Conclusion: The Living Veronicas of Liège

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Unveiling the Veronicas

Philip of Clairvaux declares that Elisabeth of Spalbeek is ‘an unmistakeably alive and open-hearted Veronica’ (‘scilicet vivae et apertae Veronicae’).1 Philip refers to the vernicle here: an image of Christ’s face purportedly imprinted upon a cloth belonging to a woman named Veronica.2 The moniker ‘Veronica’ relates to both a mystical divine image and a woman. As such, it offers an interpretive framework with which we can understand all of the holy Liégeois. Analytic strands explored throughout this book are tied up in (the) Veronica: the power of being looked at and looking back; the transformation of a visual object into living personage and vice versa; the operation of screens (veils, icons) in revealing and concealing divinity; the manner in which a holy woman may merge with Christ and become worthy of veneration in her own right. The Liégeois, as Veronicas, exist in an oscillation between activity and passivity, shifting constantly – and necessarily – between individualized female subjects and objectified saintly artefacts subordinate to the male-controlled Church.

The earliest account of the Veronica legend is found in the *Cura sanitatis Tiberii*, a work appended to the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus* and composed no later than 700.3 In this text, the emperor Tiberius sends his official, Volosianus, to Jerusalem in search of Christ, whom he hopes will cure him of terrible illness. Volosianus’ mission is initially fruitless, as Christ has been crucified. However, he encounters Veronica, a woman in possession of a painted image of Christ. She herself was healed by Christ, who alleviated her haemorrhagic complaint. This identifies her with an unnamed woman from the New Testament (Matthew 9.20-22; Mark 5.25-34; Luke 8.43-48). After some persuasion on Volosianus’ part, Veronica and her icon return to Rome with him. With one glance at the image, Tiberius is cured, which leads directly to his baptism. Later accounts, such as that contained in Jacobus

1  VESEng, 16; VES, 16.373.
2  On the Veronica, see in particular: Belting, pp. 541-44; Hamburger, pp. 316-82; Kuryluk; Montgomery; von Dobschütz, pp. 197-262.
3  On the *Cura*, see in particular: Gounelle, pp. 232-37. See also similar narratives composed before the ninth century and in the late medieval period respectively: *Vindicta Saluatoris*, in EA, pp. 448-63; *Mors Pilati*, in EA, pp. 432-35.
of Voragine’s *Legenda aurea* (composed c. 1260), follow the contours of the older tale in the main. One significant shift occurs: the painted image of Christ becomes an imprint of Christ’s face left upon Veronica’s cloth or veil during a chance meeting, as detailed in Jacobus’ work. From the fourteenth century onwards, the location of the story shifts to Calvary, and the story of an anonymous woman wiping Christ’s face on his final journey began to circulate widely. Christ’s visage was purportedly imprinted upon the woman’s veil, which she then brought to Rome for popular veneration. The anonymous woman became ‘St. Veronica’, conflated with the Veronica (image and individual) from earlier stories, though this has no basis in Scripture.

The Veronica image resonated with thirteenth-century holy women, as shown by the presence of a vernicle (synonym for ‘Veronica’) in Eve of Saint-Martin’s cell. One look at the Veronica causes Juliana of Mont-Cornillon to become overwhelmed with pain at the memory of Christ’s Passion and faint. Jacques of Troyes (later known as Urban IV) donated a similar image to his sister in Laon in 1249. Jacques’ appreciation for the Veronica is also shared by his papal predecessors. In 1208, Innocent III inaugurated a procession of the icon from the basilica of Saint-Peter to the hospital of Saint-Spirito, and granted indulgences to all who venerated it. In 1297, Veronica’s veil was translated to the Basilica by Boniface VIII. This concretized the relic’s reputation as an object of supreme religiosity, and expanded its appeal to even more devotees across Europe. Nevertheless, the Veronica retained its especially ‘close connection’ to female religious expression. This is demonstrated by the prominence and frequency of the vernicle’s display in female religious spaces and in texts intended for women, lay and religious alike.

