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Mechthild of Hackeborn and Margery Kempe:
An Intertextual Conversation

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Abstract

Chapter 58 of *The Book of Margery Kempe* documents how a priest new to Bishop's Lynn takes on an eight-year commitment to read scriptural and devotional works to Margery Kempe, thus enhancing both her and his own spiritual expertise. Although not named amongst the works listed in the *Book*, we argue that the 'swech oþer' texts, a term tantalisingly appended to the list of named books presented, would likely have included the thirteenth-century *Liber specialis gratiae* attributed to the Saxon nun, Mechthild of Hackeborn (d. 1298). Drawing on some of the most vivid and compelling correlations between the two texts, we argue not only for Kempe's familiarity with Mechthild's writing but also for a much more central positioning of this earlier work within the literary and spiritual cultures of fifteenth-century England than has generally been understood.

Introduction

In chapter 58 of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, finally written down in about 1436, the *Book*'s protagonist, Margery Kempe, is recorded as offering a characteristic rebuke to Christ because of his failure to comply with her request for a suitable cleric out of "þe many clerkys as þu hast in þis world" to read to her from the scriptures and other devotional works.[1] Depicting herself as hungering in spirit for such readings, she calls upon Christ's pity for her devotional starvation, causing him to quickly capitulate and promise her: "þer xal come on fro fer þat xal fulfillyn þi desyr."[2] As if on cue, a new priest duly appears in Bishop's Lynn sometime in 1413, one wholly unfamiliar with Margery, but who is arrested by her remarkable pious behaviour and noisy affective performances as she goes about the streets. As a result, he seeks out an introduction and, within days, Margery is invited to this priest's rented accommodation, which he shares with his mother. Soon, the three of them begin reading and discussing together scripture and devotional works, and Margery peppers these gatherings with copious tears of compassion, which clearly impress the priest's mother, if not the priest himself initially. Indeed, it is this mother who vouches for

[1] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Sandford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen, EETS OS 212 (London, New York and Toronto, 1940, repr. 1997). All quotations will be taken from this edition, unless otherwise stated, and cited by book, chapter and page number (here at 1.58: 142). There has been much debate surrounding authorship of this text and Kempe's own contribution to it. Original critics often saw the *Book* as overly simplisic, naive, or largely shaped by its various scribes. Later commentators tended to separate the protagonist, Margery, from the professed author, Margery Kempe, when discussing the *Book*, suggesting that the figure of Margery was largely a textual construction, a process begun by Lynn Staley in 1994 when she suggested that the scribes mentioned in the text were meant to be tropological: see Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* (Philadelphia, PA, 1994). Since then, there has been a number of discoveries regarding the book's first scribe and the scribe of the extant manuscript copy. See, for example, Sebastian Sobecki, "'The writyng of this tretys': Margery Kempe's Son and the Authorship of Her Book," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 37 (2015): 257-83; and Anthony Bale, "Richard Salthouse of Norwich and the Scribe of *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *The Chaucer Review* 52.2 (2017): 173-87. In this essay, we will comply with convention and refer to the author as Margery Kempe and the internal protagonist as Margery.

[2] Kempe, *Book*, 1.58: 142.

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Margery's spiritual singularity, counselling her son to pursue the acquaintance further: "Hys modyr was wel plesyd & cownselyd þat he xulde [spekyn more wyth hir]."[3] Hence Margery begins a six-year period of deeply satisfying religious exchange with the priest – and possibly his mother too – teaching him – or them – much about "good scriptur and many a good doctor which he wolde not a lokyd at þat tyme had sche ne be."[4] In turn, the priest provides Margery with "many a good boke of hy contemplacyon" – some of which are even named in the text: "þe Bybyl wyth doctowrys þer-up-on, Seynt Brydys boke, Hylton's boke, Bone-ventur, Stimulus Amoris, Incendium Amoris, *& swech oþer*."[5]

Here we find listed a predicable array of texts to be read for devotional purposes *in camera* amongst like-minded people.[6] But what is of particular concern to this present article is the somewhat throw-away reference to "swech oþer" texts included here, of which there must have been a considerable number, given the seven- or eight-year period when this priest and Margery read together between 1413 and 1421. Also significant is the fact that this reading practice is presented as both communal and reciprocal – indeed, it is as beneficial to the priest as it is to Margery, increasing his own "cunnyng and merit." Explicitly, too, it provides him with the spiritual added-value that allows him ultimately to receive a benefice of his own: so much so that he "lykyd hym ful wel þat he had redde so mech beforn."[7] The inference here is that Margery and the priest are actually discovering new works to read together, each informing and developing the other's devotional knowledge-base. Between them, we can also infer, they clearly devour many of the devotional "best-sellers" of the day, a number of which, besides those already mentioned, are alluded to or clearly referenced elsewhere in the *Book*. Indeed, it cannot be of insignificance that, just two chapters later, Margery Kempe's scribe will recount how his faith in Margery was restored and reinforced by his own reading of popular continental women's visionary writing: specifically *The Life of Marie d'Oignies* (d. 1213) and the visions attributed to Elizabeth of Hungary (d. 1231), who displayed similar affective practices to those embraced by Margery Kempe in the fifteenth century.[8] No doubt, these texts also constituted some of the "swech oþer" works read communally by Margery and her priest, demonstrating clearly that female-authored visionary writings were being circulated and read in those milieux in which Margery Kempe was operating at this time. In this article, therefore, we wish to suggest that one of these "swech oþer" texts would have been the *Liber specialis gratiae* of Mechthild of Hackeborn (d. 1298), most likely in its translated form, *The Boke of Gostely Grace*, although, it is also quite possible that the work could have been summarised

[3] Kempe, *Book*, I.58: 143.

[4] Kempe, *Book*, 1.58: 143.

[5] Kempe, *Book*, 1.58: 153 (our emphasis). There are two extant Middle English translations of Birgitta of Sweden's complete *Liber Celestis*, one found in London, British Library, MS Claudius B.i, the other in British Library, MS Julius F. II. A modern edition of the former has been published as *The Liber Celestis of St Bridget of Sweden: The Middle English Version in British Library MS Claudius B.i, together with a Life of the Saint from the Same Manuscript*, ed. Roger Ellis, vol. 1, EETS OS 291 (Oxford and New York, 1987). As well as Birgitta's writing and a glossed Bible, the works referred to here are the *Stimulus Amoris*, erroneously attributed to Bonaventure (for which, see Allen's notes on 143/25-6 and 153/38-154/1, Kempe, *Book*, 322 and 323); the *Scale of Perfection* by Walter Hilton; and the *Incendium Amoris* of Richard Rolle – all standard spiritual works of the period.

[6] On private reading as a devotional practice promoting self-reflection, see Jennifer Bryan, *Looking Inward: Devotional Reading and the Private Self in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia, PA, 2008). Bryan discusses Mechthild of Hackeborn's *Boke* on pp. 36-37 and pp. 90-93. Margery Kempe's role as audience for devotional reading is discussed on pp. 12, 19 and 20. For a wider study of late medieval women's access to, and ownership of, books, See Mary C. Erler, *Women, Reading and Piety in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge, UK, 2002). Both Jacqueline Jenkins and Rebecca Krug comment on Margery Kempe's reading practices as collaborative. See Jacqueline Jenkins, "Reading and the *Book of Margery Kempe*," in *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis (Cambridge, UK, 2004), pp. 113-28 (p. 117); and Rebecca Krug, *Margery Kempe and the Lonely Reader* (Ithaca, NY and London, 2017).

[7] Kempe, *Book*, 1.58: 144.

[8] Kempe, *Book*, 1.62: 153-54. Both of these texts were circulating in Middle English by the early fifteenth century, in their entirety and in excerpted formats. For modern critical editions of these texts, see "The Life of Marie d'Oignies," in *Three Women of Liège: A Critical Edition of and Commentary on the Middle English Lives of Elizabeth of Spalbeek, Christina Mirabilis and Marie d'Oignies*, ed. Jennifer N. Brown (Turnhout, 2008), pp. 85-190; and Elizabeth of Hungary, *Two Middle English Translations of the Revelations of St Elizabeth of Hungary*, ed. Sarah McNamer (Heidelberg, 1996). McNamer problematises this authorial attribution in her introduction.

or paraphrased for Margery. It may also be likely that one or other of her scribes had also been strongly influenced by it before or during his writing-up of Margery's life.

This suggestion is not entirely a new one: it was first posited by Hope Emily Allen in her Prefatory Note to the EETS edition of the text produced with Sandford Brown Meech in 1940.[9] Additionally, in Appendix IV of this edition, also prepared by Allen, she argues for the importance of studying *The Book of Margery Kempe* in the context of Dominican – or Dominican-influenced – visionary women operating in Germany during the thirteenth century;[10] Mechthild can, of course, be numbered amongst such women.[11] Indeed, in her preface, Allen tantalisingly declared that, in a second volume, she would be presenting long extracts from the work of Mechthild and others like her to evidence her assertion of strong influence upon Margery Kempe. Indeed, as she asserted of Kempe's literary practice: she had "a habit to drop clues useful to the scholar . . . sometimes split up in widely separated sections."[12] As we know, Allen's collaboration with Meech was subject to considerable difficulties, the promised second volume never materialised, and we are still left to a large extent second-guessing what this remarkable and assiduous early twentieth-century scholar would have presented us with.[13] However, what *does* remain for our own scrutiny is this same series of clues dropped into the text by Kempe and her scribes – some of which we aim to identify and discuss in this present article.

