The paper below is a version of a piece accepted for publication, after peer-review. To cite this paper, please consult the final published version:
Spencer-Hall, Alicia, 'Christ's Suppurating Wounds: Leprosy in the Vita of Alice of Schaerbeek († 1250)', in *'His brest tobrosten': Wounds and Wound Repair in Medieval Culture*, ed. by Kelly DeVries and Larissa Tracy (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 389-416

Christ's Suppurating Wounds: Leprosy in the *Vita* of Alice of Schaerbeek (d. 1250)

Alicia Spencer-Hall
Queen Mary University of London

From the earliest age, Alice of Schaerbeek was a shining example of Christian devotion.[1] Like Esther in the Old Testament (Esther 2:15), she was beloved by all and thought highly beautiful, despite her lack of care for her outward appearance (*VAS* 1:2.477). Aged seven, she left her parents' home to forge a life of extreme piety in the Cistercian monastery of La Cambre. Some years later, perhaps around 1240 (aged around 20), Alice was struck with leprosy and her beautiful appearance horrifically disfigured.[2] This event, and its physical and spiritual ramifications, dominates the short *vita* that records Alice's tale, written approximately ten to twenty-five years after her death in 1250 by an unknown author.[3] Two thirds of the text is devoted to leprous Alice's tribulations (*VAS* 2-3:479-83).[4] In recent critical scholarship, Alice of Schaerbeek bears

Acknowledgements: My thanks to the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) for PhD funding which made the preparation of this paper and my postgraduate studies possible. For her continuous wise counsel and support, I owe a debt of gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Jane Gilbert (UCL). A version of this paper was presented as "Shedding Skin / Shedding Sin: Leprosy in the *Vita* of Alice of Schaerbeek (d. 1250)" at the 55th Annual Society for French Studies Conference, University of Aberdeen, 1 July 2014. I am grateful to the audience for valuable suggestions, in particular Prof. Peggy McCracken.

[1] Anon, "De B. Aleyde Scharembekana, sanctimoniali Ordinis Cisterciensis, Camerae iuxta Bruxellam," in *Acta Sanctorum*, ed. Godfrey Henschen (Paris: Société des Bollandistes, 1902-1970), June, 2:477–83. Referred to as *VAS*. Throughout, in-text references to primary sources are given for part, chapter, paragraph, and page numbers. Subsequent English translations of the text are taken from *Life of St. Alice of Schaerbeek*, trans. Martinus Cawley O.C.S.O. (Lafayette, OR: Our Lady of Gaudalupe Abbey, 2000).
[2] Martinus Cawley O.C.S.O., introduction to *Life of St. Alice of Schaerbeek*, ed. Martinus Cawley O.C.S.O (Lafayette, OR: Our Lady of Gaudalupe Abbey, 2000), v–xxx, at xiii. The *vita* provides only a death date for Alice, and several references to specific time spans in her life. We are told, for example, that she spends four years in her first hut: 2.12.479. Cawley has extrapolated the plausible date of the onset of Alice's leprosy from various textual calculations. Cawley's introduction is an adaptation of his earlier essay: "The "Life of Alice" and the Silver Age at Villers," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 31.1 (1996): 51–74.
[3] Eleanor Campion O.C.S.O., "Bernard and Alice the Leper: An Odor of Life for Some," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 39.2 (2004): 127–139, at 127.
[4] Cawley, introduction, viii–ix.

the moniker Alice the Leper, so significant is the illness to her identity. The holy woman's malady is portrayed not as a terrible burden but a glorious gift from God, revealing a medieval perception of the positivity of a deleterious affliction at odds with the modern understanding of pain and suffering.[5] On the contrary, Alice— shown to be in great pain—glories in her suffering as her leprous body withers, oozes, and decays. If she could be cured, she is certain that she would refuse—even if a return to full health entailed similar spiritual benefits (*VAS* 2:10.479). Central to the "pleasantness" of Alice's affliction is its utility as a means of spiritual elevation, a tenet of medieval religion that Esther Cohen terms "philopassianism."[6] Rather than annihilating her personhood, in the *vita*, leprosy allows an efflorescence of Alice's devotion, in which her leprous body becomes a stand-in for Christ's tortured body on the cross. Interrogation of the representation of leprosy in Alice's biography, contextualized with a study of the

[5] Recent scholarship has focused on a contextualized understanding of pain, and its different conception, in the Middle Ages. On pain generally, see in particular: Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Esther Cohen, *The Modulated Scream: Pain in Late Medieval Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Cohen, "Towards a History of European Physical Sensibility: Pain in the Later Middle Ages," *Science in Context* VIII (1995): 47–74; "The Animated Pain of the Body," *The American Historical Review* 105.1 (2000): 36–68; Javier Moscoso, *Pain: A Cultural History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Donald Mowbray, *Pain and Suffering in Medieval Theology: Academic Debates at the University of Paris in the Thirteenth Century* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2009). On pain in the context of punishment, see: Mitchell B. Merback, *The Thief, the Cross, and the Wheel : Pain and the Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (London: Reaktion, 1999); Robert Mills, *Suspended Animation: Pain, Pleasure and Punishment in Medieval Culture* (London: Reaktion, 2005). Several studies have also been undertaken analyzing pain and its signification in specific religious texts, for example: Marleen Cré, "The Literary Significance of Ilness in Julian of Norwich's "a Vision Showed to a Devout Woman"," *Poetica* 72 (2009): 43–57; Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa, "Mysticism and Medicine: Holy Communion in the *Vita* of Marie d'Oignies and the Book of Margery Kempe," *Poetica* 72 (2009): 109–118.

[6] Cohen, "Towards a History," 54; *Modulated Scream*, 25–51. Robert Mills offers a critique of philopassianism, which Cohen declares is not about pleasure, but utility. By contrast, Mills shows the space for pleasure within philopassianistic narratives: *Suspended Animation*, 149 referring to Cohen, "Towards a History," 52.

polyvalent signification of the malady in the period, suggests that leprous wounds become, at times, synonymous with Christ's lacerations.

The preoccupation with the usefulness of illness in medieval devotional practice appears to be particularly female, or at least occurs more frequently in biographies of holy women than holy men. Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell explain that, although fewer than twenty per cent of individuals canonized or venerated as saints between 1000 and 1700 were female, fifty three per cent of these female saints experienced mystical suffering or illness as a significant part of their devotion.[7] Alice is certainly not the only holy woman to embrace her illness.[8] In this volume, for example, Albrecht Classen examines the self-inflicted wounds of female mystic Dorothea von Montau in her search for holiness.[9] Beatrice of Nazareth (d. 1268) glories in her painful illness and urges God to bless her with more suffering (*VBN* 3.1:189-91.218-23).[10] After all, "corporalis infirmitas anime delectation" [[her] body's sickness was [her] soul's delight] (3.1:191.222-23). Similarly, Margaret of Ypres (d. 1237) begs to be struck down by the Lord with another more devastating malady on her sickbed (*VMY* 41.125).[11]

[7] Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints & Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 234–35. Cited by Caroline Walker Bynum in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 60, 188. This is in part because torture and martyrdom were not an option for these contemporary medieval saints as they were for the saints of the early Christian centuries, for example in the *vita* of Elizabeth of Hungary. See: Larissa Tracy, *Women of the* Gilte Legende: *A Selection of Middle English Saints Lives* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003), 109.
[8] For similar examples, see: Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 132.
[9] Albrecht Classen, "Wounding the Body and Freeing the Spirit: Dorothea von Montau's Bloody Quest for Christ, a Late-Medieval Phenomenon of the Extraordinary Kind," in this volume, XX–XX.
[10] Anon and Roger de Ganck, *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth: 1200-1268 [parallel Latin and English edition]*, trans. John Baptist Hasbrouck and Roger De Ganck (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1991). Referred to as *VBN*.
[11] Thomas of Cantimpré, "Vita Margarete de Ypris," ed. by. G. G. Meerseman, in *Archivum fratrum praedicatorum* 18(1948): 106–130. Referred to as *VMY*.

Caroline Walker Bynum in particular argues forcefully for an understanding of the theological utility of pain for medieval women.[12] Pain allowed medieval mystical women to absolve the female body, long associated with sin. Moreover, female religious could associate themselves with Christ's body within a theological framework that posited Christ's body as paradoxically female.[13] As the Virgin Mary is both the "source and container" of Christ's form, He is born without human male influence – and thereby into uniquely female flesh.[14] An elegant summary of this viewpoint is provided in the writings of English anchoress and mystic Julian of Norwich (d. 1416):[15]

> Thus our Lady is our Moder in whome we are all beclosid and of hir borne in Christe, for she that is moder of our Savior, is moder of all that shall be savid in

[12] Caroline Walker Bynum, "Fast, Feast, and Flesh: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women," *Representations* 11(1985): 1–25, at 14; *Fragmentation*, 151–238. See also: Shawn Madison Krahmer, "Redemptive Suffering: The Life of Alice of Schaerbeek in a Contemporary Context," in *Maistresse of My Wit: Medieval Women, Modern Scholars*, ed. Juanita Ruys and Louise D'Arcens (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2004), 267–239, at 285–86.
[13] Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 171–175.
[14] Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 172.
[15] Julian of Norwich, *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich*, ed. Georgia Ronan Crampton (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994). Available online as part of the Consortium for the Teaching of the Middle Age initiative, undertaken with the support of Medieval Institute Publications at Kalamazoo: <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/crampton-shewings-of-julian-norwich> (accessed 21 April 2014). References are to the online edition, identified as *Shewings*. Part and chapter are followed by line numbers – no page numbers are extant in the online edition. For further references to Jesus as mother, see 2.52:2074–2075, 3.54–63:2287–2260, 3.83:3355–3356. Translations from Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, trans. and ed. Edmund Colledge O.S.A. and James Walsh S. J. (Mawah, N. J.: Paulist Press, 1978). Referred to as *Showings*, with chapter number followed by page number in parenthesis. Cited passage discussed in Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 267; Grace M. Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian*. 2nd ed. (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2000), 120–121; Brant Pelphrey, "Leaving the Womb of Christ: Love, Doomsday and Space/Time in Julian Norwich and Eastern Orthodox Mysticism," in *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays*, ed.Sandra J. McEntire (New York: Garland, 1998), 291–320, at 312–315. On Julian's notion of Christ as mother, see in particular: Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 163–164; Jantzen, *Julian*, 115–126; Eleanor McCullough, "'Loke in: How Weet a Wounde is Heere!': The Wounds of Christ as a Sacred Space in English Devotional Literature," in *Through a Glass Darkly: Suffering, Sacred, and the Sublime in Literature and Theory*, ed. Holly Faith Nelson, Lynn R. Szabo, and Jens Zimmermann (Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010), 25–52, at 28; Colleen Carpenter Cullinan, *Redeeming the Story: Women, Suffering, and Christ* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 45–46.

