christ” centers on the medieval presumption that the measure of a person is in some sense their replicated self; such an approach to measurement is seen in the practice of donating a unit of wax equal to a body’s measure in exchange for a saint’s favor. According to Bynum, “To measure is to absorb the power of the measured self by contact with it.” See also David S. Areford, “The Passion Measured: A Late Medieval Diagram of the Body of Christ,” in The Broken Body: Passion Devotion in Late-Medieval Culture, ed. A. A. MacDonald, H. N.B. Ridderbos, and R. M. Schluesselmann (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1998), 211–38.

106. On “metric relics,” see Kathryn Rudy, Virtual Pilgrimages in the Convent: Imagining Jerusalem in the Late Middle Ages (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 97–107.

Notes at the bottom of fol. 150v alert the reader to flip two pages, where they will discover another series of drawings and another indulgence (figure 11). The second indulgence established a list of popes who authorized it and specified the number of days for which it was effective—three years’ remission from purgatory from Saint Peter, one hundred days from thirty popes, forty days from twenty-eight bishops, and forty days from Pope Leo. This list thereby assured the practitioner of the efficacy of performing the contemplative process. This second indulgence makes more explicit the function of bodily health in the practice of this prayer, indicating that “whoever daily considers these with a devout mind will find no evil death.” Furthermore, it specifically addressed women, recommending contemplation of the arms as a healing practice for parturient women because “this practice will provide the best remedy for women in labor.” The song and indulgences suggest something of the urgency underlying the making of this manuscript to assure its users of the efficacy of the texts it supports. The indulgences—authorized by a string of powerful clerics—acted as proof that words the nuns uttered could indeed establish salus.

The childbirth indulgence harks back to the wound, resignifying the wound as an obstetric amulet. Flora Lewis has shown that the arma Christi and wound images were often associated with talismans against fatal or difficult childbirth. The blood of Christ here was analogous to the blood of childbirth, both providing salvation and renewed life. In fact, the arma Christi indulgence had a long history of therapeutic uses, where it had been employed as a textual amulet for healing, often worn around the neck. As discussed in the previous chapter, fifteenth-century English arma Christi illustrations were designed especially for women, who used them for apotropaic purposes and for protection in childbirth, and, in an earlier period, devotional images of Christ’s passion and side wound were sources of semantic motifs for healing bodily wounds. Like the obstetric...
charms in KBR MS 8609–20, this series of images, songs, and indulgences offers another example of a prayerful remedy for safe labor in a manuscript used in Cistercian women’s communities. It provides a further indication that Cistercian nuns in the thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century Low

or kissed a representation of the wound, the mensura vulneris. She finds none of this activity prior to 1300. Rubin, Corpus Christi, 303–6.
Countries were possibly administering healthcare, in the form of both physical and spiritual caregiving, to petitioners from outside of their cloister walls. We know, for example, that the nuns of Vrouwenpark were permitted to receive family and friends, so it is possible that they provided care to outsiders. In fact, so passionately did they guard this approval that, when the 1242 General Chapter sought to enforce greater restrictions on enclosure, the nuns of Vrouwenpark rebelled by threatening visitor abbots and departing from the chapter house.

Religious women’s verbal efficacy is further established in this manuscript by a cluster of texts dedicated to elucidating the beneficial effects of participation in the feast of Corpus Christi. A transcription of papal records related to the foundation of the feast, these texts carried regional significance, as the feast was conceived, designed, and promoted in the Diocese of Liège by two mulieres religiosae, Juliana of Mont-Cornillon and Eve of St. Martin. They include a bull of canonization for the Franciscan “living saint,” Louis of Toulouse, approved by Pope John XXII, who was responsible for elevating the feast of Corpus Christi to universal observance in the Christian calendar. Also copied here is a list of reasons given by Pope Urban IV for his initial confirmation of the feast and for his support of its regional promotion. Clear marginal numeration made the treatise manageable for readers unfamiliar with the scholastic style. The *rationes* emphasized the logic behind the promotion of the feast, which, he claimed, assisted in the fight against heretics, conferred grace, and elevated the status of the Host as a cure for human infirmity. The treatise, in fact, suggested that the Host itself was experiencing its own infirmity, being wounded and degraded by the lack of reverence Christians paid it. The author likened the feast to a cure that would heal (*salubriter*) the Host as well as the Christian community. The treatise therefore imagined the feast, a liturgical procession, as an efficacious practice, one with the capacity to heal through participation.