The Boke of Gostely Grace

As mentioned above, *The Boke of Gostely Grace* (hereafter *Boke*) is the Middle English translation of the *Liber specialis gratiae* (hereafter *Liber*), the revelations attributed to Mechthild of Hackeborn, a Saxon mystic and chantress at the Benedictine/Cistercian convent of Helfta in what is now northern Germany.[14] The *Liber* is thought to have been compiled collaboratively by Gertrude the Great (1256–1301/2) and another unknown nun at Helfta during the last decade of the thirteenth century, but it was soon abridged by an anonymous redactor and enjoyed wide circulation in Europe.

The Liber is the only extant Helfta text to have been translated into Middle English – probably at Syon Abbey during the same period as Birgitta of Sweden's *Liber Celesti*s and Catherine of Siena's *Dialogo* were being translated into English in the early fifteenth century, also in a Carthusian or Birgittine milieu.[15] The *Boke* is a translation of an abridged version of the *Liber*, which contains the first five books and concentrates on visions connected with the Church's liturgy, Mechthild's personal piety and prayers for the deceased in purgatory. This translation survives in two manuscripts — Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 220, dating from the mid-fifteenth century, and London, British Library, MS Egerton 2006, dating from the last quarter of the fifteenth century – but it is very likely that the two manuscripts share a common Middle English antecedent, now lost.[16] This would mean that a version of the *Boke* may well have been in circulation when Margery and the unnamed priest were reading together between 1413 and 1421. Indeed, as Liz Herbert McAvoy has argued elsewhere, the clear – and, on occasion, unique – correlations between the *Boke* and

[9] Allen in Kempe, *Book*, I: lxvi.

[10] Allen in Kempe, *Book*, I: 376-8. The Dominican influences upon the texts under scrutiny are discussed further below.

[11] See, for example, Mary Jeremy Finnegan, *The Women of Helfta: Scholars and Mystics* (Athens, GA and London, 1991), especially p. 15, p. 19 and p. 55.

[12] Allen, in Kempe, *Book*, I: lxvi.

[13] For a sensitive account of the issues surrounding the book's twentieth-century publication history, see Marea Mitchell, *The Book of Margery Kempe: Scholarship, Community, and Criticism* (New York, 2005).

[14] The original Latin text has been edited by Dom Ludwig Paquelin in *Revelationes Gertrudianae ac Mechtildianae* (hereafter *Revelationes*), 2 vols (Paris, 1875–7), II, pp. 1–422. The Middle English translation based on MS Egerton has been edited by Theresa A. Halligan as *The Booke of Gostlye Grace of Mechtild of Hackeborn* (Toronto, 1979).

[15] For an overview of the history of the Bridgettine foundation of Syon Abbey, see Edward A. Jones, *Syon Abbey 1415-2015: England's Last Medieval Monastery* (Leominster, 2015). See also *Syon Abbey and its Books*, ed. E. A. Jones and Alexandra Walsham (Woodbridge, 2010); and Susan Powell, *The Birgittines of Syon Abbey* (Turnhout, 2017).

[16] Halligan, *Booke*, "Introduction," pp. 6-7.

the 1422 text, *A Revelation of Purgatory*, attributed to an anonymous female recluse in Winchester, would strengthen the case for the *Boke*'s early circulation in such circles.[17]

In terms of their contents, MS Egerton 2006 contains only Mechthild's revelations, while MS Bodley 220 comprises a treatise on meekness, a short text on vices and virtues, and two English poems, concluded by the scribal signature: "Deo gracias Amen, quod Wellys I. et cetera" (fol. 103r).[18] Although the name is perhaps too common for identification, this scribe could possibly be John Wells, a Carthusian monk of the House of Salutation in London, who appears in the record in 1425 and whose death is also recorded at Hinton Charterhouse in 1445 under the name John Wellis.[19] Indeed, dialectical distinction between the two Middle English versions supports the possibility: MS Bodley 220 is written in a London dialect while MS Egerton 2006 is written in a northern dialect. Theresa Halligan, the editor of the Egerton manuscript, however, argues that its scribe was consciously amending the dialect of his master copy, eliminating southern forms of words as he got used to copying the text.[20] She also suggests that MS Egerton 2006 may have been written in the Carthusian house in Axholme on the Lincolnshire and Yorkshire border.[21] That the master copy was written in a southern dialect indicates production in a Carthusian monastery near London – or, again, even at Syon Abbey, with which many other manuscript traces of Mechthild are associated, as we shall see.

In this context, additional to the *Boke* and a number of complete manuscript copies of the *Liber* in England,[22] there are a number of extant devotional works and anthologies that contain passages of Mechthild's revelations in Latin and/or English translation. Extracts from the *Liber*, for instance, were circulating in manuscripts soon after the foundation of Syon Abbey in 1415. *The Myroure of oure Ladye*, written for the nuns of Syon probably between 1420 and 1448, contains two excerpts from "Mawdes boke";[23] however, it is impossible to discern whether these were based on the *Liber* or *Boke*, because of their largely paraphrastic tenor.[24] Extracts also appear in *The Speculum devotorum* (translated as the *Myrowre to Devout Peple*), written between c. 1415 and 1425 by an anonymous brother of Sheen Abbey. In the prologue, its Carthusian author memorably names Birgitta of Sweden, Catherine of Siena and Mechthild of Hackeborn as "approued women," probably

[17] Liz Herbert McAvoy, "'O der lady, be my help': Women's Visionary Writing and the Devotional Literary Canon," *The Chaucer Review* 51.1 (2016): 68-87 (for Mechthildian influence upon *A Revelation of Purgatory*, see pp. 78-86.)

[18] A more extensive account of the manuscripts and anthologies will appear in *The Boke of Gostely Grace, edited from Oxford, MS Bodley 220 with Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Anne Mouron and Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa with assistance of Mark Atherton, Exeter Medieval Texts (Liverpool, 2021 forthcoming). All quotations from MS Bodley 220 will be cited by book, chapter and folio number.

[19] Halligan, *Booke*, "Introduction," p. 2, n. 4; Rosalynn Voaden, "The Company She Keeps: Mechtild of Hackeborn in Late-Medieval Devotional Compilations," in *Prophets Abroad: The Reception of Continental Holy Women in Late-Medieval England*, ed. Rosalynn Voaden (Cambridge, UK, 1996), pp. 51-69 (p. 53).

[20] For example, there are some northern characteristics in the end of Part I, such as *hate* for 'hot'; *amange* for 'among'; *chase* for 'chose'. "The spyrites of þe ordere of seraphyne . . . were kyndlede moreouere in charyte of þe hate luffe" (I. 58, 242); "Amange martyres sche was moste pacyete" (244); "a fulle bryght myrrour þat euerlastyinge luffe wherewith he luffede me ande chase me before any creature" (I. 59, 247).

[21] Halligan *Booke*, "Introduction", pp. 22-23. For northern features, see J. A. Burrow and T. Turville-Petre, *A Book of Middle English*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1996), pp. 5-8. A. I. Doyle speculates that the spelling of this scribe points chiefly to Lincolnshire: see his essay, "English Carthusian Books not yet linked with a Charterhouse," in *'A Miracle of Learning': Studies in Manuscripts and Irish Learning: Essays in honour of William O'Sullivan*, ed. Toby Barnard, Dáibhí Ó Cróinín and Katharine Simms (Aldershot, 1998), pp. 122-36 (p. 126-27). According to *Linguistic atlas*, MS Egerton 2006 is mixed with a SE Leicestershire component: see Angus McIntosh and others, *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English*, 4 vols (Aberdeen, 1986), I, p. 109. The same hand is responsible for Cambridge, St John's College 189 and British Library, Additional 37790. See also Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa, "Mechthild of Hackeborn and Cecily Neville's Devotional Reading: Images of the Heart in Fifteenth-Century England," in *Revisiting the Medieval North of England: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Anita Auer, Denis Renevey, Camille Marchall and Tino Oudesluijs (Cardiff, 2019), pp. 25-38.

[22] Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Trinity College 32; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 21; Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff. 1.19.

[23] *The Myroure of oure Ladye*, ed. John Henry Blunt, EETS ES 19 (London, 1973), 38-39, 276-77. Mechthild's name appears in a wide variety of forms in Middle English: for example, Mawde, Moll, Molte, Molde, Maude, Maute and Matilde. On this, see Voaden, "Company," p. 54, n. 16.