In the early fourteenth century, for instance, a mural depicting Veronica holding a bust of Christ was inscribed close to the sanctuary in the church of the beguines in Sint-Truiden, Christina *Mirabilis*’ hometown.

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4 53.233. See also Gervase of Tilbury’s earlier account of this meeting: 3.25.604-07. Gervase’s rendition differs in two significant ways: he maintains that the woman’s name is Martha, and the image of Christ is a painting, not an impression.

5 *VJC*, 1.5.28.453-54.

6 *VJCEng*, p. 216, n. 171; Mulder-Bakker, *Anchoresses*, pp. 133-34. Jacques is connected to Juliana of Mont-Cornillon in various ways. During his tenure as archdeacon of Liège (1243-1249) Jacques discussed Juliana’s vision signalling the need for the institution of the Corpus Christi Feast with her supporter, John of Lausanne: *VJC* 2.2.7.459.

7 Migne (ed.), 104.cc-ccii.

8 Montgomery, p. 812.

9 Hamburger, p. 372.

10 Ibid., pp. 350-82

11 Ibid., p. 372.
The popularity of the Veronica for holy women lies, perhaps, in its evocation of a ‘faith focused on the incarnate Christ’. Whether produced on the road to Calvary or in a chance meeting with Christ, the vernicle’s power ultimately lies in its indexicality. It is an acheiropoietos, an image made without human interference or fabrication. It thereby offers a link to Christ-as-man mediated only by its material support, and testifies to God’s presence on earth. Some scholars have linked the nature of the Veronica’s production to film on the basis of its non-human indexing of human form, offering an immutable trace of presence to the spectator. As with the Veronica, ‘film receives the imprint of the real’. The Liégeoises’ bodies are similarly imprinted with the reality of God’s magnificence and Christ’s suffering, and make plain the mechanics of Catholic doctrine. The signification of their bodies, marked in various ways that are often initially difficult to comprehend, becomes intelligible once we read the Liégeoises as Veronicas, images of Christ. When Christ imprints himself upon the holy women’s bodies and souls during visions, divinity is rendered visible – and tangible – to onlookers in various ways. As saints, the women index God and His heavenly empire, becoming transformed into vernicle icons themselves.

Lively Relics

Writing in c. 1216, Gerald of Wales offers his own account of the Veronica legend in the Speculum ecclesiae. Upon Christ’s exit from a temple, a woman called Veronica lifts her tunic and wipes his face, securing an imprint of his visage on the cloth. The resulting image is named after this woman, Gerald maintains. However, he also proffers the following gloss: the term ‘Veronica’ is a ‘play on words, meaning the true icon or the true image’ (‘vocabulo alludentes, Veronicae dici, quasi veram iconiam, id est, imaginem veram’). It is with this inflection that I deploy the term ‘Veronica’ for the holy women of Liège: holy individuals who function as ‘true icons’ of Christ, living relics. The interconnection of text and image in Gerald’s anecdote, and in the construction of the ‘Veronica’ itself, highlights the multimodal quality of medieval media as text and image (reading and

13 Bazin, p. 34; Biddick, pp. 156-58; Peucker, p. 4.
14 Peucker, p. 4.
15 6.278-79.
16 Emphases in original; ibid., 6.279. Translation from Belting, p. 542.
seeing) interact and overlap. The vitality of the Liégeois creates another link with the Veronica image, a remarkably lively relic. For example, in his thirteenth-century *Chronica majora*, Matthew Paris recounts that in 1216 the Veronica resisted being returned to its place at the end of a procession. As a form of protest, the Veronica re-oriented itself apparently under its own steam (‘se per se girabat’) so that the Christ-image was upside down.