> our Savior. And our Savior is our very moder in whom we be endlesly borne and never shall come out of Him. (*Shewings* 3.7:2371-2374)

> [So our Lady is our Mother, in whom we are all enclosed and born of her in Christ, for she who is mother of our saviour is mother of all who are saved in our saviour; and our saviour is our true Mother, in whom we are endlessly born and out of whom we shall never come.] (*Showings* 57.292)

Christ's feminized flesh is *maternal*, nurturing and life-giving, and thus a potent example for the redemption of female flesh. Being characterized as flesh, women were actively associated not just with Mary's body, free from original sin, but also with Christ's humanity. Women, then, could break free of the taint of Eve by aligning themselves with Mary. This maneuver is well illustrated in a sermon of vaunted preacher and eminent cleric Jacques de Vitry, written between 1229 and 1240:[16]

> Formata muliere de uiro perditus est mundus; nato Cristo ex muliere est redemtus. Per mulierem dampnacio, per mulierem saluacio. Per malum angelum annunciacio dampnacionis, per bonum angelum annunciacio salutis. Sicut autem Eua terra fuit inanis et uacua (Gen. 1.2) que caput serpentis in sinu nutriuit, ita Maria terra benedicta, fertilis et fecunda que caput serpentis contriuit. (Sermon 25, section 4 in Muessig, *Faces*, 161)

[16] Jacques de Vitry, *The Faces of Women in the Sermons of Jacques De Vitry*, ed. Carolyn Muessig (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing Company, 1999). On the *Sermones feriales et communes*, a collection of twenty five non-liturgical sermons dealing with the first three chapters of Genesis, from which this example is drawn, see in particular: *The Faces of Women*, 39–45.

> [Woman having been made from man, the world was lost; Christ being born from woman, the world was redeemed. Through women there was damnation, through woman there was salvation. Through the evil angel is the annunciation of damnation, through the good angel is the annunciation of salvation. On the one hand, Eve was just as the earth, *void and empty* (Gen. 1,2), she who nurtured the head of the serpent in her lap; on the other hand, Mary was the blessed earth, fertile and fecund, she who crushed the head of the serpent.] (Sermon 25, section 4 in Muessig, *Faces*, 31)

Pain in the lives of such women had a "referential content," it was both *for* and *of* something.[17] Pain was a particularly apt means of redeeming the female body, as it was intrinsically linked with woman. The penalty for Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden was the introduction of pain to humanity, and it was through a holy woman's pain that sins could be cleansed.[18]

Much has been made of the relationship of female mystics and holy women with the body.[19] Female spirituality is interpreted as inherently somatic, as testified by episodes of asceticism and ravishment in hagiographies. Bynum pinpoints the emergence and increase in female narratives featuring corporeal paramystical phenomena to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.[20] Such scholarship suggests that holy women's relationship to the body was more intense, more graphic than male religious, revealing an "authentic" female spiritual praxis. Without doubt, instances of often bizarre physical

[17] Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 5.
[18] Cohen, "Towards a History," 53; Mowbray, *Pain and Suffering*, 43–60.
[19] Bynum, *Fragmentation*, passim.
[20] Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 194.

expression of piety circulate within the corpus, and women were more linked with the body, and sin, than men in the medieval era. However, as Amy Hollywood notes, such accounts of somatization do not frequently appear in female-authored spiritual works before the fourteenth century.[21] Male-authored hagiographies such as Alice's text offer a "highly mediated" perspective on female religious experience, often for specific purposes.[22]

There is relatively little scholarship on Alice and her *vita*; most of what is available was authored from within the contemporary Cistercian community.[23] Describing his own introduction to Alice's biography as a Cistercian novice in the 1950s, Chrysogone Waddell comments that Alice was an obscure figure, not widely known even in ecclesiastical circles.[24] Margot H. King and Ludo Jongen have identified two thirteenth-century and two fifteenth-century extant Latin manuscripts of the *vita*, alongside one Middle Dutch manuscript dating from the fifteenth century, testifying to a modest but relatively long lasting audience for Alice's tale.[25] What is clear is the affective power of

[21]Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 27–39. See also: Krahmer, "Redemptive Suffering," 286–87.
[22] Hollywood, *Soul*, 38.
[23] Campion, "Bernard and Alice"; Cawley, introduction; Krahmer, "Redemptive Suffering"; Edmund Mikkers O.C.S.O., "Meditations on the 'Life' of Alice of Schaerbeek," in *Hidden Springs: Cistercian Monastic Women*, ed. John A. Nichols and Lillian Thomas Shank O.C.S.O. (Kentucky: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 395–415; Edith Scholl O.C.S.O., "The Golden Cross: Aleydis of Schaerbeek," in *Hidden Springs: Cistercian Monastic Women*, ed. John A. Nichols and Lillian Thomas Shank O.C.S.O. (Kentucky: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 377–393; Chrysogone Waddell O.C.S.O., "Alice de la Cambre: regards sur sa vie," *Collectanea Cisterciensia* 66 (2004): 83–96.
[24] Waddell, "Alice," 85.
[25] Margot H. King and Ludo Jongen, "The Holy Women of Liège: A Bibliography," http://monasticmatrix.org/commentaria/holy-women-li%C3%A8ge-bibliography (accessed 29 April 2013). The thirteenth-century Latin MSS are: Bruxelles, Bibliothèque Royale MS 4459–70 (3161), ff. 48–57 and MS 8609–20 (3206), ff. 139–146. For the fifteenth-century Latin MSS, see: Bruxelles, Bibliothèque Royale, MS IV. 778, 11 ff; Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek MS 12706–12707, ff. 248–252v. The fifteenth-century Middle Dutch MS is: 'S-Gravenhage, Koninklijke Bibliotheek MS 71 H 7, ff. 1–8v.

the text, and its capacity for theological insight. For Shawn Madison Krahmer, the text's model of "redemptive suffering" offers some comfort in her navigation of a deeply unhappy abusive marriage.[26] The *vita* struck Waddell as beautifully exemplifying Cistercian spirituality, particularly that which focuses on the supreme divinity of a suffering Christ (*Deus crucifixus*). Central to such appreciation of Alice's biography is an appreciation of the holy woman as an example to follow in the religious lifestyle, with obvious pertinence to periods of extended suffering. Thus, Alice's leprosy, and the wounds it produces, is an educative instrument for readers. The narrative is not necessarily an account of how one specific woman did behave, but an archetype of how one *should* behave in the face of overwhelming adversity.

Alongside the text's utility as a source of spiritual teaching, Alice offers a model of obedience to the Cistercian Rule. Twentieth-century Trappist monk Thomas Merton, for example, declares that Alice's book should be given to every Cistercian brother, because it functions as a "practical and concise treatise of Cistercian asceticism."[27] Analyzing the precise nature of the blueprint for Cistercian observance found in the *vita*, Martinus Cawley suggests that the monks of Villers were the text's intended audience.[28] He proposes that Arnulf II of Ghistelles, abbot of Villers from 1270 to 1276, is the likely author of the work, [29] instead of an unknown chaplain from La Cambre as is historically

[26] Krahmer, "Redemptive Suffering," 284.
[27] Thomas Merton O.C.S.O., *Modern Biographical Sketches of Cistercian Blessed and Saints*, Cistercian Studies (Abbaye de Gethsemani, 1954). Cited in Waddell, "Alice," 96. The Merton text was never publically disseminated, and is available only for the community at the Abbey of Gethsemane.
[28] Cawley, introduction, xiii–xv.
[29] Cawley, introduction, v–xxii.

argued.[30] Alongside similarities in style and the fact that the abbot of Villers held paternity of La Cambre, Cawley maintains that the model of austerity offered by Alice suited Arnulf's need to encourage monks to be more frugal in his attempt to deal with debts. Eleanor Campion offers a strong rebuttal of Cawley's proposition, including pointing out the dangers of attempting to identify a unifying style for a single unknown author. [31] Notwithstanding Campion's important note of caution, Cawley's analysis remains useful by emphasizing the constructed-ness of Alice's biography as a vehicle for specific concerns rather than an objective chronicle of her lifetime, a key characteristic of all hagiography. As such, the construction of leprosy in the *vita* is an expression of Alice's immense spirituality. Throughout the text, leprosy is shown to be useful spiritually in different ways and for different people. There are certainly moments when Alice's female flesh is vindicated, cleansed at least partially from the gendered blemish of sin. However, other perspectives are also thrown up that subvert such empowerment. Alice's leprosy is a boon for her community, and a means for them to expurgate sin: She bears their spiritual wounds in somatized form, and there is little space for Alice's own experiences. Alice is a gap — or wound — in the tissue of her community, rather than a subject proper.