Notes made hastily under this text by a later reader provide additional context that tells us about the interests of the book’s readers. The notes indicate that a bull of approval was given to the “monialibus” of Liège, and that the feast was to be celebrated after Pentecost. The nuns referenced here are Juliana of Mont-Cornillon and her helpmate, Eve, the recluse of the Church of St.

---

114. Moens, 259.
115. His *Life* is copied at fols. 239v-244v. That both his *Life* and his canonization bull are included in the manuscript emphasizes the intertextuality of the scripta. The Lives in this manuscript gain meaning in relationship to other scripta copied within.
Martin of Liège. While living, Juliana experienced what she believed were divine revelations urging her to develop an annual liturgical celebration for the institution of the sacrament of the Eucharist. Acting upon these visions, she recruited an assistant, John, from Mont-Cornillon and began to elaborate a liturgical office, what would eventually become *Animarum cibum*. After scrutiny of her office by clerics, including Hugh of St. Cher, Jacques Pantaleon (who later became Pope Urban IV), and Guiard of Laon, Juliana’s feast was eventually adopted before undergoing significant revisions by Thomas Aquinas. The notes, then, indicate that readers were actively connecting the mulieres religiosae to sacramental and liturgical performances.

The treatise on Urban IV’s rationale for adopting the feast is followed by a letter from his papal successor, Clement V, which paid tribute to the memory of Urban, honoring him for his interest in and promotion of the feast of Corpus Christi regionally. A copy of Pope Urban IV’s 1264 bull, *Transiturus de hoc mundo*, is also featured here. This bull provided authorization for the feast of Corpus Christi to be celebrated on the Thursday after Pentecost, praising in particular the renewal of Christ’s body and blood in the Host, in which “wonderful things are transformed,” an idea he explains using scholastic language that aligned the transformation of bread and wine into body and blood with the transformation of sinful humanity into the body Christ. Drawing a direct connection between salvation from sin and the salvific effects of the Host, Urban praised

---

116. The Cistercian compiler of this manuscript refers to Juliana as a nun, though it is not certain what vows she would have taken.

117. The *Life* of Juliana is bound in a small volume of eighty folios alongside Fulbert of Chartres’s sermon on the Nativity of the Virgin and Jerome’s address to Paula and Eustochium, the subject of which is the Assumption of the Virgin. Paris, Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, MS 945 was likely made at Villers in the late thirteenth century. The textual association with the Virgin Mary seems appropriate given that the *Life* of Juliana records that “she had a most tender devotion to the Holy mother of God. In the midst of her labors she would frequently cast herself upon her knees and with great fervor and devotion recite the Ave Maria,” and when meditating on the virtues of the Virgin, “she endeavored to put into practice the particular virtue on which she was meditating.” But the association of Juliana and the Virgin makes sense therapeutically as well. As prioress at Mont-Cornillon, Juliana recommended that her sisters perform the Aves and the Magnificat as a means of “exciting in others” a kind of joy.


the Host as a universal cure for all wounds, which was necessary because all humans were made sick at the fall. Analogizing the infectious apple of Eden to the health-giving Eucharist, he insisted that “because food ruined man in death, food cured him in life.”

Urban IV’s bull was sent directly to Eve of St. Martin, a measure of the affection he held for the mulieres religiosae of Liège. Before becoming pope, Urban had been a canon of St. Lambert beginning in 1232 and had involved himself in Juliana’s struggle for control of her leprosarium. In 1245 he wrote the Libellus de Regula et Vita Beginarum to assist with the governance of beguines in Liège, urging their regularity and adherence to customs. After instituting the feast of Corpus Christi in Laon and Verdun, he acceded to the papal throne in 1261 and, out of affection, brought with him Juliana’s prayer book. From his papal seat, Urban IV addressed to Eve his bull officially approving the feast of Corpus Christi. After her death, in 1264, her tomb in a chapel at the Church of St. Martin became a central focus of the feast, at which the canons would stop to pay her tribute after the Mass.

These texts supporting the feast of Corpus Christi are copied along with a third indulgence, this one for participation in the feast. The indulgence is included as part of a letter from Hugh of St. Cher, regent master of theology at Paris, Dominican provincial in Paris, and later cardinal-legate to Germany. Hugh was a supporter of the eucharistic feast in Liège, promoting it in sermons delivered along his legatine route. He had served as the evaluator of Juliana’s feast, probably about 1235–36, and became an advocate for it, as well as for the mulieres religiosae who enlivened the region he visited as cardinal. He ensured that the feast was celebrated annually by the canons of St. Martin, and he instituted it in the Diocese of Liège. The letter from Hugh copied into MS 4459–70 was originally written in April of 1252 and guaranteed to the Church of St. Mary in the abbey of Villers a forty-day indulgence for anyone who attended the Corpus Christi Mass. Like the

121. “quia per mortem homo corruerat, et per cibum relevaretur ad vitam.”
125. Mulder-Bakker, 80.
126. Rubin, Corpus Christi, 174–75.
indulgences that preceded it in the manuscript, this one served to convince readers of the efficacious capacity of the Host, and of its celebratory feast. The indulgence promoted the path to salvation for participants in this ritual, who memorialized the crucifixion and ingested the body of Christ.