In several of the Liégeois’ *vitae*, the protagonists are explicitly shown to take on the form of images or animated relics during their lifetime. Elisabeth of Spalbeek adores a diptych portraying the Crucifixion so much that seemingly she becomes fused with it. During raptures, she clutches the icon so tightly that ‘when the tablet itself is drawn or shaken or moved by another person trying, as it were, to rip it out of her hands, she never does let it fall out of her fingers’ [grasp], but her own body moves in accord with the movements of the icon. Elsewhere in her biography, she is described as being ‘like a statue’ (‘sic statuata’) in pauses in her ecstatic performances, seemingly existing without respiration and without exuding spittle or mucous. Though immobile as a statue, Elisabeth is still a dynamic presence. Her audience witnesses torrents of blood spilling from her stigmatic wounds which stain her clothing and skin.

Beatrice of Nazareth also turns to images as a means to remember Christ’s suffering constantly. She wears a wooden cross continually about her neck, binds an image of the cross to her arm, and sets out a painting of the cross before her whenever she sits down to write. The plethora of representations ensures that Christ is forever impressed upon her heart (‘impressum cordi suo in memoria firmiter retineret’), as she meditatively absorbs – and is absorbed by – the icons. As the images become imprinted upon Beatrice’s body and spirit, she becomes an image herself. Moreover, Christ is shown to imprint his very being into the saint: ‘just as soft wax, pressed with a seal, displays the seal’s character in itself, so the divine Spirit modeled her soul according to his own image’. An identical simile is utilized in Ida of

17 Luard, (ed.), III (1876), 7-8.
18 VESEng, 7.5. ‘cum ipsa tabula ab aliquo trahitur aut quasi conamine eam eripiendi concutitur aut movetur, nunquam discohaeret digitis, sed movetur secundum modum tabulae totum corpus’. VESEng, 7.367-68.
19 VESEng, 5.366 and 29.378 respectively. Translation from VESEng, 5.6. See also her insensibility: VESEng, 10.369. For further discussion of stasis, see references in n. 39 below.
20 VESEng, 13.371.
21 VBN, 1.14.70.88.
22 Ibid., 1.14.70.90.
23 Ibid., 2.18.166.195-97. ‘et sicut, impressa sigillo mollis cere materies, illus in se karakterem representat., sic ad ymaginem suam illam effigiatam, diuinus spiritus redderet.; et ad similitudinem
Nivelles’ *vita* to characterize her relationship with the holy Trinity. The imprinting of Christ’s image upon the holy women parallels the production of the Veronica image, transforming the saints into living *acheiropoietoi*. At the end of Beatrice’s hagiography, the reader is addressed as follows: ‘May you firmly imprint on your minds and inscribe on the fleshy tablets of your heart the imitable image of her life which you grieve to have been withdrawn from your eyes.’ Contemplation of the holy woman allows a reader to be imprinted with the saintly image, itself a copy of Christ’s image. Through a chain of divine indentations, a reader may become a Veronica too.

**Bargaining: Agency and Impotence**

As Veronicas, the Liégeois offer material presence to divinity in the world. Thus they play a crucial role in bolstering Catholics’ faith, and thereby accede to certain forms of agency. Though they retain a trace of divine presence, as icons they exist ultimately *to be looked through*. As image-objects, they represent divinity that is accessed not by looking at the image itself, but looking through the image – a ‘window to heaven’ – to see the divine presence signified. Becoming a Veronica entails a process of effacement as much as dynamic presence. In this, the relationship between sanctity and celebrity comes back into focus: ‘iconic’ is the label with which our most famous celebrities are affixed. These stars are those who are beloved by the masses, whose special status has been accepted. But this recognition that the ‘iconic’ star carries within them the real trace of the ‘X factor’ comes at a cost. As an ‘icon’, their subjectivity is evacuated as they are transformed into a cultural symbol, albeit a rich and privileged one. The ‘iconic’ celebrity represents elements of a culture in which they can no longer participate fully, precisely due to their representational function. This is the ‘price of fame’, the heavy toll enacted on the stars.

suam decentissime figuratum’. Ibid., 2.18.166.194-96. On the language of ‘impression’ in the corpus, as akin to photographic process(es), see also above: Chapter 1, pp. 74-75.