Diagnosis with leprosy in the Middle Ages was, as Saul Nathaniel Brody puts it, "a prediction of lifelong suffering and isolation."[32] Although analgesia existed in the

[30] See, for example: Simone Roisin, *L'Hagiographie cistercienne dans le diocèse de Liège au Xiii siècle* (Louvain: Bibliothèque de l'Université, 1947), 49–50.
[31] Campion, "Bernard and Alice," 137–39.
[32] Saul Nathaniel Brody, *The Disease of the Soul; Leprosy in Medieval Literature* (Ithaca N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974), 73.

period, there was no known cure for leprosy: it was a death sentence.[33] The Third Lateran Council of 1179 promulgated a decree for the segregation of lepers from the rest of the community initiated by a ritualized ceremony (*separatio leprosorum*).[34] This ceremony, bearing many hallmarks of the office of the dead, solidified the connection between leprosy and death, social and physical.[35] However, in practice, separation of the leprous from the community was not necessarily enforced,[36] unless putrefying lacerations were detected. The patient's suffering was exacerbated by the historical association of leprosy with sin and heresy. The leprous body was a "social text," which laid bare the internal moral degradation of the afflicted.[37] However, leprosy could also be viewed positively, as a religiously affirmative affliction ordained by God Himself.[38] Through suffering hellish torments in life, the leper could enter the kingdom of heaven directly, without the stain of sin.

[33] On medieval pain alleviation, see in particular: Cohen, *Modulated Scream*, 87–112. Various plants, for example, could be used for alleviating pain, with knowledge sourced from classical and Arab medical treatises ("Towards a History," 66.) Cohen cites the contents of thirteenth-century texts from Vincent of Beauvais and Bartholomaeus Anglicus: Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum Naturale* (Douai: C. Beller, 1624), 624; Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *De Rerum Proprietatibus* (1601; repr., Frankfurt: Minerva, 1964), 227–365.
[34] Brody, *Disease of the Soul*, 64; Susan Zimmerman, "Leprosy in the Medieval Imagination," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38.3 (2008): 559–587, at 560. The overarching logic of the segregation ritual was indebted to pronouncements in Leviticus. Leviticus 13:46, for example, preaches that separation of lepers from the community is divinely ordained (Brody, *Disease of the Soul*, 62).
[35] Brody, *Disease of the Soul*, 65; Zimmerman, "Leprosy," 560. For an overview of sequestration ceremonies, see: Brody, *Disease of the Soul*, 66–69. English translations of regulations from a variety of leper hospitals, and a sequestration ceremony, can be found in: Peter Richards, *The Medieval Leper and His Northern Heirs* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1977), 123–43.
[36] Brody, *Disease of the Soul*, 93.
[37] Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1978), 58.
[38] For a detailed study of leprosy specifically as a route to the divine, see: Carole Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), 104–54. See in particular her notes on the biblical grounding of a spiritually beneficial leprosy in the story of Lazarus (Luke 16:20-31; not to be confused with the resurrected Lazarus of Bethany): Rawcliffe, *Leprosy*, 114–15.

At the end of her life, Alice of Schaerbeek's leprous body is little more than a patchwork of suppurating wounds sutured together by withering flesh:

> Manus suae ad modicum usum errant sibi necessariae: nam ex nimia infirmitate per longa tempora fuerant contractae; quarum cutis, ad modum cortices alicujus arboris, variis distincta vulneribus, similitudinem ejus gerere videbatur. […] Cutis quoque pectoris, capitis, & brachiorum, similis erat cortici arboris, varias rimas ex nimia ariditate continentis, Crura ejus, vitulo excoriato errant simillima, & ipsa una cum pedibus fuerunt inflate. De corpore ipsius carnes & sanies abundanter effluebant. (*VAS* 3:31.482)

> [Her hands, so needed for even her restricted uses, were long since all shrunken from the illness. Their skin was fissured with multiple wounds, like the bark of a tree. […] The skin of her chest, head and arms, likewise resembled tree bark, scored unevenly and cracked from the excessive dryness. Her legs closely resembled a calf that has been skinned. They were also swollen, as were her feet. From her body there oozed loose flesh and abundant pus] (3.31:31. 27-8).

Leprosy enacts the gradual disintegration of the body.[39] The leprosy bacterium (*mycobacterium leprae*) causes nerve damage, limits the supply of nutrients and blood to

[39] Peter Lewis Allen, *The Wages of Sin. Sex and Disease, Past and Present* (Chicago: University of Chigago Press, 2000), 26; Brody, *Disease of the Soul*, 24–33; Richards, *Medieval Lepers*, xv–xvi; John Maurice, "Leprosy: Liberation from the Colonies," *New Scientist* 4 (February 1989): 48–52, at 50. For an overview of the changing medical understanding of leprosy, see: Brody, *Disease of the Soul*, 21–59; Luke Demaitre, *Leprosy in Premodern Medicine. A Malady of the Whole Body* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007). For an in-depth study, from a modern medical perspective, see: *Leprosy: A Practical Guide*, ed. Enrico Nunzi and Cesare Massone (Milan: Springer-Verlag Italia, 2012).

the skin, which scars and withers. The body is opened up to debilitating secondary infections. As the malady progresses, tissue damage worsens; fingers, toes, chunks of nasal skin drop away; the hands and feet turn into claws; nasal passages and vocal chords are mutilated; facial features and limbs become misshapen; the body emits a foul odor. The leprous body becomes a patchwork of putrefying fissures, a vivid illustration of decomposition and fragmentation. It is precisely this element of leprosy, a "living death,"[40] that Bynum suggests proved most threatening about the malady in this period.[41] Indeed, in Job 18:13, the illness is identified as "the firstborn death."[42]

The connection between leprosy and death is made graphically explicit in a description of Alice in the last days of her life: "Fuit itaque ab officio, corporis scilicet & membrorum, tota destituta, & more cadaveris in terra putrescentis, in lectulo suo tradita, quasi putredine extitit consummanda" (*VAS* 3:31.482) [Wholly deprived of the use of her body and of any of its members, she was committed to her bed just as a rotting corpse is committed to the earth, as it to let the rotting itself finish her off] (3.31: 31. 27). Alice's biographer figures the saint as a *monstrum horribilis*, a "horrible monster." All who see her are shocked and awestruck by her monstrosity; she is no longer a human to them, but a terrifying *creatura*, "creature." Despite her renown for piety within her community, she is afforded no special favors: as fitting all lepers, she must live sequestered from society

[40] Allen, *Wages of Sin*, 25–40; Sylvia Huot, *Madness in Medieval French Literature: Identities Found and Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 138; Richards, *Medieval Leper*, 68. See also: Brody, *Disease of the Soul*, 60–106.
[41] Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 276. See also: Zimmerman, "Leprosy," 579.
[42] Zimmerman, "Leprosy," 560.

to protect against contagion (2:12.479),[43] and she cannot receive the sacramental wafer (2:15.480). Nevertheless, Alice welcomes each worsening affliction as a gift from God, a gain in spirituality (3:31.482). Although she certainly endures extreme pain due to her leprosy, Alice also feels pain because of a desire for the Lord. Once at Mass, for example, her yearning for God's presence provokes such physical anguish that "totius venae corporis pati violentiam & dirumpi videbantur" (2:11.479) [every vein in her body seemed to be suffering violence to the breaking point] (2.10:11.11). In another episode, Alice's desire for the Lord leads her to feel *sauciata quomodo* (1:3.478), "almost wounded" (1.3:3.4). Physical discomfort, for Alice, is inexorably linked to an experience of religion. Though she may appear corpse-like, her physical decay is a source of eternal salvation for others, as her illness is cast as having divine origin and characterized as a proxy for Christ's Passion.

Whilst the leprous Alice appears to be a monster from the outside, she is in the epitome of spiritual health.[44] This is fully revealed upon Alice's death. A girl sees Alice in a vision after the saint's death. Rather than the monstrous body of the leper, however, Alice now inhabits the beautiful body of a little child, illuminated by divine rays (*VAS* 3:34.482). The Alice-child is being carried directly to heaven by angels: her earthbound suffering allows her to go directly to God's embrace in heaven after death without

[43] After diagnosis, Alice lives in isolation, spending four years in her first hut and the rest of her life in her second hut. Although the *vita* does not detail Alice's sequestration ceremony, it is likely that Abbot William of Villers performed the rite (Cawley, introduction, xxiv.) It is noteworthy, however, that it is absent from the text, given that this rite was central to the social experience of the leper. Based on this absence, Martinus Cawley asserts that the *vita*'s author is not necessarily interested in leprosy *per se*, but Alice's own struggle with "social isolation" and "moral stigma" (Cawley, introduction, xxiii.)

[44] Alicia Spencer-Hall, "The Post-Mortem Projections: Medieval Mystical Resurrection and the Return of Tupac Shakur," *MDCCCXXVI Opticon1826* 13 (2012): 56–71, at 63. http://www.opticon1826.com/article/view/opt.af (accessed 21 April 2013).

suffering purgatory. Another vision shows Christ and the Virgin Mary at the head of a procession meeting Alice at the gates to heaven, signalling her immense piety (3:33.482). Seeing Christ as a child in the Eucharistic wafer was commonplace by the thirteenth century, and often features in *vitae*.[45] Christ appearing in the sacrament is detailed, for example, in the *vitae* of Beatrice of Ornacieux and Ida of Nivelles.[46] Alice as a soul-child, then, implicitly links her to Christ and His holiness.