[24] Voaden, "Company," p. 55.

for the deemed orthodoxy of their visions.[25] But, again it is impossible to tell on which version of Mechthild's writing its extracts are based. Extracts attributed to Mechthild are also found in a number of devotional anthologies, including British Library, MS Harley 494, an early sixteenth-century manuscript which is also connected with the Syon network and includes Mechthild's revelations bilingually as one of its sources.[26] Whether Latin, vernacular or bilingual, Mechthild's text (in a variety of forms) thus forged predominantly Birgittine and Carthusian connections and was widely disseminated under their auspices.

The Boke of Gostely Grace as an approved, vernacular mystical text

Behind the translation of the *Liber* lies the politico-religious tension of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries following Archbishop Arundel's *Constitutions* of 1409, issued to counter the ideological and political struggles precipitated by Lollardy.[27] As Vincent Gillespie has argued, an unintended consequence of the *Constitutiones* may have been concerted translation into English of older texts with "an impeccably orthodox pedigree or . . . reputation."[28] Reflecting the Church's reform agenda for the English Church, Syon Abbey grew to be a centre of orthodox translation into the vernacular during the episcopate of Arundel's successor, Henry Chichele (1414-43).[29] Having resurfaced within the Carthusian/Birgittine milieu, Mechthild's *Liber*, with its emphasis on liturgical worship, clearly fitted comfortably both with Syon's cloistered spirituality and with the type of Church reforms enforced by Arundel and Chichele.[30]

Unlike Birgitta or Catherine, who were both fourteenth-century saints and therefore perhaps of more immediate interest to a vernacular readership, Mechthild belongs to a group of twelfth- and thirteenth-century, continental female mystics celebrated for their charism, intellectual confidence and powerful voices during their own day. The most prominent example is, perhaps, Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), who directed her voice, and the esteem within which she was held, at promoting twelfth-century Church reform.[31] As Barbara Newman argues, "Hildegard condemns a Church whose vain, pleasure-loving prelates had lost all manly fortitude and zeal for the Word of God in their craving for worldly honor, soft living, and wealth."[32] Although the Helfta nuns were

[25] *The Speculum devotorum*, or *Myrowre to Devout Peple* is a meditative prose life of Christ in Middle English. See *A Mirror to devout people (Speculum devotorum)*, ed. Paul J. Patterson, EETS OS 346 (Oxford, 2016), p. 6.

[26] On this, see Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa, "The *Liber specialis gratiae* in a Devotional Anthology: London, British Library, MS Harley 494," in *Late Medieval Devotional Compilations in England*, ed. Marleen Cré, Diana Denissen and Denis Renevey (Turnhout, 2020), pp. 341-60. Besides *The Myroure, Speculum devotorum* and MS Harley 494, other works and manuscripts with Syon or Carthusian connections include: London, British Library, MS Harley 4012, a devotional compilation owned by Anne Wingfield (d.1500) of East Anglia; London, British Library, MS Lansdowne 379, a compilation of prayers and other religious texts dating from the fifteenth century and associated with Mountgrace monastery, where a manuscript of Margery Kempe's book eventually ended up; Downside Abbey MS 26542 (c. 1430), a compilation of Dartford Priory ownership; and Durham, University Library, MS Cosin V.III.16, a Syon Abbey manuscript containing extracts from both Birgitta's and Mechthild's writing. For an overview of these traces, along with those of other Continental women writers, see Alexandra Barratt, "Continental Women Mystics and English Readers," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing*, ed. Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace (Cambridge, UK, 2003), pp. 240-55.

[27] On the development and progress of Lollardy in Britain, see *A Companion to Lollardy*, ed. J. Patrick Hornbeck II, with Mishtooni Bose and Fiona Somerset (Leiden and Boston, MA, 2016). See also Robert Lutton, *Lollardy and Orthodox Religion in Pre-Reformation England* (Woodbridge, 2006); Richard Rex, *The Lollards* (London and New York, 2002); *Lollardy and the Gentry in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Margaret Aston and Colin Richmond (London and New York, 1997).

[28] Vincent Gillespie, "1412-1534: Culture and History," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism*, ed. Samuel Fanous and Vincent Gillespie (Cambridge, UK, 2011), pp. 163-93 (p. 174).

[29] For a series of important discussions of this period's turbulent socio-religious politics, see *After Arundel: Religious Writing in Fifteenth-Century England*, ed. Vincent Gillespie and Kantik Ghosh (Turnhout, 2011).

[30] The translator of the *Liber* refers to his readers as "Deuoute systren and brethren" in the prologue, suggesting that the *Liber* was translated for a mixed audience.

[31] For a detailed study of the movement for Church reform within the twelfth century, see Giles Constable, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, UK, 1996).

[32] Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley, CA, 1987), pp. 239-40. See also Finnegan, *The Women of Helfta*, pp. 121-22.

active more than a century after Hildegard,[33] they too are considered to have been working partly within a reformist agenda. Indeed, in a proem to her book, Mechthild and the Helfta scribes pray that all those who will read the work, or hear it read, will worship the Lord for what he had revealed to Mechthild, and that, through his mercy, he will "renewe thys olde world and … reule and reforme men and women olde growyn in sleuth of all goodnesses with such devoute sterynges and holy and verteouse ensamples."[34]

In fifteenth-century England, there may well have emerged an urgent need to look back to these women as pioneering voices within the call for spiritual reform, giving rise, therefore, to a new imperative for the translating of Mechthild's revelations into the vernacular. The fifteenth century, too, bore witness to what Sarah McNamer has referred to as the "gendered logic [of] . . . iterative affective performance" which, for this commentator, was linked to "practices of maternal and feminized sexual holding." In turn, such observations (that are certainly pertinent to the writing of both Mechthild and Margery Kempe) culminate in the assertion that "to feel compassion is to feel like a woman."[35] Within such a climate, the deeply compassionate writing that constitutes the *Liber* seems to have taken on a new urgency and communicative charge as the type of affective devotional practices that proved so important to Margery Kempe came in from the margins to enter the mainstream. In combining orthodox teaching with contemplative aspiration and mediatory prayers for the suffering souls in purgatory, the *Boke* was clearly received as one of the approved texts of vernacular, mystical material by those in orders and the laity alike, to enforce the spirit of reform and ensure a new religious beginning after the trouble with Wycliffe and his followers at the end of the previous century.[36] As such, it is just the type of book that Margery, her priestly friend and his mother would have been reading together at this juncture in the early fifteenth century.

Despite geographical and temporal distance, then, we argue that Margery Kempe was very likely to have had access to Mechthild's *Liber* in Latin or in translation. Again in a prefatory note to *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Allen asserts that the books of revelations by Birgitta, Catherine and Mechthild had all been translated into English before Margery Kempe finally succeeded in getting her own revelations recorded (1436-38).[37] She also offers the examples of the readership of the "Mauldebuke," which was owned by Eleanor Ros of York as early as 1438,[38] and points out that the MS Egerton 2006 version of the *Boke* belonged to "R. Gloucester and Anne Warwick," that is to say the king Richard III and his wife Anne, in the latter part of the fifteenth century. Indeed, the names of both appear on the folio facing the beginning of the text. It is also of interest to us here that both of these royal persons were direct descendants of the Lady Westmorland (d. 1440) mentioned in Book 1, chapter 54 of Margery Kempe's *Book*: that is to say Joan Beaufort, legitimated daughter of John of Gaunt and Catherine Swynford, and named as both a close acquaintance and a fan of Margery Kempe in her book – at least according to Margery's perspective ("My Lady hir owyn persone was wel plesyd wyth þe [Margery] & lykyd wel thy wordys").[39] Indeed, one of Lady Westmorland's daughters, Cecily, duchess of York (d. 1495), is also known to have owned a copy of Mechthild's *Boke*, which formed part of her daily reading. And Cecily, of course, was the sister of the same Lady Greystoke whom Margery knew well and for whose decision to leave her husband

[33] Newman argues that "there is no sign that the women of Helfta knew Hildegard, whose difficult books had ceased to be read or copied by their day": see *Book of Special Grace*, "Introduction", p. 11; Albert Derolez, "The Manuscript Transmission of Hildegard of Bingen's Writings: The State of the Problem," in *Hildegard of Bingen: The Context of her Thought and Art*, ed. Charles Burnett and Peter Dronke (London, 1998), pp. 17-28.

[34] *Boke*, I. 2nd prologue, fol. 14r.

[35] Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia, PA, 2010), p. 7 and p. 19.

[36] Vincent Gillespie, "Chichele's Church: Vernacular Theology in England after Thomas Arundel," in *After Arundel*, ed. Gillespie and Ghosh, pp. 3-42, especially pp. 4-5.

[37] Allen, writing in Kempe, *Book*, I: lxvi.

[38] *Testamenta Eboracensia: A Selection of Wills from the Registry at York*, ed. James Raine, vol. 2 (1855), pp. 65-66.

[39] The words here are those of the Archbishop of York to Margery during one of his interrogations of her: Kempe, *Book*, 1.54: 133.

Margery was blamed in 1417.[40] That Margery would not have been aware of Mechthild's work, given this array of interlinking contexts for its ownership and dissemination, seems highly unlikely, therefore.