24 ‘quia sicut cera impreßa sigillo, sigilli in se retinet imaginem, sic eius anima’. Emphases in original. *VIN*, 28.271. See also Ida’s habit of holding books so tightly that they leave bruises on her body: ibid., 2.207.

25 *VBN*, 3.17.274.343. ‘quatenus imitabilem sue conversationis ymaginem, quam vestris substractam doletis aspectibus, [...] sic vestris mentibus imprimatis et in tabulis cordis carnalibus tam firmiter inscribatis’. Ibid., 3.17.274.342.

26 Quote from SL Resident, female, 36, USA, Catholic (2011).

27 Maniura, p. 51.
The religious women of Liège were ‘simultaneously central and marginal’ to the Church: excluded from the ranks of the clergy, but essential in maintaining the Church’s powerbase.\textsuperscript{28} The corpus emphasizes strictly orthodox behaviours, and offers myriad examples with which to combat heresy. Indeed, the hagiographies can be read as responses to the ordinances of Lateran IV (1215), which highlight the specific problems faced by the Church in the thirteenth century.\textsuperscript{29} Again and again, the texts underscore the dangers of heterodoxy and recapitulate the importance of the sacraments of confession and the Eucharist. As Lateran IV mandated annual auricular confession for Christians, it also strengthened the doctrinal status of purgatory, the future destination for those who do not confess sins fully.\textsuperscript{30} Equally, purgatory, envisioned as a set system of post-mortem judgement, was intrinsically anti-heretical, as many of the heterodox cults questioned or outright rejected judgement after death.\textsuperscript{31} Despite their practice of a new form of piety, the Liégeois remain locked within the framework of medieval Catholicism and are subject to its governing rules.

Dyan Elliott maintains that narratives describing female mystics’ intercession for souls in purgatory can be interpreted as ‘essential to oiling systems of justice that otherwise might atrophy through excessive rigidity’.\textsuperscript{32} The Church could route acts of mercy, such as the liberation of souls via prayer, through women and thereby not be tainted by any claim of weakness or wavering on core doctrine. Various episodes from the corpus are challenging to understand, such as Christina Mirabilis’ bizarre behaviours or Alice of Schaerbeek’s glorying acceptance of her leprosy. Yet, the texts themselves do not challenge overwhelmingly Church precepts or the male-controlled system itself. The interpretive challenge of such episodes lies in the ways in which the women make manifest – incarnate – the ramifications of doctrine taken to its full extent.

The Liégeois’ spirituality plays a ‘salient, albeit at times covert, role’ in buttressing the Church and its ecclesiastical elite.\textsuperscript{33} Nevertheless, the holy women are not passive victims of the clergy, witnessed by their powerful influence in various spheres of activity – social, political, and spiritual. The women cannot function as holy individuals without contact with, and support from, men. For example, they require priests and confessors to

\textsuperscript{28} Bennett, p. 158.
\textsuperscript{29} Elliott, \textit{Woman}, pp. 1-2.
\textsuperscript{30} Walls, pp. 18-19. For the Council’s decree, see Denzinger, (ed.), p. 271, DS 812.
\textsuperscript{31} Elliott, \textit{Woman}, pp. 76-77.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p. 78.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., p. 84.
offer them the sacraments and illustrious men to lobby for their protection and welfare. However, such men need the holy women too. As the texts underline frequently, not everyone is able to see God like these women can. Even when men do have mystical visions in the hagiographies, their experiences are qualitatively inferior to the women’s divine liaisons. Men need contact with the holy women to magnify their own visual powers. As Veronicas, they bring ‘heaven down to earth’ for us mortals, and by so doing authenticate Catholic doctrine.34 What’s more, their powers of prophetic insight allow the laity to avoid eternal damnation or demonic possession and to make practical decisions in their everyday lives. Male hagiographers owe their reputation, at least partially, to the protagonists of their texts. To be sure, Jacques of Vitry et al. can compose texts, preach openly, and offer the sacraments but they cannot offer dramatic examples of God’s authenticity and munificence themselves.