An episode in which a voice from heaven explains the unity of the sacraments shows Alice's seemingly fragmenting body as, paradoxically, eternally whole. Deeply saddened by being prohibited from ingesting the Lord's blood during the Eucharist, an interdiction levied on all lepers, Alice is almost inconsolable. A voice speaks to her, reassuring her that if she has taken the wafer, she has also tasted Christ's blood: "quia ubi pars, ibi totum; nec pars potest dici, sed totum debet reputari" (2:15.480) [Since where the part is, there is also the whole. Nor should it even be called a part; it must rather be considered simply the whole.] (2.14:15.15). This pronouncement resonates with the depiction of Alice: though outwardly corporally disintegrating, she remains paradoxically whole due to her religiosity—shown by her soul's appearance after death as an

[45] Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 130, 132, 174; Elina Gertsman, "Signs of Death: The Sacrificial Christ Child in Late Medieval Art," in *The Christ Child in Medieval Culture: Alpha Es Et O!*, ed. Mary Dzon and Theresa Kenney (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 66–91, at 69–75; Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, "Holy Laywomen and Their Biographers in the Thirteenth Century," in *Living Saints of the Thirteenth Century. The Lives of Yvette, Anchoress of Huy, Juliana of Cornillon, Inventor of the Corpus Christi Feast, Margaret the Lame, Anchoress of Magdeburg*, ed. Mulder-Bakker (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 1–42, at 13.
[46] Margaret of Oingt, "The Life of the Virgin Saint Beatrice of Ornacieux," in *The Writings of Margaret of Oingt, Medieval Prioress and Mystic*, ed. and trans. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 47–62, at 6.55; "Li Via Seiti Biatrix, Virgina De Ornaciu," in *Oeuvres De Marguerite d'Oyngt*, ed. E. Philipon (Lyon: N. Scheuring, 1827), 49–76, at 6.62–64; Goswin of Bossut, "Vita Beatae Idea de Niuella Sanctimonialis in Monasterio de Rameya," in *Quinque Prudentes Virgines*, ed. Chrysostomo Henriques (Antwerp: Joannem Cnobbaert, 1630), 199–300, at 21: 250-53.

unblemished child.[47] The grisly wounds that crisscross her flesh are generative, allowing Alice to birth her spiritual self.

Just as the wounds on Alice's flesh are legible, so too is the skin—the animal skin— upon which her story is written. In recent scholarship, Sarah Kay discusses the ramifications of reading texts written on animal skins.[48] She maintains that "wounds in [a manuscript's] parchment may have been seen as a graphic realization of the text's content, an uncanny precipitate of its ideas in concrete form."[49] A manuscript's "sublime appearance" (i.e. silky smooth texture and flawlessness) can also serve as "a token of the immortality" of textual protagonists. There is a dearth of images featuring Alice in extant manuscripts of her tale: the reader must imagine the saint's bodily breakdown, emphasizing the role of the manuscript's material form as proxy for her flesh. A fifteenth-century copy of Alice's biography (produced by Johannes Gielemans ca. 1470-1486; once owned by Augustinian canons in Rooklooster, Brussels), now housed in Vienna's Österreichische Nationalbibliothek as MS. 12706-1207 (ff. 248-252v), is no

[47] On corporeal disintegration of religious women as a sign of spirituality and connection to Christ, see in particular: Bynum, *Fragmentation*, passim; Miri Rubin, "The Person in the Form: Medieval Challenges to Bodily 'Order,'" in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed.Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 100–122, in particular at 113–115; Michelle M. Sauer, "Divine Orgasm and Self-Blazoning: The Fragmented Body of the Female Medieval Visionary," in *Sexuality, Sociality, and Cosmology in Medieval Literary Texts*, ed. Jennifer N. Brown and Marla Segol (London: Palgrave, 2013), 123–143, passim.
[48] Sarah Kay, "Original Skin: Flaying, Reading and Thinking in the Legend of Saint Bartholomew and Other Works," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 36, no. 1 (2006): 35-74; "Legible Skins: Animals and the Ethics of Medieval Reading," *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 2 (2011): 13-32. On the signifying potential of medieval texts inscribed on animal skin(s), see also: "Flayed Skin as *objet a*: Representation of Materiality in Guillaume de Delguileville's *Pèlerinage de vie humaine*." In *Medieval Fabrication: Dress, Textiles, Cloth Work, and Other Cultural Imaginings*, ed. E. Jane Burns (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 193-205; Katie L. Walter, ed. *Reading Skin in Medieval Literature and Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
[49] Kay, "Original Skin," 36.

different.[50] Analysis of this manuscript suggests the way in which the material form of Alice's text might have privileged a specific interpretation of the saint's leprosy as a means to spiritual wholeness. Specifically, this manuscript foregrounds the notion of sharing skin productively, and the generative nature of physical degradation.

The five folia on which Alice's biography is found advocate an interpretation of the manuscript itself as an "illustration" of Alice's body. Following standard practice, scribes have scored the parchment into lines and columns, "wounding" the parchment, and enabling the writer to organize the text and "make sense" of her life, while allowing the reader to similarly "read" (literally and metaphorically) Alice's *vita*. Similarly, Alice's leprous wounds are organized, classified as a means of understanding God's authenticity and the ramifications of sin and suffering in the mortal world. Chapter headings and the start of sentences are highlighted in red ink, like blood oozing from the saint's wounds, guiding the diegetic onlooker to specific meanings of her suffering. The parchment is of middling quality—not flawless per se, but not particularly "tortured" either; uneven edges are the main marker of mediocre parchment. However the last folio is marked by two small repairs, holes in the parchment carefully sutured together to maintain "bodily" integrity. On the recto, this coincides with the section that details the horrific nature of Alice's physical degradation on her deathbed (*VAS* 3.31.482). On the verso, the stitching coincides with the passage detailing Alice's death and the definitive shedding of her mortal skin, ascending to heaven in the spiritual "second skin" she puts

[50] Available to view online via the library's digital reading room: <http://data.onb.ac.at/rec/AL00093622 >. Accessed 25 May 2014.

on once she disposes of her leprous body: "Exuit enim tunicam mortalitatis & miseriae, & induit tunicam immortalitatis & gloriae, plenam felicitatis & laetititiae" (3.32.482) [Thus did she doff the robe of mortality and wretchedness, and don that of immortality and glory, a happy robe, full of gladness.] (3.32.32.29). The manuscript is neither breaking down fully nor perfectly whole—like Alice's body. The central motif of Alice's life, wholeness dependent on breakdown, is concretized in the manuscript form. Without the ruptures in her skin, the force of Alice's text and her suffering would be almost entirely lost. Without her wounds, the holy woman would be nothing.

The fecundity of Alice's wounds render them uterine, leading to a further parallel with Christ's lacerations. Karma Lochrie describes the "polysemy" of Christ's wound, functioning in medieval texts and images both as a literal image of bodily rupture and as a "vulva/vagina."[51] The link between wound and female genitalia is further supported by the similarity of the Latin words vulnus ("wound") and vulva ("vagina" or "vulva").[52] Lochrie draws substantially from the *Stimulus amoris*, a manual for Passion meditations composed by Franciscan James of Milan in the late thirteenth-century, in which the spiritual union of worshipper to Christ is posited as "as a joining of wounds in a mystical

[51] "Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies," in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James Alfred Schultz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 180–200, at 189. Michael Camille also discusses Christ's wounds as "vagina-like" with specific reference to illustrations in fourtheenth-century Books of Hours: "The Image and the Self: Unwriting Late Medieval Bodies," in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed.Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 62–99, at 77. On Christ's wounds as womb, see: Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 278;
[52] Eleanor McCullough, "'Loke in: How Weet a Wounde is Heere!': The Wounds of Christ as a Sacred Space in English Devotional Literature," in *Through a Glass Darkly: Suffering, Sacred, and the Sublime in Literature and Theory*, ed. Holly Faith Nelson, Lynn R. Szabo, and Jens Zimmermann (Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010), 25–52, at 26.

act of copulation."[53] Christ, with female genitalia, is penetrated by mystical desire. Prioress and mystic Margaret of Oingt (d. 1310) explicitly addresses Christ as her mother, birthing not just herself but the entire world (*Med*. 33-43.13-16).[54] For Margaret, the blood pouring from Christ's wounds on the cross equates to the sweat pouring from a mother's body during labor. As sweat becomes blood, and Christ becomes mother, a positive form of female bloody discharge saves all of humanity.[55] Julian of Norwich's Christ-mother's bloody liquefactions are figured as even more fortifying than breast milk, leading magnificent spiritual transcendence:[56]

> The moder may leyn the child tenderly to her brest, but our tender Moder Jesus, He may homely leden us into His blissid brest be His swete open syde and shewyn therin party of the Godhede and the joyes of Hevyn with gostly sekirnes of endless bliss. (*Shewings*, 3.60:2508-2511)
>
> [The mother can lay her child tenderly to her breast, but our tender Mother Jesus can lead us easily into his blessed breast through his sweet open side, and show us

[53] Lochrie, "Mystical Acts," 189; James of Milan, *Stimulus amoris fr. Jacobi Mediolanensis*. Bibliotheca franciscana ascetica medii aevi, 4. (Quaracchi: ex typographia Collegii s. Bonaventurae, 1905), 71-76
[54] Margaret of Oingt, "Pagina Meditationum," in *Oeuvres De Marguerite d'Oyngt*, ed.Philipon, 1–33. Referred to as *Med*. Subsequent English translations from "A Page of Meditations," in *The Writings of Margaret of Oingt*, ed. and trans. Blumenfeld-Kosinski, 25–54. Bynum refers to this passage, but cites incorrect page numbers in the original: *Fragmentation*, 97 n.43.
[55] On medieval maternal representations of Jesus, see in particular: Jenny Bledsoe, "Feminine Images of Jesus: Later Medieval Christology and the Devaluation of the Feminine," *Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies* 3.1 (2011): 33–58. <http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1015&context=imwjournal> (accessed 21 April 2014); Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 93–117; *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1982), 110–169; Cullinan, *Redeeming the Story*, 44–46.
[56] On Christ's wounds as breasts, see: Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 269–276, in particular 273; Graziano, *Wounds of Love: The Mystical Marriage of Saint Rose of Lima* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 205–215.