Intervention of the Carmelites

Other possible routes for Margery Kempe's familiarity with Mechthild's writings emerge within Carmelite contexts. The Carmelite order was one of the older monastic traditions, and one from which Syon sought help in its early history: as Vincent Gillespie points out, Carmelites were involved in developing Syon's own distinctive form of living as advisors.[41] Thomas Netter of Walden (c. 1372-1430), Prior Provincial of the English Carmelites from 1414, was a confessor to Henry V and so must have had a close connection with Syon Abbey, founded by the king in 1415. Moreover, Netter was one of the most prominent figures in anti-Lollard campaigns and international ecclesiastical politics in the early fifteenth century,[42] and was present at Council of Constance as a royal observer or in some other capacity mandated by Henry V.[43] However, Netter was also deeply suspicious of women's revelations and exercised particular concern about *discretio spirituum* and *probatio*, suggesting a vested interest in the ways in which they were copied and disseminated.

As Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa has pointed out elsewhere, we know of Margery's association with the Carmelites from the many references to the friars peppered throughout the *Book*.[44] Among others, Alan of Lynn, native of Lynn, Carmelite anchorite and doctor of divinity, remained a highly-valued spiritual adviser to Margery throughout much of her adult life,[45] having enormous influence on her spiritual education through the intensely intellectual Carmelite network within which he operated. Indeed, a school in the Carmelite Friary in Lynn was almost certainly instrumental in disseminating the latest theological ideas and trends, then shared and discussed by the friars and their associates.[46] Additionally, the cartulary of the Carmelites, which includes various arrangements for corrodies, suggests that the interchange of personnel between England and the continent was very frequent.[47] Such mobility of the well-educated friars strengthened the Carmelites' academic network and enabled them to maintain the high standard of intellectual pursuit for which they were renowned. We know that Alan was keen on cataloguing works of mysticism and accommodating the demands of the laity seeking access to the Bible.[48] He is also recorded as

[40] Kempe, *Book*, I. 54: 133. According to her household ordinance, dating from 1485-95, Cecily's daily devotional reading included the revelations of St Birgitta and Mechthild of Hackeborn and a life of St Catherine of Siena. See *A Collection of Ordinances and Regulations for the Government of the Royal Household* (London, 1790), pp. 37-39; C. A. J. Armstrong, "The Piety of Cicely, Duchess of York: A Study in Late Mediaeval Culture," in *England, France and Burgundy in the Fifteenth Century* (London, 1983), pp. 135-56 (pp. 140-42).

[41] Vincent Gillespie, "The Moles in the Vineyard," p. 137.

[42] Kevin J. Alban, *The Teaching and Impact of the Doctrinale of Thomas Netter of Walden (c. 1374-1430)* (Turnhout, 2010); *Thomas Netter of Walden: Carmelite, Diplomat and Theologian (c.1372-1430)*, ed. Johan Bergström-Allen and Richard Copsey (Faversham, 2009).

[43] Richard Copsey, "Thomas Netter of Walden: a biography," in *Thomas Netter of Walden*, ed. Bergström-Allen and Copsey, pp. 23-111 (pp. 56-58).

[44] Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa, "Carmelite Spirituality and the Laity in Late Medieval England," in *Anchoritism in the Middle Ages*, ed. Catherine Innes-Parker and Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa (Cardiff, 2014), pp. 151-62; J. P. H. Clark, "Late Fourteenth-Century Cambridge Theology and the English Contemplative Tradition," in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England*, Exeter Symposium V, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge, UK, 1992), pp. 1-16, especially pp. 13-14 for Alan of Lynn.

[45] Hope Emily Allen identifies Alan as one of Margery's principal confessors. See Kempe, *Book*, I: 259, n. 6/9. In her recent essay, Susan Maddock identifies his probable surname as Warnekyn and speculates that he was much younger than previously thought, having been confused with a considerably older Alan by generations of scholars. For this reason, we leave his birth date (c. third quarter of the 14th century) undetermined. See "Margery Kempe's Home Town and Worthy Kin," in *Encountering The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Laura Varnam and Laura Kalas (Manchester, forthcoming 2021).

[46] Kukita Yoshikawa, "Carmelite Spirituality," p. 152.

[47] A. G. Little and E. Stone, "Corrodies at the Carmelite Friary of Lynn," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 9 (1958): pp. 8-29 (pp. 9, 15-17).

[48] See *A Biographical Register of the University of Cambridge to 1500*, ed. A. B. Emden (Cambridge, UK, 1963), pp. 381-82 for the list of his works credited by John Bale.

having made indexes of the revelations and prophecies of St Birgitta of Sweden and of the pseudo-Bonaventuran *Stimulus Amoris*, both known to Margery, as mentioned earlier.[49] Moreover, he was even interested in radical revelatory theology, such as the Franciscan apocalypticism of Henry of Costesy, and he compiled a detailed index of Costesy's Apocalypse commentary.[50] It was, no doubt, Alan's active involvement in the dissemination of vernacular theology that inclined Netter to censor the friendship between Alan and Margery, to Margery's great distress, as documented in Chapter 69 of her *Book*, when she tells us: "þe worthy doctwr was chargyd be obediens þat he xulde not spekyn ne comownyn wyth hir."[51] Such proscription, however, was short lived and, to her great relief, Margery continued to interact regularly with both the reading priest and Alan of Lynn. There were any number of opportunities for her to have become familiar with Mechthild's writings in one or both these ways. Indeed, considering the Carmelites' academic network and close links with the Birgittines of Syon from the Order's early years; and, given Alan's grandfather hailed originally from a German-speaking territory, we can speculate with some confidence that Alan may well have had a specific interest in Mechthild's *Liber* which, like Birgitta's revelations, was circulated out of Syon and would surely have been consulted by him, if the opportunity had arisen.[52]

Margery's Continental Pilgrimage

There remains one more distinct possibility: that Margery's familiarity with Mechthild's writings could have been influenced – or consolidated – by her son and daughter-in-law, residents of one of Lynn's primary trading outposts in Danzig – present-day Gdansk – now a Polish city but part of the northern German territories during the later Middle Ages.[53] In Book 2 of her text, Margery recounts a visit made to Lynn in 1431 by her son, John, who was at that time living in Danzig with his unnamed German wife, whom he brought back to England with him apparently on her own behest: "sche wolde leeuyn hir fadyr & hir modyr & hir owyn cuntre for to comyn into Ingolonde & seen hys modyr."[54] With this journey and his subsequent residency in Margery's home having been recently historically verified by Sebastian Sobecki, even more grist has been added to the mill pointing towards this son as Margery's first scribe.[55] Indeed, given that the text also records how pious conversion, followed by marriage to a local woman in Danzig, had saved the son from a dangerously dissolute life-style, it is very likely that he – and, perhaps more importantly, his wife – brought back with them to Lynn knowledge of the renowned holy women of northern Germany, amongst whom Mechthild of Hackeborn was a dominant figure.

In a recent unpublished conference paper, Santha Bhattarcharji has turned the spotlight for the first time firmly onto Margery's much overlooked daughter-in-law, who, following the sudden deaths of Margery's son and husband during their stay in Lynn, stayed on as a young widow to spend more than a year and a half with Margery between the end of 1431 and April 1433.[56] As Bhattarcharji suggests, there is absolutely no reason to discount the likelihood that the daughter-in-law also played a role in scripting Margery's book. For one thing, it would completely explain the

[49] Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa, "Margery Kempe and Felip Ribot's *Liber de institutione primorum monachorum*," in *Celebrating St. Albert and His Rule: Rules, Devotion, Orthodoxy and Dissent*, ed. Michelle M. Sauer and Kevin J. Alban (Rome, 2017), pp. 133-49.

[50] The existence of an index for the Apocalypse commentary shows the relative freedom and tolerance of the Carmelite intellectual pursuit: Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, *Books under Suspicion: Censorship and Tolerance of Revelatory Writing in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame, IN, 2006), pp. 102-03.

[51] Kempe, *Book*, 1.69: 168.

[52] Alan's grandfather, Stephen Warnekyn, moved to Lynn from a German-speaking part of the Continent in the second half of the fourteenth century. He is thus very likely to have communicated in German at home and Alan's father, Alan Warnekyn senior, may also have had some German. We speculate that there is a good possibility that Alan of Lynn was brought up in a multi-lingual and multi-cultural (English-German) milieu and this facilitated his role as a conduit for transmitting Mechthild's *Liber/Boke* to Margery. For Alan's family, see Maddock's essay as before.

[53] For a more detailed analysis of Margery's trip to Danzig, see McAvoy, "'O der lady'," pp. 71-78.

[54] Kempe, *Book*, 2.2: 223-25 (here at p. 224).

[55] Sobecki, "'The writyng of this tretys'."