Immense piety and mystical aptitude form bargaining chips with which the Liégeoises can negotiate, more or less overtly, with the men around them. In an essay from the late 1980s, Deniz Kandiyoti developed her notion of the ‘patriarchal bargain’, analysing gender relations in non-Western societies.35 Within a patriarchal society, women face a system of oppressive ‘concrete constraints’.36 In response, they develop more or less conscious strategies (‘patriarchal bargain[s]’) with which to carve out space in a hostile socio-cultural environment, coping mechanisms that allow for active and passive resistance.37 In other words, women learn to ‘play the game’ of patriarchy. Though the deck is stacked against them – the house always wins, after all – women may experience small triumphs by following skilfully the logic offered by the patriarchal system.

The holy women of Brabant-Liège engage in a series of shifting ‘patriarchal bargains’ with dominant male-controlled structures, a series of negotiations enabled by leveraging their unique holiness more or less consciously. The Liégeoises uphold Catholic doctrine, defer to the clergy, and do not threaten earthly ecclesiastical structures. In return for this ‘good behaviour’, they are allowed certain benefits. Mystical vision space offers a chance for direct interaction with the divine and other holy individuals outside of clerical interference. Holy women develop intensely personal relationships with Christ,

34 Sudyam, p. 91.
35 ‘Bargaining with Patriarchy’. Bennett also deploys this terminology to discuss the reasons why medieval women married: pp. 148-49.
36 Kandiyoti, p. 275.
37 Emphases in original.
in which their own spirituality is perfected. Unions with the heavenly bridegroom replace traditional spousal ties, freeing the women from domination by husbands and sons. By prophecy, they can intervene in earthly politics and help shape the world around them. As mouthpieces of the divine, holy women can also adopt the role of preacher without falling foul of condemnation.

During ecstasies, Elisabeth of Spalbeek becomes a statue, but she is not a mannequin that others can pose as they wish. As her biographer repeatedly notes, her posture cannot be changed at will by others – her signification cannot be manipulated capriciously by her audience. She is ‘like a certain image of wood or stone that lacks feeling and movement and breath, so that no part of her can be touched or moved, not even her little finger, without her entire body being moved [at the same time]’.38 Utilizing Elisabeth as an image or statue of divinity entails accepting all of her: to make use of her, one has to accept the pose she already inhabits. Each night, Elisabeth experiences multiple ecstatic episodes during which she acts out the different stages of the Passion. It is within these episodes that she becomes literally statuesque, interspersing her dramatic retelling of biblical events with moments of fixity which focus the audience’s gaze on her precise incarnation of doctrine.39 Her biographer underscores the true signification of Elisabeth and her body: she ‘images and expresses not only Christ, but Christ Crucified, in his own body, and also the mystical body of Christ, i.e., the Church’.40 Elisabeth performs Church doctrine with strict observance, as all her performances are organized according to the canonical Hours and relay scenes central to Catholic faith. However, the precise form her performance takes – the lean of her head or slant of her leg – is decided by Elisabeth with God. In this way, she accedes to a role officially prohibited to women. She becomes a kind of bodily preacher, expounding on Scripture physically.41 This is made explicit in the text, as Philip of Clairvaux remarks that her performance of the Passion operates ‘as if she were explaining to [onlookers] that gospel message [Matthew 8.20; Luke 9.58]’ (‘ac si illud evangelicum nobis exponeret’).42