> there a part of the godhead and the joys of heaven, with inner certainty of endless bliss.] (*Showings*, 60:298)

Similarly, in Alice's text a cross-gendered form of divine vaginal blood flow is salvific. In times of particular anguish, the leper drinks directly from Christ's wounds, with the blood miraculously healing her own wounds: "[…] more parvuli causa sugendi matris ubera, ad pectus Christi convolavit & ad vulnera; quorum liquore membra sauciata sanitati concito sensit restituta" (*VAS* 2:10.479) [Yes, she would wing her way to the bosom of Christ, even as a little one to suck its mother's breasts. And how promptly she would feel her bruised members restored to soundness, thanks to the beverage from those wounds!] (2.9:10.11).[57] As Christ's "menses" nourish Alice, her own leprous exsanguination is a form of life-giving effluent for herself and her community.

[57] Krahmer, "Redemptive Suffering," 276–77. Various female religious are shown drinking from Christ's wounds in the Middle Ages, including Angela of Foligno (d. 1309), Gertrud of Helfta (d. c. 1302), Ida of Louvain (d. ca. 1261), Julian of Norwich (d. c. 1416), and Lutgard of Awyières (d. 1246): Angela of Foligno, Ludger Thier, and Abele Calufetti, *Il Libro Della Beata Angela Da Foligno: Edizione Critica*, Spicilegium Bonaventurianum (Rome: Editiones Collegii S. Bonaventurae ad Claras Quas, 1985), 1.14.141–143; Gertrude the Great, *Oeuvres spirituelles*, vol. 3, ed. Pierre Doyere (Paris: Cerf, 1968), 3.45.2–3; Anon, "De vener. Ida Lovaniensi, Ord. Cisterc. in Brabantia prope Mechliniam," in *Acta Sanctorum*, ed. Daniel Papebroeck (Société des Bollandistes, 1902-1970), April, 2:157–189, at 2.3.11.173; Thomas of Cantimpré, "De S. Lutgarde virgine, sanctimoniali Ordinis Cisterciensis, Aquiriae in Brabantia," in *Acta Sanctorum*, ed. Godfrey Henschen (Société des Bollandistes, 1902-1970), June, 3:234–263 at 1.1.13.239–1.2.14.240, 2.1.6.244-245; Julian of Norwich, *Shewings*, 74:863–865, cf. 1.12:473–497. Angela of Foligno's *Libro* will henceforth be referred to as *LBA.* On these women, see: Alexandra Barratt, "'The Woman Who Shares the King's Bed': The Innocent Eroticism of Gertrud the Great of Helfta," in *Intersections of Sexuality and the Divine in Medieval Culture: The Word Made Flesh*, ed. Susannah Mary Chewning (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 107–119, at 114–117; Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 160–165; *Holy Feast*, passim; *Jesus as Mother*, 192–193; Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 41–42; Melissa L. Meyer, *Thicker Than Water: The Origins of Blood as Symbol and Ritual* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 199. For an overview of medieval interpretations of Christ's blood and other blood, see: Bettina Bildhauer, "Medieval European Conceptions of Blood: Truth and Human Integrity," *Journal of the Royal Anthropoligcal Insitute* 19.S1 (2013): 57–76. Peggy McCracken, *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero: Blood, Gender, and Medieval Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

The paper below is a version of a piece accepted for publication, after peer-review. To cite this paper, please consult the final published version:
Spencer-Hall, Alicia, 'Christ's Suppurating Wounds: Leprosy in the Vita of Alice of Schaerbeek († 1250)', in *'His brest tobrosten': Wounds and Wound Repair in Medieval Culture*, ed. by Kelly DeVries and Larissa Tracy (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 389-416

The biblical figure of Lazarus (Luke 16:22-25) underpins the association of leprosy as a divinely mandated and spiritually positive illness.[58] Although scourged by leprosy during his lifetime, Lazarus is comforted in his afterlife and embraced in Abraham's bosom — unlike the rich man, who leads a physically agreeable life, but is tormented after death. The leprous body could also be viewed as Christ Himself, in reference to Isaiah 53:4: "Surely [Christ] hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows: and we have thought him as it were a leper, and as one struck by God and afflicted."[59] The connection of Christ with the disease gained significant currency, and stories featuring Christ appearing to the pious as a leper were frequently featured in sermons.[60]

Christ's leprous appearance could also be directly linked to his countenance during the Crucifixion. For example, in her *Meditations*, Margaret of Oingt addresses Christ:

> O preciosissimum & nobilissimum corpus, quam pium erat respicere te tempore Passionis tue, quando proditores injusti screaverant in facie tua pulchra quam tu, qui eras super omnia pulcher, *videbaris essee leprosus.* (30.12) [My emphasis]
>
> [Oh, most precious and noble body, how blessed it was to contemplate you at the time of your Passion, when the unjust traitors had spat at your beautiful face, so

[58] Brody, *Disease of the Soul*, 101–03.
[59] Brody, *Disease of the Soul*, 103–04; Douay-Rheims Catholic Bible.
[60] See, for example: Jacques de Vitry and Thomas Frederick Crane, *The Exempla or Illustrative Stories from the Sermones Vulgares of Jacques De Vitry* (London: D. Nutt, 1890), sermons 94–5, 43–45. These and other relevant sermons are discussed in Brody, *Disease of the Soul*, 104.

> that you, who was beautiful above all else, *seemed to be a leper*.] (30.30) [My emphasis]

Elsewhere, Margaret details how Jews tormented Christ's body *tant que il fenblevet eftre mefeuz* [1:4.37] "until He looked like a leper" (1:4.42).[61] Margaret capitalizes on the notion of the leper as lowest of the low, clearly portraying Christ's degradation, but is careful to avoid equating the two: Christ is *not* a leper here. Crucially, heretical enemies are the vectors of Christ's *quasi*-infection, characterizing the traitors as almost bio-hazardous artifacts, dangerous transmitters of sin to all those with whom they come into contact. In comparison, the *vita* of Angela of Foligno (d. 1309) explicitly characterizes leprous flesh as the flesh of Christ, in the form of the Eucharistic wafer (*LBA*,"Third Supplementary Step," 243). [62] After Angela washes the feet of lepers, she drinks the dirty water and accidentally ingests a diseased scab. She interprets the chunk of diseased flesh lodged in her throat as a sacrament (*mi reprendeva la consienzia come se io avese comunicato*), and swallows it whole. Such configurations of the leper as Christ-like are evident in Alice's *vita,* in which her illness is portrayed as a form of *imitatio Christi*.[63]

[61] Margaret of Oingt, "Speculum Sancte Margarete Virginis," in *Oeuvres De Marguerite d'Oyngt*, ed. Philipon, 35–48. English translation from "Mirror," in *The Writings of Margaret of Oingt,* ed. and trans. Blumenfeld-Kosinski, 41–47.
[62] David Aers, "The Humanity of Christ: Reflections on Orthodox Late Medieval Representations," in *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture*, ed. Aers and Lynn Staley (University Park.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 15–42, at 33; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 144, 209; Molly Morrison, "Ingesting Bodily Filth: Defilement in the Spirituality of Angela of Foligno," *Romance Quarterly* 50.3 (2003): 204–216. See also the later mystics Catherine of Genoa (d. 1510) who ate lice, drank pus, and rubbed her nose in rotting wounds and Catherine of Siena (d. 1380) who drank pus from the breast of a dying woman.
[63] For further information on wounds as a form of *imitatio Christi,* see: Joshua S. Easterling, "Ascetic Blood: Ethics, Suffering and Community in Late-Medieval Culture," in this volume, XX–XX.

The paper below is a version of a piece accepted for publication, after peer-review. To cite this paper, please consult the final published version:
Spencer-Hall, Alicia, 'Christ's Suppurating Wounds: Leprosy in the Vita of Alice of Schaerbeek († 1250)', in *'His brest tobrosten': Wounds and Wound Repair in Medieval Culture*, ed. by Kelly DeVries and Larissa Tracy (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 389-416

According to her biographer, Alice's leprosy is divinely ordained. It is because God loves Alice so much, and recognizes her virtues, that he sees fit to afflict her with the disease. Her biographer explains that God "[...] morbo incurabili paucis desiderabili, lepra videlicet, ipsam graviter percussit" (2:9.479) [[…]struck her a heavy blow, struck her down with a disease, an incurable disease, a disease few could wish for: leprosy itself!] (2.7:9.9). This pronunciation syntactically evokes the five sacred wounds of Christ, the injuries on His hands, feet, and side endured during His Passion.[64] Alice is (1) struck down (2) with a disease, which is (3) incurable and (4) particularly undesirable, that is (5) leprosy. Her illness is thus a form of stigmata; she bears the marks of Christ's crucifixion across her body. Unlike the typical stigmatic, whose wounds correspond identically in placement with those of Christ,[65] Alice carries the sacred wounds diffuse across her leprous body in the form of myriad seeping lesions. Rather than the foul stench traditionally emanating from the leprous body, Alice gives off a refreshing divine fragrance (*VAS* 2:10.479). The beautiful odor emphasizes the God-given nature of this illness, and how *spiritually* refreshing it is, because it allows her to suffer and, thus, become closer to God. Moreover, the pleasant fragrance directly parallels a characteristic of some stigmatic wounds, which almost exclusively do not smell of putrefaction and, in some cases, are also finely scented.[66] Further, Alice's experience is directly connected

[64] J. Aumann, "Mystical Phenomena," in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 10 (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2003), 105–109, at 108; Frederick G. Holweck, "Wounds, The Five Sacred," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 15 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), 714–15,at 714–15.
[65] Augustin Poulain, "Stigmata, Mystical," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 14 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), 294–296, at 294–295. Cf. note 64.
[66] Poulain, "Stigmata," 296. As evidence, Poulain cites the sweet fragrance issuing from the stigmatic wounds of Blessed Lucy of Narni (d. 1544) and Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz (d. 1695). The foul stench emanating from St. Rita of Cassia's (d. 1465) mystical head wound is the only example known to Poulain

with the Lord's presence even further, as a description of the delectable aroma from the Lord that permeates the saint's cell precedes details of Alice's own sweet scent.