[56] Kempe, *Book*, 2.2: 225.

hybrid German-English script and linguistic expression that the second scribe found so difficult to decipher, it being "neiþer good Englysch ne Dewch."[57] It would also provide a more feasible time-frame for the *Book*'s first writing: given the son's business affairs and his having become mortally ill so quickly after his arrival at Lynn, there was very little time left at his disposal to write down an entire book in the space of the month between arrival and death. The daughter-in-law, on the other hand, had plenty of time to get the first version of the book written down during her time with her mother-in-law in Lynn, as Bhattarcharj emphasises. Even if she were not party to the *Book*'s first inscription, the daughter-in law would have had ample time to recount tales of those holy women who had been prominent in and around Danzig in order to stir Margery's imagination and help her recast her visionary experiences within new and exciting narrative frameworks. As the *Book* announces elsewhere, Margery was happy to talk at great length "alwey of þe lofe & goodnes of owyr Lord as wel at þe tabyl as in oþer place."[58] There is no reason to consider things had changed in this respect during the time that she spent with her daughter-in-law, both in England and then in Danzig where Margery stayed after accompanying her newly bereaved daughter-in-law on her journey home.

As McAvoy has previously argued in a similar context, as a resident of Danzig, Margery's daughter-in-law would certainly have been familiar with Dorothy von Montau (d. 1394), who was born in the town and enjoyed elevated status as respected holy woman.[59] It may even be that Margery's seemingly impulsive decision to accompany her daughter-in-law back to Danzig in 1433, where the latter had left her own child in the care of others, was impelled in part by a wish to visit in person the region within which the type of female spirituality she had been espousing for most of her adult life had also long been thriving. We must remember that she, too, was suffering from the same bereavement as her daughter-in-law and, as far as we know, had never met her infant granddaughter. These are reasons enough to want to undertake such a long and dangerous journey. But her husband's death also freed her from the close bodily care and emotional labour she had been expending on him during his years of incapacity, at which time she had had to offer up to God both her frustrations and her labours. As God had assured her: "I wil þat þu be fre to helpyn hym at hys nede in my name."[60] John Kempe's death, therefore, provided another perfectly valid reason for Margery's desire to visit the heartland of the type of female-coded spiritual practices she had long espoused – and, no doubt, had further gleaned from conversational interaction and reading.

Besides being the birth-place of Dorothy of Montau, Danzig also supported one of the first Birgittine foundations and had even provided a stop-off point for Birgitta's daughter, Katharina, as she carried her mother's remains back to Sweden.[61] With Mechthild having had a clear influence on aspects of Birgitta's writings – the soul as a room to be swept clean by its "housekeeper" is probably the best-known example[62] – and with the Danzig foundation still offering indulgences at the time of Margery's three-month stay there, there were doubtless multiple reasons for Margery's visit

[57] Kempe, *Book*, 1. Proem: 4.

[58] Kempe, *Book*, 1.26: 61.

[59] McAvoy, "'O der lady'." This is a connection again first posited by Hope Emily Allen in *Book*, p. lix. See also Clarissa M. Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The* Book *and the World of Margery Kempe* (New York, 1983), especially pp. 179-81; and David Wallace, *Strong Women: Life, Text and Territory 1347-1645* (Oxford, 2012), pp.1-60.

[60] Kempe, *Book*, 1.76: 180.

[61] Thomas Andrew Dubois, *Sanctity in the North: Saints, Lives and Cults in Medieval Scandinavia* (Toronto, Buffalo, London, 2008), p. 296.

[62] When Mechthild deplores the absence of a confessor when she desires to confess, Christ authorises her inner confession by telling her: "It is now of þy synnes as whan a myȝty kyng shall com into an ynne or into a grete place. Anon þe house ys made clene þat noþing may be sene ther þat shuld desplece hys syȝt. But whan it fallith þat þe lord be so nye þat þe fylth may not be caste oute or þe lorde com, anon þei geddyr it and ley it in an herne þat it mow be caste oute afterwarde" (II.16, fol. 60r). In her *Liber Celestis*, Birgitta writes: "For he þat will resaiue a worþi lorde to his herber, he awe noȝt alloneli to arai himselfe, bot also all þat langes to household. And so did he noȝt. For all ife he ordainde his house, ȝit he swepid it noȝt besili with reuerens, ne he strewed it noȝt with floures of vertuse." See *Liber Celestis*, II.ii: 118.

beyond the encouragement she documents as having been received from Christ.[63] Moreover, as we have just suggested, all of these reasons seem to be female-focused: on a maternal sense of duty to a sometimes reluctant daughter-in-law; on a wish to see her unseen German granddaughter in the face of her own loss of an adult child; and on a desire to visit a locale within which pockets of female spirituality continued to be subject to cult status. Indeed, it seems likely that the determination shown by Margery to get her book written in its entirety once and for all when she returned to Lynn was also spurred on by her protracted stay in this region and her journey home.

Upon leaving Danzig after what is documented as a successful stay of five to six weeks, and where she felt she had been received with "ryth good cher of meche pepil for owr Lordys lofe,"[64] Kempe sailed first to Straslund,[65] from where she began her trek overland, heading south to Wilsnack and then on to Aachen, to visit both towns' famous relics.[66] Her most likely route would have been south, taking her through new Helfta itself and nearby Magdeburg. Indeed, it was close to Magdeburg that Margery was abandoned by her travelling companions as a result of her excessive weeping, forcing her to continue south-west towards Aachen alone. On the way, however, she would have had to pass through the important spiritual centre of Erfurt, before eventually joining a convoy of pilgrims journeying back to England.[67] It is in Erfurt that the most authoritative version of the complete Latin version of Mechthild's *Liber* was copied in 1370 by a priest named Albertus, vicar of the church of St Paul in the town; moreover, this manuscript (Wolfenbüttel HAB codex 1003 Helmst), claims to have been closely copied from the original Helfta autograph produced in the last decade or so of the thirteenth century and completed very soon after Mechthild's death in 1298. Indeed, Ernst Hellgardt attributes both the preservation and dissemination of the *Liber* to the Benedictine and Carthusian communities in the town,[68] with this particular manuscript having been preserved in the Charterhouse of St Salvatorberg in Erfurt.[69] Similarly, in an essay documenting the strong Carthusian predilection for such female-authored mystical writings, Dennis Martin identifies Erfurt as a pivot for interest in, and dissemination of the writings of all three Helfta women visionaries: there are, for example, two entries for Mechthild's writing under the terms *exempla* and *revelationes* in the late fifteenth-century Erfurt charterhouse library catalogue of manuscripts.[70] Additionally, the former Erfurt, MS J 2 Halle (now Universitätsbibliotek Y c8o 6), begins with the words *Collectorium ex libris devotarum feminarum* [a collection from the books of devoted women] and includes works by Birgitta, Mechthild, a "certain holy Margareta," Catherine of Siena, Gertrude of Helfta and Hildegard of Bingen, all attested spiritual "heavyweights" and authoritative authors of important female-coded and female-scripted mystical and devotional

[63] "Þe forseyd creatur. . . was comawndyd in hir hert for to gon ouyr þe see wyth hir dowtyr. Sche wolde a putt it owt of hir mende, & euyr it cam ageyn so fast þat sche myth not rest ne qwiet han in hir mende but euyr was labowryd & comawndyd to gon ouyr þe see." Kempe, *Book*, 2.2: 226.

[64] Kempe, *Book*, 2.4: 231. Margery also claims that this warm reception by the people incentivised her to stay longer, in spite of ill-treatment by her daughter-in-law. Christ, however, intervenes to urge her to return home.

[65] Kempe, *Book*, 2.4: 233.

[66] Kempe, *Book*, 2.5-6: 234-35. For an fuller account of this journey, see McAvoy, "'O der lady'."

[67] This, as the most likely route, is testified to by a surviving account of the same journey by Philip, last Count of Katzenellenbogen in 1434, a year after Kempe's own journey. Taking thirteen to fourteen days, the itinerary takes him to Magdeburg, Halle, Erfurt and Cologne, among other places, on his way to Aachen. Kempe, *Book*: 346-47, n. 237/34-37.

[68] See Balázs J. Nemes, "Text Production and Authorship: Gertrude of Helfta's *Legatus Divinae Pietatis*," in *A Companion to Mysticism and Devotion in Northern Germany in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. Elizabeth Andersen, Henrike Lähnemann and Anne Simon (Leiden and Boston, MA, 2014), pp. 103-30 (p. 103). The earliest vernacular translation, dating from the first quarter of the fifteenth century at the very latest, was an important Dutch translation, from which, as Richard Bromberg has argued, all other vernacular translations ensued, including German, Swedish, Italian and English. See Ernst Hellgardt, "Latin and the Vernacular: Mechtild of Magdeburg – Mechtild of Hackeborn – Gertrude of Helfta," in *A Companion to Mysticism and Devotion in Northern Germany*, ed. Andersen, Lahnemann and Simon, pp. 131-35 (pp. 137-28). This Dutch translation, *Het boek der bijzondere genade van Mechthild van Hackeborn*, has been edited by R. L. J. Bromberg (Zwolle, 1965).

[69] Hellgardt, "Latin and the Vernacular", pp. 133-34.