38  VESEng, 3.4. ‘ut imago quaedam ligni aut lapidis sine sensu et motu et flatu tota rigida perseverat, ita quod de ipsa nihil tangi aut moveri potest, nec etiam minor digitus, quin tota machina moveatur’. VES, 3.364.
39  On this, see also the discussion of bodily rigidity during episodes of coma-like ecstatic stasis above: Chapter 1, pp. 73-77. See also brief references on p. 131, p. 246.
40  VESEng, 30.1. ‘non solum Christum et ipsum crucifixum in suo corpore, sed etiam Christi corpus mysticum, id est Ecclesiam, effigiat et exponit’. VES, 30.378.
42  VESEng, 10.10; VES, 10.370.
Visa Immonen and Jussi-Pekka Taavitsainen describe the ‘chiastic structure’ between a relic and the community which venerates it: the relic’s ‘existence required an accepting community, but on the other hand, this community and its collective memory was partly formed through the act of recognition’. A similar dynamic is evident in Elisabeth’s life, and in the entire corpus of living Veronicas from Liège. Claude Carozzi maintains that the ultimate destiny of a saint is to become ‘a lifeless object, a relic’ (‘un objet sans vie, une relique’). This pronouncement erroneously equates relics with passive object-hood. In fact, medieval relics exhibit a ‘marked liveliness’. As such, Elliott’s description of the Liégeois as ‘animated relics’ is accurate but tautological: exertion of power in the world is central to the mechanics of relics. Elisabeth’s immobility strengthens an interpretation of her as a living relic, as dead saints were understood – and shown – to block the movement of their bones if they so wished. For example, a saint could stop theft of her relics by working a miracle which rendered them fixed in place. A refusal to produce such a miracle led to the ‘participation’ of the saint in the act of theft, often due to unhappiness at the level of veneration at the bones’ current home.

Traces of such wilfulness are evident elsewhere in the corpus. In Christina Mirabilis’ vita, an unknown old woman – likely the saint herself – appears to a priest some twenty-five years after the saint’s death. She orders the translation of Christina’s relics to a new location as her current tomb is being sorely neglected. Failure to obey will result in unspecified divine punishment, motivating the priest to move the relics immediately to a place beside the altar. Marie of Oignies’ corpse is decidedly stubborn. When the prior of Oignies tries to harvest some of her valuable teeth with great violence, Marie’s jaw remains firmly locked in place until the prior offers sufficient prayers. Marie’s transaction with the prior brings to the fore another dynamic element of relics: they act as vectors by which worshippers

43 P. 162.
44 My translation; p. 266. Carozzi refers specifically to the southern French beguine Douceline of Digne (d. 1274), but his comments stand more generally.
45 Hahn, ‘Do For Relics’, p. 299.
46 Elliott, Woman, p. 71.
48 VCM, 5.57.660. I also discuss this episode briefly above, Chapter 1: p. 86.
49 VMOSupp, 3.14.672. See also Lutgard of Aywières’ vision of the holy virgin Osanna, who laments that all have forgotten her and that her tomb’s inscription has been lost: VLA, 2.3.34.251. This is framed in the text as a response to a priest’s inability to find out the ‘owner’ of a crypt, but equally shows the everlasting connection of a saint to her bones.
contact a saint and by which a saint can respond by transmitting God's grace.

Elisabeth's extreme visibility during performances is balanced by an acute disinclination to be seen at other times. She reportedly flees from spectators after returning from ecstasy, and covers herself modestly with a veil during ravishments. Such a desire to remain hidden from sight is evident in several other vitae, most notably in the life of Marie of Oignes, who decamps to Oignies in order to avoid crowds of visitors. The motif of modest self-concealment corresponds to the humility topos. It also underscores the fact that the holy woman's exposure is involuntary, and thereby not due to her pride. In return for moments of dynamic public presence, the saint has to be seen to veil herself willingly for most of her life. From another perspective, the rhetoric of concealment and revelation is central to the Liégeois' leveraging of power. Their visions reveal the authenticity of the divine and Church doctrine. Inherent in the action of rendering the divine visible, however, is the concealment of the divine from those who are insufficiently holy to access it directly.