The verb *cruciare* "to torment," unequivocally linked to the cross and *crux* "torment" of Christ's Passion, repeats throughout the *vita*, referring to the sufferings of purgatory and Alice's physical ordeals that liberate souls from such anguish (*VAS* 2:20.480; 3:25-26.481; 3:29.481).[67] Such formulations explicitly couple Alice's experience with Christ's Passion, and her illness thus equates to a form of *imitatio Christi*. In a vision to Alice on Good Friday, the verb focuses the reader's attention on a depiction of Christ suffering. She sees the Lord "cruentatis manibus & clavitis pedibus, persossoque latere" (3:30.482) [with his hands all bleeding, his feet nailed, and his side pierced open] (3.30:30.27). In another vision, before Alice contracts leprosy, the holy woman finds herself before an altar as a golden cross descends from the heavens towards her on a rope (1:8.478-79).[68] The biographer glosses this episode as follows:

> Cujus cruces visio similiter & transmissio, non indebite passionem Domini, quam more Sponsae ut fasciculum myrrhae inter ubera deportabat, nobis demonstrate; & quod cordis corporisque afflicitone martyrio in se consummato, Martyrem se Deo praesentaret. (1:8.479)

of a "typical" smell of putrefaction in connection to stigmata. On pleasant aromas from a holy individual's body as a charismatic mystical phenomenon, see also: Aumann, "Mystical Phenomena," 109.
[67] *Life of St. Alice*, 11–12 n.61, 18 n.92;Krahmer, "Redemptive Suffering," 276.
[68] For a discussion of this vision in depth, see: Scholl "Golden Cross." Eleanor Campion also offers insight into the link between this vision and St. Bernard's Sermon 43 on the Canticle: "Bernard and Alice," 132.

The paper below is a version of a piece accepted for publication, after peer-review. To cite this paper, please consult the final published version:
Spencer-Hall, Alicia, 'Christ's Suppurating Wounds: Leprosy in the Vita of Alice of Schaerbeek († 1250)', in *'His brest tobrosten': Wounds and Wound Repair in Medieval Culture*, ed. by Kelly DeVries and Larissa Tracy (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 389-416

> [For us, what this points to—this vision, this letting down of the Cross is the Lord's Passion. And deservedly so, for that passion is what Lady Alice, like the Bride, used to bear as *a bundle of myrrh between her breasts* (Cant 1.12). This vision and bestowal of the Cross also point to the fact that her heart and her body were going to be afflicted, even to a full-scale martyrdom, enabling her to present herself before God as a martyr] (1.6: 8.8-9).

Alice embraces the cross — the Lord's Passion — and literally incorporates it in her body, so that every moment of her leprous life is one in which she is joined with Christ on the Cross. Her martyrdom via leprosy is arguably a superior form of *imitatio Christi*, inasmuch as it is never-ending: She does not get moments of rehabilitation or pause as ascetics may, but instead her suffering deepens every day as her disease progresses and her flesh steadily disintegrates, leaving her little more than a suppurating wound.

Alice's never-ending corporeal deterioration is unlike stories of many other female martyrs, particularly those from early Christian history, who miraculously remain whole despite annihilating tortures at the hands of pagan tormentors. For example, after a horrific double mastectomy Saint Agatha of Sicily (d. 251) is returned to full health, with her breasts mystically returned to her chest.[69] In such tales, the saint's physical incorruptibility is a telltale sign of God's grace; the opposite is true in Alice's life. The persistence of suffering inherent to the symptomology of leprosy makes the illness an ideal form of stigmata. As Augustin Poulain underlines, such ongoing and debilitating

[69] Jacobus de Voragine, "De sancta Agatha virgine," in *Legenda aurea*, ed. Th. Graesse (Leipzig: Librariae Arnoldianae, 1701), 171–174, at 171–72.

suffering is the "essential part" of visible stigmata that unites the stigmatic with Christ in His Passion.[70] If there were no physical torment, the lacerations would be "empty symbol[s]" and "unworthy" of God. Alice's wounds are fulsome, in the double-sense of both disgustingly excessive *and* abundant in symbolic value. It is precisely because her leprous lesions are gross and worthy of revulsion that they are symbolically charged as evidence of extreme, offensive suffering. What's more, the incurability of leprous wounds renders them eternal — allowing for an experience of eternal suffering coterminous with that of the crucified Christ Himself.

In the Middle Ages, pain (spiritual or corporeal) circulates from one body to another.[71] Central to the understanding of such collective pain experience is the narrative of Christ's suffering on the cross, the foundational element of Christian faith.[72] By dying on the cross, Christ absorbed humanity's sin (spiritual disease). One sufferer's pain, spiritual or otherwise, may be alleviated by its transfer to the body of another individual. Alice's suffering, like that of Christ the healer Himself, is a means of saving souls from purgatory and cleansing sin from the souls of the still living (*VAS* 2:21-22.480-81; 3:25-26.481). For example, she saves the soul of a sinful and negligent nobleman from the horrible torments of hell via a year-long suffrage (*VAS* 2:20.479; cf. 3:29.481-82). Her ability to expurgate others' sins is related to her incredible care for all humanity and the *caritatis violentiam* "violent charity" (2:21.480) that inhabits her body. As elsewhere in

[70] "Stigmata," 294.
[71] Mills, *Suspended Animation*, 148, 62. See also: Mary Sudyam's discussion of the transformative effects of visionary performance on audiences from "Women's Texts and Performances in the Medieval Southern Low Countries," in *Visualizing Medieval Performance. Perspectives, Histories, Contexts*, ed. Elina Gertsman (Illinois: Ashgate, 2008), 143–159, at 149–55.
[72] Cohen, "Towards a History," 53–54.

the *vita*, the physically annihilating (violence) is rendered spiritually productive (charity). Furthermore, Alice sacrifices particular bodily parts so that others may enjoy specific blessings associated with the metaphysical qualities of a given organ.[73] Her ocular impairment is involuntary, not a result of ascetic practices, yet she embraces the opportunity these events present. Instead of praying to God for a cure to restore her sight, she voluntarily dedicates her organs to the betterment of those in need of religious succor. She dedicates her failing right eye to Count Willem II of Holland (d. 1256) as he lays siege to Aix in May 1248. Alice asks God to confer on Willem the *vera cognitionis & intelligentiae oculo* (2:23.481) "eye of true knowledge and understanding" (3.23:21) of the Supreme Good, and ultimately lead him to defend the Church from her enemies.[74] Approximately a month before her death, Alice loses the use of her left eye too, leaving her completely blind. She sacrifices this eye for the King of France (Louis IX; d. 1270), who set sail for Egypt on crusade in 1248, so that he might have *oculo diviniae claritatis illuminatus* (3:27.481) "an eye divinely bright to enlighten him" (3.27:24) to guide him securely in his mission to fight off the pagan enemies threatening the Kingdom of Jerusalem. In these examples, Alice redefines her corporeal losses as others' spiritual gains.

As her sister, Lady Ida, witnesses the holy woman struck by particularly severe pain, Alice offers the following consoling reply:

[73] Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 121; Waddell, "Alice," 94.
[74] Máire Johnson explores the sanctifying aspects of ocular wounds and blinding in Irish hagiography in "In the Bursting of an Eye: Blinding and Blindness in Ireland's Medieval Hagiography," in this volume, XX–XX.

> "Dulcissima soror, noli sic affliginon autem me putes pro peccatis meis hujusmodi exponi tormentis, sed pro defunctis in locis poenalibus diu cruciandis & pro peccatoribus mundi, a laqueis venantiam jam jam miserabiliter irretitis, & sine sine seducendis […]" (3:26.481)
>
> ["Sweetest Sister, be not so afflicted! Do not imagine that it is for sins of my own that I am prey to these torments. Rather it is for the deceased, subject to long, excruciating detention in regions of penalty, and for the sinners of the world, already miserably trapped *in the fowlers' snares* [Ps 90:3; 123.7] and apt to be endlessly seduced."] (3.26:23-4)

Alice's emphasis on the fact that she bears the pain of others' sins underscores that she has not been struck down by leprosy for any moral fault of her own.[75] Further, this analogy allows Alice to form a significant bond with her community, from which she is physically separated and in which she can no longer dynamically physically participate.[76] The excruciating torment of Alice's *intolerabili passion* (2:26.481) "intolerable suffering," (2.26:26.23) which provokes groans, wails and floods of tears, is rendered tolerable because it serves a higher spiritual purpose. Though her leprosy may be "rapidly consuming" (*sic consume*) her body, it is actually a "constructive" experience of Christian charity.[77] Instead of being "an exemplum, an emblem of decay," as with the sinful leper, Alice's leprous body is recast as a route to spiritual refreshment and eternal

[75] *Life of St. Alice*, 24 n.109.
[76] Madison, "Redemptive Suffering," 279–81.
[77] Moscoso, *Pain*, 32–33.

life in paradise.[78] Alice's body becomes analogous to Christ's suffering body on the cross—a body in pain that offers spiritual redemption to humanity. Additionally, Alice's suffering on the part of others is a process of "*analogical verification*," a procedure in which the insistent realness and "*presentness*" of a body in pain lends presence to an intangible/ineffable otherness.[79] Her body testifies to the reality of purgatory and hell, and thus the necessity of devotion to God during a believer's lifetime on earth. The *vita* attests that Alice endures excruciatingly painful visits to hell or purgatory three or four times a day, screaming out "'[m]odo crucior in inferno, modo in purgatorio'" (3:25.481) ["'It's Hell that's torturing me!'" or "'It's Purgatory!'"] (3.25:25.23). Similarly, she announces her return to the mortal world with "'[m]odo de locis purgatorii, modo revertor de infernalibus'" ["'Now I'm back; back from Purgatory!'" or "'Now I'm back from Hell!'"]. The certainty of her pronouncements, and their location "there," a location from which she is now "back," inscribes the reality of purgatory and hell on her very body. Her wounds form a somatized roadmap of the landscape of the afterlife. That her suffering successfully saves souls, illustrated in the *vita*, shows that the doctrine of Christ's redemption of humanity is authentic.