[70] Dennis D. Martin, "Carthusians as Advocates of Women Visionary Reformers," in *Studies in Carthusian Monasticism in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. Julian M. Luxford (Turnhout, 2008), pp. 127-53.

writings.[71] Mechthild, then, was patently a particular favourite within wider, European Carthusian circles in the fifteenth century, and, as mentioned earlier, the English charterhouses of London and Witham both possessed codices containing her writing during the same period. As Voaden notes, too, Mechthild's work tended to "travel in convoy" with that of Birgitta of Sweden and Catherine of Siena through Carthusian and Birgittine networks.[72] Indeed, according to the evidence of wills, within English contexts the writing of Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton and Henry Suso also formed part of this "convoy". Folio 10 of Suso's *Horologium sapientiae* in Lambeth Palace MS 436, for instance, bears a marginal note pointing the reader explicitly to the links between Suso's writing and Mechthild's extended commentary on the *Paternoster* in *Liber* Book IV,[73] and it is this extended commentary, along with Mechthild's other prayers, which was also clearly familiar to Boccaccio when he wrote his *Decameron* in 1353.[74] In turn, this suggests much wider lay familiarity than has been considered and, as Voaden has suggested, evidences the extent of Mechthild's fame and influence within those literary cultures with which we know Margery had regular contact, both at home and abroad.[75]

Margery's overseas travels, then, offered her direct contact with communities where the spirituality of women had long been nurtured. With ample time for talking of spiritual things, including the exploits of local holy women such as Mechthild, we argue that this had a direct and immediate impact upon Kempe's self-perception as belonging to a privileged, female-focused spiritual community extending far beyond her home town of Lynn. Indeed, the rapidity with which she visited the Birgittine house of Syon Abbey upon her return to England from her travels in northern Europe would testify to this, as does her recording of how a young man at the Abbey addressed her by the title "Modir" – a commonly used title for a seasoned holy woman.[76] At Syon, too, Margery learns from a hermit, who had initially led her and her daughter-in-law out of Lynn,[77] of the deep disapproval of her confessor, Richard Spryngolde, about her disappearing to Danzig without his permission, so she was also clearly in no hurry to get back to Lynn without further validation of the reasons for her journey.[78] We suggest, then, that an important impetus for this Syon visit on Lammas Day was to share with like-minded fellow pilgrims the knowledge she had gleaned about the spirituality and writings of continental holy women like Mechthild which she had consolidated whilst abroad. Indeed, within three years or so, Margery had not only secured a new amanuensis to transcribe her son's and/or daughter-in-law's poorly executed first draft, but had also recorded the events of this important German adventure as a second book appended to the first. Also incorporated into the manuscript at this point were Kempe's own prayers, which, as Allen has pointed out, bear more than a trace of German holy women's influence. These prayers were most likely composed many years before the *Book*, but a precedent for their incorporation had

[71] Martin, "Carthusians," p. 135. The "certain holy Margareta' may well be a reference to Margaret of Magdeburg, also known as "Lame Margaret" (d. c. 1250), who was a respected anchoress in the town during the thirteenth century. Her *vita*, written by a Dominican named John, is unusual in that it was written during her lifetime and apparently presented to her for her own approval. For a careful appraisal of Margaret and the sources that reconstruct her life, see Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, *Lives of the Anchoresses: The Rise of the Urban Recluse in Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia, PA, 2005), pp. 148-173. Mulder-Bakker claims that Margaret's *vita* took on canonical status, and its influence extended as far as "Utrecht, Ghent, and even the entire lowland area between the Seine and the Elbe (p. 173)."

[72] Voaden, "Company," p. 66. For more detailed information on extant manuscripts, see Halligan, *Booke*, 'Introduction', pp. 8-10.

[73] *divina matildi parta quinta c. 10*. Voaden, "Company," pp. 66-67.

[74] On the seventh day of the story-telling forming the frame-narrative of Boccaccio's text, one Gianni Lotteringhi is depicted as having learnt to recite Mechthild's "Hymn" alongside the *Paternoster* in the vernacular as a sure means of protecting "the salvation of his soul": Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, trans. Guido Waldman and ed. Jonathan Usher (Oxford, 1993), VII.1, p. 419.

[75] Voaden, "Company," pp. 65-66.

[76] Kempe, *Book*, 2.10: 245-46.

[77] Kempe, *Book*, 2.2: 226 and 2.10: 246.

[78] In fact, her confessor had forbidden her to go ("ȝe may not gon") because of her old age and because she had recently suffered a foot injury from which she had not yet recovered: Kempe, *Book*, 2.2: 226.

already been established by Margery's likely intertexts – that is to say, those texts which directly or indirectly influenced her writing – or, in Hope Emily Allen's words: "the flotsam and jetsam of popular devotion in manuscripts of English origin."[79] The extant copy of the whole work was ultimately produced by the scribe Salthows in the Benedictine priory of Norwich and later read and preserved by the Carthusians of Mountgrace after Kempe's death.[80]

Mechthild and Margery: The Internal Evidence

As mentioned earlier, Margery Kempe, not only read – or had read to her – Birgitta's revelations but is very likely to have had access to Mechthild's text in one or more of the ways documented, access which, we wish to argue in the final part of this article, had significant influence upon a number of episodes in the *Book*.[82] Such a possibility has previously been entertained by Allen, who points out that Margery's vision of a celestial dance with the Lord, his mother and holy virgins in Chapter 22 is based on a remarkably similar visionary episode within Mechthild's book, when, on the feast of All Saints, Mechthild sees "a wounderfull goyng and ledyng aboute in maner of a karoll".[82] Choreographically, a medieval "karolinge" was circular and the dancers' revolving movements thus evoked for Mechthild – and clearly for Margery too – the perfect and harmonious circle of beatitude in heaven, as well as the holy woman's role as *sponsa Christi* dancing with her Bridegroom at the celestial marriage feast.[83] However, we suggest the direct correlations go far beyond this. As Kukita Yoshikawa has argued previously,[84] elsewhere in her text Margery draws upon the same type of musical hermeneutics that proliferate everywhere in Mechthild's writing, no doubt a result of the latter's experiences as longstanding chantress within the Helfta community. For Mechthild, heaven is not only inseparable from the musical harmony enjoyed by the choir at Helfta, but God, himself, *is* divine music. On one occasion, for instance, divine love is envisioned as a "full feyr mayd synggyng;"[85] and on another, Mechthild's own singing in church brings about both mystical encounter and union with God, so that the breath they take in their singing is drawn from the same divine source.[86] In Margery's case, too, we can recall how her first spiritual awakening takes the form of "a sownde of melodye so swet & delectable, hir þowt, as sche had ben in Paradyse."[87] She also relates how, for many years during the Palm Sunday procession "sche herd gret sowndys & gret melodijs wyth hir bodiy erys & þan sche þowt it was ful mery in Heuyn."[88]

Mechthildian spirituality in the discourse of Holy Communion

But there are even more compelling resonances than this between the two books. Other of Margery's meditative, revelatory experiences also correlate with those of Mechthild, particularly the account in Chapter 86 where Margery documents perhaps her most comprehensive statement of a matured understanding of Holy Communion, the Trinity and mystical union.[89] Here she recounts Christ's final monologue centred on Holy Communion, and points to what ultimately lies beyond it — that is, union with the divine. In this monologue Christ first commends Margery for receiving the

[79] Allen in Kempe, *Book*: lix.
[80] On this, see Bale, "Richard Salthouse."
[81] See Allen in Kempe, Book: lxvii. Halligan also suggest a possible influence of Mechthild on Margery Kempe: see Halligan, *Booke*, "Introduction," p. 59.
[82] *Boke*, I. 68, fol. 48r. See Kempe, *Book*, p. 283, n. 52/27.
[83] *Book*, ed. Newman, "Introduction," p. 20.
[84] Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa, "Heavenly Vision and Psychosomatic Healing: Medical Discourse in Mechtild of Hackeborn's *the Booke of Gostlye Grace," in Medicine, Religion and Gender in Medieval Culture*, ed. Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa (Cambridge, UK, 2015), pp. 67-84.
[85] *Boke*, II. 35, fol. 66v.
[86] *Boke*, III. 6, fol. 72v.
[87] Kempe, *Book*, 1.15: 11.
[88] Kempe, *Book*, 1.3: 185.
[89] Kempe, *Book*, 1.86: 209-14. But also see, for example, Christ's profession to Margery, based on John 14.20 ("I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you"): "I am in þe, and þow in me" (Kempe, *Book*, 1.10: 23) and *Boke*, 1.4: "thou art in me and y in the, and y shall never forsake the" (fol. 16r).

Eucharist with a company of saints in her soul:

> I knowe þe holy thowtys & þe good desyrys þat þu hast whan þu receyuyst me & þe good charite þat þu hast to me in þe tyme *þat þu receyuyst my precyows body in-to þi sowle*, and also how þu clepist Mary Mawdelyn in-to þi sowle to wolcomyn me . . . & *sumtyme, dowtyr, þu thynkyst þi sowle so large &' so wyde þat þu clepist al þe cowrt of Heuyn into þi sowle for to wolcomyn me*. I wot ryth wel, dowtyr, what þu seist, "Comyth alle xij apostelys þat wer so wel belouyd of God in erde & receyuyth 3owr Lord in my sowle." Also þu preyist Kateryn, Margarete, & alle holy virginys to wolcomyn me in þi sowle.[90]

Although Margery's vocabulary is homely and, perhaps, a naïve and partial echoing of the Sarum Missal here,[91] nevertheless she succeeds in having Christ emphasise the belief that saints are reliable intercessors and mediators in whose merits she should trust in order to attain the bliss in heaven and who should be invited into the expansive soul to receive the body of Christ at the Eucharist.