Let me conclude where the manuscript concludes, with attention to a series of texts about religious women and the men of Villers who ministered to them. The final inscriptions include a Tongres beguine’s mystical dialogue, letters from Thomas, a Villers monk, to his sister Alice, a nun of Vrouwenpark, and excerpts from the Chronicle of Villers. These scripta allow us to capture a sense of the salutary significance attributed to religious women’s performed words in this region. The Tongres beguine’s words demonstrate a real interest in seeking out, recording, and sharing the inner visionary experiences of women, thereby endorsing their value. The beguine’s spiritual experience was considered valuable enough by the monks of Villers to be translated into Latin and transmitted, along with a series of women’s Lives, in this codex.  

Her visionary experience, just like those of all “holy virgins,” as Caesarius of Heisterbach asserted, might generate delight and promote health. Meanwhile, the letters from Thomas demonstrate an interest in training and cultivating women’s performed words. Thomas, his brothers, Godfrey and Renier, and his father, Renier, had all entered Villers in the first quarter of the thirteenth century, and their sister Alice took vows at Vrouwenpark. Only two letters survive from a more extensive correspondence that Thomas maintained with his sister. These two letters express an interest in Alice and her sisters’ performance of prayer and in the role of the Divine Office as a means of transforming the self from sin to salvation. For example, Thomas instructed Alice that participating in the psalmody “magnifies the soul, purifies the mouth, gladdens the heart,” and catalyzes a host of other personal transformations, including, “mak[ing] a person illustrious, open[ing] the senses, vanquish[ing] sins, mak[ing] peace between body and soul.”

---

129. On the translation, possibly from Dutch, of this account, see Walter Simons, “Staining the Speech of Things Divine: The Uses of Literacy in Medieval Beguine Communities,” in The Voice of Silence: Women’s Literacy in a Men’s Church, ed. Thérèse de Hemptinne and María Eugenia Góngora (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 97–98.

130. Caesarius of Heisterbach, bk. VIII, ch. lxxix: “quam sint iocundae, quam salutiferae visiones sanctarum virginum.”

131. On Godfrey, see chapter 2; his Life is considered part of the liégeois corpus.

Their performed words of the psalter eliminated sin, sharpened the affects, and brought wellness to the body and soul.

The manuscript witness of the first collections of Lives of the thirteenth-century mulieres religiosae from this region suggests that the performance of those Lives wrought therapeutic effects. The audition of their Lives, and quite possibly even the physical presence of their Lives within the codex, had achieved among beguine and Cistercian women’s communities in the region a status not unlike that of Margaret of Antioch, though on a strictly local level. Their healing grace did not dissipate after their deaths, but remained in their bones and in their Lives, an embodiment of the saintly self in parchment and performance. The association, in KBR MSS 8609–20 and 4459–70, between the Lives of religious women in the region and salutary texts reveals a concern to establish the efficacy of daily words and practices, of blessings, prayers, liturgical celebrations, and other rituals. Reading the Lives recreated the therapeutic experience of their grace-filled presence when alive in a manner that transformed those who experienced it, providing healing gaudium. Nearly all of the scripta copied into both manuscripts provide some kind of platform for arousing hygienic passions, and in doing so, they position Cistercian nuns as skilled purveyors of this practice of prayer. As a form of therapeutic practice, their prayers extended beyond the cloister walls. Even in a censored birthing charm, we can detect traces of lives that labored for the health of their communities. In prayers, the guardianship of relics and images, the recitation of charms, the performance of psalms, and the reading of Lives, Cistercian nuns found ways to build salutary communities and to practice forms of care that heretofore have remained invisible.

Letters of Thomas, Cantor of Villers, to His Sister Alice, Nun of Parc-les-Dames,” in Partners in Spirit: Women, Men, and Religious Life in Germany, 1100–1500, ed. Fiona Griffiths and Julie Hotchin (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 213–36. Ray argues, contrary to current scholarly emphasis on women’s capacity to spiritually inspire clerical men, that Thomas was the spiritual leader in his relationship with Alice and, potentially, with the other women of her community.