A treatise on the figurative signification of Scripture (*Allegoriae in novum testamentum*),[80] probably written ca. 1167-1171, interprets the leprous body of the

[78] Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 58.
[79] Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 9, 13–14. Emphases in original.
[80] Hugh of St. Victor, "Allegoriae in Novum Testamentum," in *Opera Omnia*, ed. J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina 175* (Paris: Migne, 1854), cols. 791–924. Although the treatise is contained in the works of Hugh of St. Victor, the editors classify it as presumptively, not definitively, Hugh's work. Over the years, the text has also been attributed to Richard of St. Victor, Peter Comestor, Peter of Poitiers and Peter the Chanter (Philip S. Moore, "The Authorship of the *Allegoriae Super Vetus Et Novum Testamentum*," *The New Scholasticism* 9.3 (1935): 209–225, at 209). There still remain conflicting views over authorship. Rawcliffe, for example, maintains it is by Hugh of St. Victor (*Leprosy*, 112 n.29.) However, many believe

unnamed man in Matthew 8:1-4,[81] cured by Christ's touch, as a proxy for humanity, corrupted by sin:

> Leprosus iste est genus humanum, quod, qunadiu fuit leprosum, a Deo fuit et a civitate Dei, ide est Hierusalem (quae sursum est mater nostra) separatum et longe remotum. … Sed Dominus … leprosum curavit et civem suae civitatis fecit. Hoc idem Dominus quoque miraculum per suam gratiam, quotidie facere non dedignatur. Sunt etenim multi intra ambitum sanctae Ecclesiae vitiorum lepra foedi et peccatorum contagi, quasi lepra polluti. (2.26: 790)
>
> [This leper is the human race, which, while it was leprous, was separated and far distant from God and the City of God, that is to say Jerusalem (which on high is our mother). But the Lord […] has healed the leper, and made him a citizen of his city. Nor does the Lord disdain to perform this miracle every day through His grace. For there are, indeed, many within the body of Holy Church who are befouled by the leprosy of vice and polluted by the contagion of sins, as by leprosy.] (Rawcliffe, *Leprosy*, 112)

the work to be by Richard of St. Victor (see for example: Bjarne Andberg, "Le Paysage Marin Dans La Crypte De La Cathedrale D"anagni," *Acta Ad Archaelogiam Et Artivm Historiam Pertinentia* 2 (1965): 195–203, at 200; Brody, *Disease of the Soul*, 127; John Chamberlin, *Medieval Arts Doctrines on Ambiguity and Their Places in Langland's Poetics* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 2000), 135.) It is believed to be from Richard's *Liber exceptionum*: Richard of St. Victor and Jean Châtillon, *Liber Exceptionum* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1958), bk 2, chs. 1-9, 11-14.

[81] This episode appears again in Mark 1:40-45 and Luke 5:12-16. Christ healing lepers also occurs in Luke 17:11-19. In 2 Kings 5, a leprous soldier is cured by dipping himself seven times into the river Jordan. As Brody points out, however, the 2 Kings event is more likely related to scabies, which could be cured by bathing in hot springs (Brody, *Disease of the Soul*, 73 n.32).

Like the oozing lesions that mark the leprous body, sinful individuals corrupt the body of the Church. Though these morally degraded people may not outwardly show the signs of leprosy, they are, nevertheless, afflicted in a spiritual sense. The impious, though not physically sequestered from the community like Alice and her fellow sufferers, are isolated from the flock of righteous Christians and God Himself. Over a hundred manuscripts of the treatise are extant, testifying to its popularity in the period that reached its zenith in the thirteenth century.[82] Most likely used as a theological textbook, [83] the work illustrates the currency of leprosy as a metaphor within ecclesiastical circles. Furthermore, it provides another means of reading Alice's body as Christ-like. Alice carries on her body the physical marks of the spiritual leprosy with which humanity is tainted. Her suffering body, like Christ's, allows for the cleansing of this moral corruption. Though leprous externally, she is clearly intimately connected with God and lives almost perpetually in His embrace (*VAS* 2:10,12.479).[84] Upon her initial segregation, Alice is so grieved about her separation from the community that her heart is almost literally broken, "tam gravi cordis vulnere est collisa" (2:9.479) [her heart was so severely crushed and bruised] (2.7:9.9), and her shock provokes a fainting spell. However, she is almost immediately consoled by a visit from the Lord, who showers her with His grace. From this moment, she prefers God as her only visitor and glories in her

[82] Andberg, "Paysage Marin," 200; Chamberlin, *Medieval Arts Doctrines*, 136; Moore, "Authorship of the *Allegoriae*," 209.
[83] Moore, "Authorship of the *Allegoriae*," 209.
[84] Waddell, "Alice," 91–92.

time with Him alone in her hut (*VAS* 2:10.479).[85] When she moves to a new abode, Christ welcomes her warmly, figuring her hut as a *tabernaculum* in which He will tends to her every need (2:12.479). Rather than a desolate space of hopeless seclusion, her leper hut is where she is eternally embraced by the divine; it is a *quasi*-Jerusalem. Though her personal space is limited, her spiritual mission overflows the boundaries of her cell and affects all those around her.[86]

Regardless of the favorable illustration of leprosy in Alice's *vita*, the older perception of the malady as a symptom of moral corruption continued, and ultimately triumphed.[87] Clerics used leprosy both as a metaphor for spiritual corruption and a vehicle for spiritual elevation.[88] Jacques de Vitry linked the incidence of leprosy to the existence of Original sin.[89] On the other hand, Walter, bishop of Tournai, pronounced leprosy a divine boon in 1239.[90] As Saul Nathaniel Brody comments, "[t]he leper was seen as sinful and meritorious, as punished by God and as given special grace by Him."[91] To engage with lepers, symbols of the basest moral corruption, publicly signaled a commitment to living penitence and thus operated as a socially recognizable form of religious service.[92] At the age of twenty three, for example, Yvette of Huy (d. 1228)

[85] See also a similar episode on the eve of the Feast of the Eleven Thousand Virgins (later known as the Feast of St. Ursula), in which Christ consoles Alice with his company after she feels sadness at being separated from her religious colleagues: *VAS* 2:16.480.
[86] Waddell, "Alice," 94.
[87] Brody, *Disease of the Soul*, 104–05.
[88] Brody, *Disease of the Soul*, 61.
[89] Muessig, *Faces*, Sermon 5, section 2, 160.
[90] Timothy S. Miller and Rachel Smith-Savage, "Medieval Leprosy Reconsidered," *International Social Science Review* 81.1–2 (2006): 16–28, at 19.
[91] Brody, *Disease of the Soul*, 61.
[92] Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 76.

joined the leprosarium outside the walls of her town where she nursed the afflicted for ten years (*VIH* 10:480).[93] Such is her devotion to the Lord that she wishes to become *miseriam omnibus miseriis* (10:34.870) "the most thoroughly miserable of all the miserable" (10:34.94). Her scheme to ensure that she contracts the illness involves a regimen of contamination: eating and drinking amongst the lepers, washing in their dirty bath water, and mixing her own blood with theirs (*VIH* 11:36.870). It is now known that it is relatively difficult to contract leprosy.[94] Although the disease's precise pathogenesis remains unclear, ninety-five per cent of the population is immune to the bacterium and only one per cent of individuals will contract the disease after exposure. However, leprosy was believed to be highly contagious in the Middle Ages.[95] It is noteworthy that Yvette's actions are understood as those of a "heroine of faith" instead of as those of a "frightening model of harmful behaviors."[96] Within the theological framework underpinning medieval attitudes to leprosy, voluntary contraction of the illness marks

[93] Hugh of Floreffe, "De B. Ivetta, sive Iutta, vidua reclusa, Hvi in Belgio," in *Acta Sanctorum*, ed. Godfrey Henschen, (Société des Bollandistes, 1902-1970), January, 1:863–87. Referred to as *VIH*. Chapter, paragraph, and page numbers are given in parenthesis in the text. English translations from "The Life of Yvette, Anchoress of Huy, by Hugh of Floreffe," trans. Jo Ann McNamara in *Living Saints of the Thirteenth Century: The Lives of Yvette, Anchoress of Huy, Juliana of Cornillon, Inventor of the Corpus Christi Feast, Margaret the Lame, Anchoress of Magdeburg*, ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 47–141. See also: Marie of Oignies (d. 1213) and Juliana of Mont-Cornillon (d. 1258) who also cared for lepers: Anon, "De B. Iulianae virgine priorissa Montis-Cornelii," in *Acta Sanctorum*, April, vol. 1, ed. Godfrey Henschen (Société des Bollandistes, 1902-1970), 443–77, at 2.1–2.457–58; Jaques de Vitry, "De B. Maria Oigniacensi in Namurcensis Belgii dioecesi," in *Acta Sanctorum*, June, vol. 4, ed. Daniel Papebroeck (Société des Bollandistes, 1902-1970), 636–66, at 1.1.13–14.640; Michel Lauwers, "'Noli Me Tangere'. Marie Madeleine, Marie d'Oignies Et Les Pénitentes Du Xiiie Siècle," *Mélanges de l'Ecole française de Rome. Moyen âge, temps modernes* 104.1 (1992): 209–268, at 216; Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 76–80.
[94] Nunzi and Massone, *Leprosy*, 39–42.
[95] On fear of contagion, see: Zimmerman, "Leprosy," in particular 579 n.4.
[96] Krahmer, "Redemptive Suffering," 293.