In a comparable vision, Mechthild also attributes a similar vocabulary of spaciousness and invitation to Christ in his instructions as to how *she* should prepare herself for Holy Communion. In this episode, Mechthild is led into an enormous house where Christ is having his last supper with the disciples, telling her:

> þis house betokenyth þe brede and þe widenes of my largenesse which may nou3t be mesured, which house frely and gladlye receyve all þat comen þerto. Therfor he þat wille be commownyd muste comme to þe goodnes of my largyte and þat largynes shall receyve hym as a benigne moder and defend hym from all evylles.[92]

Again, Kukita Yoshikawa has argued that the wide, large space – a house – signifies God's benevolence and generosity, and is thus emblematically figured as a maternal space;[93] this is one of many expansive allegories of enclosed, encompassing space that are interspersed throughout Mechthild's *Boke*. By far the most frequent of these, however, brings them all together in a single, fluid and multivalent hermeneutic, that is to say, Christ's Sacred Heart, a key image in the writings of all three Helfta visionaries. For Mechthild, the heart is predominantly a space of mutual indwelling that transforms in a variety of ways – sometimes into a house, a dining room, a bridal chamber, an enclosed garden, or a silver medicine chest – but all serving to nurture Mechthild's developing mystical relationship with Christ. The house in this particular vision, then, is just as much emblematic of Christ's heart as it is God's womb and echoes any number of spaces in the *Boke* where Christ can enter, rest, and eat a fortifying meal. Indeed, this was this same image that inspired the Benedictine nuns of St Walburga to produce a drawing, called "the Eucharistic Banquet," in which Christ and the nuns share an allegorical meal within the chamber of the heart.[94] Mechthild's

[90] Kempe, *Book*, 1.86: 210 (our emphasis).

[91] Christ's words here seem to draw on 'Canon of the Mass' in the Missal: "In communion with and reverencing the memory, in the first place, of the glorious and ever virgin Mary . . . As also of thy blessed apostles and martyrs—Peter, Paul . . . and of all thy saints; through whose merits and prayers do thou grant that in all things we may be defended by the aid of thy protection." See *The Sarum Missal in English*, Part I & II, trans. Frederick E. Warren (London, 1911), I, pp. 43-44. And "To us, also, thy sinful servants, who hope in the multitude of thy mercies, vouchsafe to grant some part and fellowship with thy holy apostles and martyrs . . . with all thy saints, into whose company do thou admit us, we beseech thee, not weighing our merits, but pardoning our offences." (*Missal* I, p. 48). For Margery's liturgical meditation, see Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa, *Margery Kempe's Meditations: The Context of Medieval Devotional Literatures, Liturgy and Iconography* (Cardiff, 2007), pp. 111-19.

[92] *Boke*, III. 21, fol. 77r.

[93] Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa, "Mechtild of Hackeborn as Spiritual Authority: The Middle English Translation of the *Liber Specialis Gratiae*," in *The Medieval Translator, Traduire au Moyen Âge*, ed. Pieter De Leemans and Michèle Goyens (Turnhout, 2017), pp. 175-83.

[94] Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent* (Berkeley, CA, 1997), pp. 137-41, figure 85, plate 12.

vision and this drawing convey that Christ enters the house of the heart at the moment when Mechthild receives Christ eucharistically. In the same way, Margery, in receiving the Communion, imagines her soul (that is to say, her heart) so large and wide to welcome in the Lord, in a moment of eucharistic union.[95]

There are also strong areas of comparison when it comes to the treatment of the Trinity in both texts when it, too, takes up residence in the devotee's heart upon the reception of the Eucharist in both Mechthild and Margery's books. For example, following the spiritual conversation on Communion just discussed, there follows perhaps one of the most memorable episodes in the *Book* when Margery envisions the Trinity sitting on three cushions in the chamber of her soul. In Christ's words:

> "[Þ]u haddist a cuschyn of gold, an-oþer of red veluet, þe thryd of white sylke in thy sowle. And þu thynkist þat my Fadyr sittyth on þe cuschyn of golde, for to hym is a-propyrd myght & power. And þu thynkist þat I þe Secunde Persone, þi loue & þi joy, sytte on þe red cuschyn of veluet, for on me is al þi thowte be-cawse I bowt þe so der . . . in þi sowle þat I am worthy to syttyn on a red cuschyn in rememorawns of þe red blood þat I schad for þe. Mor-ouyr þu þinkist þat þe Holy Gost sittyth on a white cuschyn, for þu thynkist þat he is ful of lofe & clennesse . . . for he is ȝeuar of alle holy thowtys & chastite."[96]

Here, the visionary meditation signals that the Holy Trinity resides, as if in state, within Margery's own soul, recapitulating the earlier reassurance of Christ in Chapter 77 that God is sitting in her heart.[97] Such a memorable vision of God sitting in the soul emerges also in Mechthild's *Boke*, again in Part V. Here, Mechthild is described as "a full restefull and a full deliciouse trone of God for her cler and clene soule." When she gives instructions to those who ask for advice, she is filled with God's grace "as if she had spoken of þe mowth of God, sittyng in her."[98]

Most significantly in this same context, both women also recount detailed first-person instructions from Christ about how they should worship the Trinity, both bearing overtones, too, of the Athanasian Creed, *Quicumque vult*. Continuing his final monologue, Christ instructs Margery thus:

> "[Þ]u thynkyst þu maist not worschepyn þe Fadyr but þu worschep þe Sone, ne þu may not worschep þe Sone but þu worschep þe Holy Gost . . . þu thynkyst þat eche of þe iij personys in Trinite hath þat oþer hath in her Godhed, & so þu beleuyst verily, dowtyr in thy sowle þat þer be iij dyuers personys & oo God in substawnce, & þat eche knowyth þat oþer knowyth, & ech may þat oþer may, & eche wil þat oþer wil. And, dowtyr, þis is a very feith & a ryght feyth, and þis feith hast þu only of my ȝyfte."[99]

It is through this teaching that Margery ultimately deepens her understanding of the Trinity, mirroring exactly the experiences of Mechthild where she, too, is subjected to a monologue by Christ on exactly the same theme:

> fyrst þou shalt worship and prayse þe myȝt of þe fader which ys allmyghty and with þe which myght he worchith in þe sone, and the holy goost after hys wyll, which myȝt no creatur may

[95] For a detailed analysis of the heart-soul metaphoric alliance in the Middle Ages, see Eric Jager, *The Book of the Heart* (Chicago, 2000).

[96] Kempe, *Book* 1.86: 210-11.

[97] Kempe, *Book*, 1. 77: 184. The visual image echoes Julian of Norwich's vision of the Trinity: *Revelation of Love*, in *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love*, ed. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (Turnhout, 2006), chap. 51, p. 81.

[98] *Boke*, V. 22, fol. 100r.

[99] Kempe, *Book*, 1.86: 211.

> fully comprehend in heven ne in erth. Also in þe same maner þou shalt worship þe wysdome of þe sonne which may nouȝt be enserchid be mannys wytte, which wysdome the sone fully comownyth with þe fader and þe holi gost after hys wyll. And þis wysdome may no creatur fully talke. Also after þat þou shalt worship þe benygnyte of þe holy gost, which benignyte þe holy goost plentevouslye comownyth with þe fader and þe sone after his wylle, which benignyte he partith nouȝt fully to no creatur.[100]

Christ's exposition on the Trinity subtly links itself with the sacrament of the Eucharist again, in both cases evoking the concluding doxology of the Canon of the Mass that celebrates the glory of God and envisions the grace of the Trinity uniting the human soul with God through the Eucharist: "Through + him, and with + him, and in + him, all honour and glory are unto thee, God the Father al + mighty, in the unity of the Holy + Ghost."[101] No reader familiar with both texts could miss the similarities between Mechthild's and Margery's discourses on the Trinity here. Indeed, such similarities – whether consciously or unconsciously – recast her meditational/visionary experience within the context of Mechthildian spirituality.