The holy women act as screens for God in both senses of the term. A screen enables the otherwise ephemeral to be seen, but also separates space, mediating and obfuscating what lies behind it. Veronica's veil, for example, makes plain Christ's visage but denies direct contact with his body. Moreover, according to Gerald of Wales, the vernicle veil is revered in Rome but kept entirely obscured by veils ('nisi per velorum quae ante dependent interpositionem inspicitur'). Access to an image which already ineluctably forecloses an unmediated apprehension of the divine is highly controlled, if not denied altogether. Such fluctuation between display and concealment also finds parallels in the manner in which medieval reliquaries signify the sacred. Whilst a reliquary's form may correspond to the relic it supposedly houses – an arm reliquary may contain an arm bone, for example – it rarely displays the bones openly. Instead, the worshipper is invited to gaze partially or meditatively on the relic subsumed within its container, which functions to control the signification of its contents.

As Cynthia Hahn formulates:

50 Respectively: VES, 20.374, 17.373.
51 VMO, 2.11.93,661. See also:ibid., 2.5.47,649; 2.7.65,654; VJC,1.1.8.446; VLA 1.1.12.239. On Marie's popularity and her transfer to Oignies, see respectively: Chapter 3 generally; and pp. 148-52.
52 6.279.
54 On the signification of reliquaries' form, see in particular: Hahn, ‘Metaphor’; ‘Voices’.
The reliquary works hard to ‘represent’ the relic as powerful, holy and sacred, part of the larger institution of the Church, at times using biblical metaphor as part of the process of creating meaning. While at the same time the relic is thus made ‘fully visible’ in its power and associations, it is also unquestionably hidden from view.55

From this perspective, *vitae* serve as reliquaries for the relics (saints) which they display textually.

**The Other Women, Glimpsed in the Mirror**

Catherine Brown suggests that, in a typical modernist approach, the medieval era is anachronistically isolated from contemporary concerns. In such colonialist research, the Middle Ages are “the Other, figured as veiled woman, mystical and enticing”.56 As I frame my trans-historical project in terms of the pre-eminent medieval veiled lady, Veronica, I am acutely aware of Brown’s pronouncement. I refer to Veronica not to conjure to mind a mystical and unknowable (veiled) subjectivity. Rather, this veiled lady (or perhaps veil-lady) permits greater comprehension of the subjective experiences of the holy women of Brabant-Liège, and the visual processes in which all medieval individuals participated, at least to some extent. As such, I unveil and thereby de-exoticise the medieval ‘Other’ paradoxically by casting the subjects of my research as veil, screen, and icon.

It is not my intention to conjure the holy women of Brabant-Liège as simplistic proxies for the modern cinema-goer. Nor do I contend that divine visions are identical to modern film, or that spectators in both eras have the same precise experience. The medieval era is not a rigid parallel to our own contemporary moment, a temporal space which maps on to our own exactly and onto which we can glibly project specific modern concerns. Yet the medieval era is not sealed off from the modern period, inert and static in the past. Instead, the Middle Ages are in constant oscillating contact with the modern period. Viewed through the hermeneutical lens of modern film theory, the divine visions of the holy Liégeoises – their form, function, and reception – come into focus as a moment in which the medieval and the modern overlap and intertwine. Within the hard kernel of the scopic act, divine and/or cinematic, we find a bridge between the two periods.

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56 ‘Middle’, p. 549.
Metaphorically looking at the Liégeoises by studying their biographies, we stare into a fun-house mirror. These women are not us exactly, the contours of their lives are certainly not perfect reflections of our own. Rather, the reflections we discern are distortions of our own experiences, and our own modes of visuality. However distorting, though, the mirror does not lie. There is an uncanny similarity there. The vision(s) of those ‘Other’ women are our visions too, however contorted and misshapen they may seem to our modern eyes. Their eyes are our eyes, blurred by the sharp grit of the shifting sands of time.

Veronica’s ‘real womanhood’ is a fiction, much like the idiom of the idealized, and thoroughly fictional, ‘real woman’ that circulates in contemporary discourse. The ‘real woman’ is a fiction: there is no singular means to embody womanhood in this life or the next. Modern women are trapped in a socio-cultural text not of our own making, ‘books of life’ filed alongside the Liégeoise vitae. The patriarchy makes ‘living Veronicas’ of us all, vital subjects trapped in a game of mirrors, stealing glimpses of a liberating paradise through cracks in the glass.