Yvette out as an overwhelmingly pious woman, enthusiastically giving herself up to the worst illness possible to become closer to Christ.

As Annette B. Mulder-Bakker points out, Yvette's enterprise at the leprosarium (later known as the hospital of Grandes Malades) is not motivated by "compassion."[97] The *vita*'s author neglects to mention her love for the diseased. Instead, what is *useful* for Yvette is their lowly status as living embodiments of moral degradation, which is emphasized again and again. Serving the lepers makes her *vilius* (10:33.870) "more vile" (10:33.93), an exercise in the practice of humility that shows her devotion to God. The lepers themselves are a means to an end. After Yvette leaves for enclosure as an anchoress in 1191 (*VIH* 14:42.871), having extracted the spiritual experience of humiliation and abnegation from her time with the lepers, they are not mentioned again. Yvette's eleven years in the *leprosarium* are rapidly recounted in just two short chapters comprised of three paragraphs each, and then the text turns to the private piety of Yvette as a visionary recluse (*VIH* 10–11:870).[98] Contact with the lepers is *functional* for Yvette, a stepping-stone in her personal journey to spiritual perfection. This is highlighted in the following aside from her biographer: "[…] sufficit in eo quod leprosis cohabitabit, abundant in eo quod seruiebat, superabundant in eo quod vt leprosa & ipsa efficeretur optabat" (11:36.870) [It suffices that she lived with the lepers; it abounds that she served them; it superabounds that she prayed to become leprous.] (11: 36.95) It would have been enough for Yvette to live with the sinful afflicted, and her actions of caregiving and

[97] Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, *Lives of the Anchoresses: The Rise of the Urban Recluse in Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 65
[98] Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 39.

willful attempts at contamination are over and above what is required to prove her Christian charity and faith.

Although Yvette of Huy never reached her impossible goal of catching leprosy, she accurately prophesies that a local woman will catch the disease (*VIH* 28:879).[99] In this episode, leprosy figures as a divine judgment levied against a sinful individual, a woman of unnamed wicked excesses. Certainly, it is an extreme penalty, *terribilem & asperam nimis,* but it also an act of charity. The experience of leprosy

> Purgatoria ei peccatorum suorum effecta fit poena, vt sancta mente & corpore transiret de hoc mundo ad Patrem, consumptis peccatis omnibus per correptionem & poenam, quae praecessit, corporis. (28: 86.879)

> [[…] acted as a purgatory, punishing her sins so that she could pass from this world to the Father, holy in mind and body, all the corporal sins she had committed before consumed through pain and correction] (28: 86.121).

Though both Alice and the unnamed woman from Huy are burdened by God with the same disease, the signification of the illness differs for each woman. What differentiates the pair is the underlying rationale of their illnesses. Female models of suffering produce polyvalent significations: As Shawn Madison Krahmer asserts "context is everything" with this material.[100] The pious Alice is untainted by sin, and thus her suffering can be used to redeem the souls of the living and dead: she functions as a physical mediatrix.

[99] Mulder-Bakker, *Lives of the Anchoresses*, 52–53.
[100] "Redemptive Suffering," 287; see also: 287-91.

The wounds on her body do not "belong" to her, as it were, but instead are impressions of others' moral blemishes. Her leprosy is an opportunity for sacrifice that benefits her whole community. The woman from Huy, on the other hand, is weighed down by her own sins, and must live in penance as a leper to atone. In the thirteenth century, preachers and theologians forged a connection between confession and medical phenomena. The expulsion of infected bodily matter, bloodletting, and inflicting wounds, or even forcibly opening existing lesions, were all conceptualized as akin to the act of confession.[101] Thus, the physical realities of leprosy, including expurgation of infected fluids and the incidence of multiple festering wounds, function as a form of daily bodily confession for the leper of Huy.

Despite the framework for the positive interpretation of suffering in the *vitae* of thirteenth-century holy women, the insistence in Alice's *vita* on the productive nature of her own affliction highlights the possibility for more negative judgments towards her illness. Indeed, the text's prologue suggests her community's potentially mixed reaction to her affliction.[102] New and heretofore unheard of events, the reader is told, are judged in many ways and the reader should not fear the inevitable reaction of reprehensible slanderers, *detrahentium formidantes*, to Alice's tale (prol.1.477). Alice will be *odor vitae* "an odor of life" for the pious who recognize her exemplary holiness and imitate her devotion to God. However, for those who despise Alice, seeing her only as a sinful leper,

[101] Lauwers, "'Noli Me Tangere,'" 254. Nicole Bériou, "La Confession Dans Les Écrits Théologiques Et Pastoraux Du Xiiie Siècle: Médication De L"âme Ou Démarche Judiciaire?" in *L"aveu. Antiquité Et Moyen Âge. Actes De La Table Ronde De Rome (28-30 Mars 1984)*, ed. Ecole Française de Rome (Rome: École Française de Rome, 1986), 261–282, at 269–73.
[102] Campion, "Bernard and Alice," 135.

she will be solely *odor mortis* "an odor of death." Physical phenomena of pain and disease are less "medical fact[s]" and more social and cultural constructions, based on the interpretations of both witnesses and authors.[103] Physical suffering is an individualized subjective experience, perceived and understood differently by all according to personal circumstance and socio-cultural inculcation. An almost limitless spectrum of signification is possible. Alice's leprosy is miraculous stigmata to some, an expression of moral corruption to others, and/or simply a bundle of medical symptoms to a modern reader.

Apart from leprosy, other illnesses in the text are not depicted in an affirmative light: the meaning of sickness and pain more generally is shown to be fluid. Alice's sister, Lady Ida, is struck down with an acute malady so severe that she is presumed to be on the brink of death (*VAS* 2:17.480). Instead of welcoming this event with happiness, Alice shows great sorrow. Suffering often offered many female religious opportunities to become closer to God, but it is clear that not all pain was embraced as a means to spiritual elevation. As Bynum points out, many miracles performed by holy women involve the alleviation of pain and illness—thus there was a medieval understanding of corporeal pain as unwanted and avoidable even within texts foregrounding the religious.[104] Such is Alice's grief at the thought of losing her helpmate and sibling that she apostrophizes God:

[103] Cohen, "Towards a History," 50.
[104] Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 188-89.

> "Domini mi, noscas pro certo, si possibile cum potestare mihi foret attributum, ut aequali jaculo, quo me de morte soreri meae jam imminenti inconsolabiliter vulnerasti, laedere te valerem minimi mihi attemptarem" (2:17.480)
>
> ["Lord, get this clear! This unsoothable gash you're wounding me with in my sister's pending death – if I had it in my power to jab you back with a hurt to match yours, I wouldn't hold off for a moment!"] (2.16:17.16).

Strikingly, Alice characterizes her sister's affliction not as a wounding of Ida's body but her own. The pains wracking Ida are transliterated into Alice's inconsolable affective agony. Suffering circulates between individuals: those emotionally touched by bodies in pain share that same pain. Although the Lord replies to Alice's tearful outburst, His reply is more dismissive than consoling. He characterizes her affective pain as *vano dolore* "ineffectual grief," and states that Ida will not die of this ailment. Alice, He decrees, will enter heaven first, followed by Ida. The potential succor provided by this statement, suggesting a blissful reunion between sisters in the hereafter, is largely undercut by the inclusion of the subordinate clause *si beatem duxerit vitam* "if, of course, she lives a blessed enough life." The *vita*'s author ends the passage with the ambiguous pronouncement *sicut rei probavit eventus* "[a]nd events were to prove this true." Though the leper certainly dies before her sister, this sheds little light on whether Ida eventually reunites with Alice in heaven, leaving the text's audience with a lingering sense of unease.

Cohen maintains that pain dangerously threatens a community's cohesion: "unless it is tamed, socialized, provided with a vocabulary of expressive gestures, and made intelligible in verbs, it can be a dangerous tear in the fabric of any society."[105] Alice's *vita* takes up the challenge of "socializing" the holy woman's dread disease, and at almost every turn provides a rhetoric of martyrdom through illness which neutralizes the negative connotations of leprosy. Instead of a morally bankrupt individual in their midst, and one with such a heretofore-pious record to boot, the community of La Cambre is faced with a woman of extraordinary spirituality who expurgates their own sins. Alice's leprosy, after all, is useful for them too. The text emphasizes that she is an exemplary patient (*VAS* 1:6.478). During her immensely painful lifetime, she does not burden others with her affliction (*nulli fuit onerosa*) but behaves extraordinarily graciously to all (*singulis & omnibus fuit gratiosa*). She focuses herself on prayer, work, and meditation (1:5.478). Her deportment in every sphere of activity and every location, including in the refectory, cloister, church, dormitory, and colloquium, is faultless (1:6.478). Alice obeys all practical behaviors that govern her community: she is well behaved, and she does not disturb, literally or figuratively. Alice the Leper, transformed into little more than a weeping lesion thanks to her leprosy, bears the wounds of Christ dispersed across her being. Bearing such wounds, however, requires the construction of a web of supporting commentary to ensure that her glorious wounds are not mistaken for what they may initially seem to be, putrefying markers of sin and degradation.

[105] Cohen, "Animated Pain," 40.