But, there are further compelling resonances, not the least in terms of the ways both women toy with the possibility of universal salvation for humankind in their interactions with God and establish themselves as direct mediators for the release of souls suffering in purgatory via their tears, prayers and intercessions. Chapter 28 of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, for example, recounts how, on her pilgrimage to Jerusalem that began in 1313, Margery undertakes a twenty-four-hour vigil in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and a tour along the *Via Dolorosa*, episodes which sharpen her perception of the living and ubiquitous presence of the Passion. During the procession Margery desires to identify herself with Christ so intensely that when she comes up on to Mount Calvary, she experiences her first crying fit and engages in "wrestyng hir body on euery syde, spredyng hir armys a-brode as ȝyf sche xulde a deyd".[102] This moment marks a turning-point in Margery's meditational experience, with all her preceding practice of Passion meditation seeming to culminate in it, and with these fits of crying and roaring lasting for many years afterwards.[103] Such experiences on this pilgrimage create an indelible memory which Margery is then able to channel into her later meditations, as deep recollection of the holy sites in Jerusalem triggers and accelerates her affective responses to the Passion. Indeed, such memories and reenactments are emblematically submerged in one meditation undertaken during the Good Friday liturgy, recorded in Chapter 57, the setting of which reanimates her first such response experienced in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre:

> þe mende of owr Ladijs sorwys whech sche suffryd whan sche behelde hys precyows body hangyng on þe Crosse & sithyn berijd be-for hir syght sodeynly ocupijd þe hert of þis creatur, drawyng hir mende al holy in-to þe Passyon of owr Lord Crist Ihesu, whom sche behelde wyth hir gostly eye in þe syght of hir sowle as verily as þei sche had seyn hys precyows body betyn,

[100] *Boke*, III. 3, fol. 70v.

[101] *Missal* I, p. 48. Noticeably, in Mechthild's vision which occurs during Mass, she says to Christ: "Y seke nouȝt þerof and I wyll noon oþer thing but þat þis day þou be praysyd and worshipped *of þysilf, and in thysilf, and be thysilf*, as holy and as perfytly as ever þou mayst be commendid, praysyd, and worshipped of all creatures in heven and in erth" (*Boke*, II. 2, fol. 58r, our emphasis). As Barbara Newman comments on this passage: "This Trinitarian formula echoes the final prayer of the Canon of the Mass" (Newman, *Book*, p. 262, n. 4).

[102] Kempe, *Book*, 1.28: 70.

[103] See Kempe, *Book*, 1.28: 68. Allen notes that an element of her beginning to "cry" on Calvary was the memory of the dying cry of the Saviour. See Kempe, *Book*, p. 290, n. 68/12 sq. See also *Nicholas Love's Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ: A Critical Edition Based on Cambridge University Library Additional MSS 6578 and 6686*, ed. Michael Sargent (New York, 1992), p. 180, lines 28-33. Such crying and bodily contortion as a response to the Passion forms part of both an *imitatio Christi* and *imitatio Mariae* shown by a number of other female mystics, not the least Marie d'Oignies, whose work, as we have seen, helped testify to the validity of Margery's own excessive weeping for the priest recording her experiences: see Kempe, *Book*, 1.62: 152-53. Such bodily reactions are also recorded in Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, 1991).

> scorgyd, & crucifyed wyth hir bodily eye, whech syght & gostly beheldyng wrowt be grace so feruently in hir mende, wowndyng hir wyth pite & compassyon þat sche sobbyd . . . spredyng hir armys a-brood, seyd wyth lowde voys, "I dey, I dey" . . . hir labowr was so greet. Þan wex sche al blew as it had ben leed & swet ful sor.[104]

Here, Margery's memory of her affective responses seems to replicate her subsequent devotion so intensely that she again spreads her arms and cries out uncontrollably, to the extent that, as she tells us, "wex sche al blew as it had ben leed."[105] Whilst scholarly discussions of these bodily responses are many and diverse, what has been entirely overlooked is how closely they follow similar episodes within Mechthild's devotional practices, as recounted in the hagiographical section of her text, again in Part V:

> Also whanne she sang in þe queer she ȝave so all her entent and besynes to God with all her myȝtes + 'as' if she hadde brenned all hoole in love, in so moch þat she wyst not what she did and shewyd somtyme full mervelouse countenaunce in her poort as in spredyng abrode her + hondes and somtyme she lifte hem up an hiȝe.[106]

Similarly, the text describes the sudden change of colour in Mecthhild's face brought about by her ecstasies, where "her face and her handes semyd of colour chaunged in maner of a sodeyne crabbe which chaungith þe colour whanne it is sode or bake" and where "she was allmoost lifles to syȝt."[107] Although the motif of figures throwing up their arms in despair was widely diffused in thirteenth century art,[108] Mechthild's treatment is not merely borrowed from these types of visual images. Rather, these highly affective responses to the Passion can be contextualised within the culture of holy tears and *imitatio Christi*. In Part 1, Chapter 32, for example, Christ says to Mechthild: "what man or woman heeldith oute teerys for devocion of my passyon, + y wyll receyve h 'e'm as thouȝ he had suffryd passion bodely for me,"[109] and he proceeds to list six ways of achieving the devotion of tears. In the same way, Mechthild's *Vita*, recorded at the end of Book V, recounts how she receives a gift of tears at the thought of Christ's passion: "A wounder affection she hadde in thinkyng, in hering, and in spekyng of Cristes passion in so moch þat full selde she myȝt speke þerof withouten teeris."[110]

There are very many examples in Margery's book, of course, of her similarly drawing upon the trope of holy women's redemptive tears to animate her awareness that they were a particularly efficacious intervention for the salvation of souls. For example:

> sche sobbyd, roryd, & cryed . . . And þe mor sche besijd hir to kepyn hir fro criyng, þe lowdar sche cryed, *for it was not in hir powyr to take it ne euyn* it but a God wolde send it.[111]

In Chapter 57, too, Margery's weeping is directed at begging mercy for the souls in purgatory, along with the souls of Jews, Saracens and all false heretics. This episode forms part of a series of charitable intercessory prayers to God that all people, whoever they are and whatever they have done, should be turned to the faith of Holy Church. Indeed, Margery is clearly hard-placed to believe that God would turn away any contrite soul because of its former sinfulness – and to that end she prays to become "a welle of teerys" to prompt compassion for the suffering and the damned.[112] The well of tears is also a recurrent image in Mechthild's work, associated this time

[104] Kempe, *Book*, 1.57: 139-40.
[105] Kempe, *Book*, 1.57: 140.
[106] *Boke*, V. 22, fol. 99v.
[107] *Boke*, V. 22, fol. 99v.
[108] Moshe Barasch, *Gestures of Despair in Medieval and Early Renaissance Art* (New York, 1976).
[109] *Boke*, I. 32, fol. 29v.
[110] *Boke*, V. 20, fol. 99v.
[111] Kempe, *Book*, 1.57: 140 (our emphasis). See also *Book*, 1.7: 19-20; and *Book*, 1.39: 94-96, for example.

with the purgative properties of Christ's wound and the water flowing from his sacred heart, where "all þo þat desyred gostelye regeneracion"[113] may be washed clean.

In chapters 59 and 64 and 65 of the *Booke* Margery returns concertedly to the theme of purgatory, first recording the pain she felt when she received visions of the damned, and then articulating her anger with God and her disbelief that he could ever allow anybody to be subject to such damnation. There follows protracted, and sometimes contentious, argumentation, with Christ eventually persuading Margery that he does not wish to impose divine vengeance upon anyone, reassuring her that "þer is no man dampnyd but he þat is wel worthy to be dampnyd & þu xalt holdyn þe wel plesyd wyth alle my werkys."[114] He also assures Margery of her own role as successful intercessor as a result of her weeping, prayer and concerted love for him, telling her: "þou wepist so euery day for mercy þat I must nedys grawnt it."[115] In the same way, Mechthild´s text also records visions of hell and purgatory and her own questioning of God about the damnation of sinners such as Samson, Solomon and Trajan, most protractedly in Book V. Here, God's response to her questioning on the salvation of sinners is equally gnomic as he explains to her his rather vague reasons. In the case of Samson, for example, he tells her: "y will þat it be unknowe of men what mercy hath do with þe soule of Salomon þat fleisly synnes mowe be þe more eschewyd of men."[116] Later we hear the full extent of how Mechthild's tearful and prayerful intercessions have released other souls from purgatory: "Whanne þis holy mayde had seid þis preyer with such entencion, she sey a grete multitude of soules ȝeld thankyng to God with a full grete gladnes for her delyveraunce."[117] Indeed, earlier in her book, these souls have been fully enumerated as Christ gives each sister, as a token of friendship, "a thousand soules which he shulde delyver from all boundys of synne for her prayers and sen hem to þe hye kyngdome of hevyn."[118] Such enumeration is echoed by Christ in Margery's own account, when he assures her: "many hundryd thowsand sowlys schal be sauyd be þi prayers."[119] Although, as Newman has shown, the efficacy of holy women's intercessory prayer for purgatorial relief of suffering souls was a common trope within their writings and *Vitae*,[120] nevertheless, the specific correlations between Mechthild's and Margery's recorded intercessions, all interspersed with direct speech, interrogation and conversation with Christ, are highly suggestive of more direct influence – sometimes even at the level of replicated image and vocabulary.

This suggestion is strengthened considerably when we consider where the chapters devoted to the purgatorial narratives are placed in Margery's book. While chapters 57, 59, and 64 concern themselves with Margery's intercessions via prayer, tears and affective bodily responses on behalf of souls suffering in purgatory, they are interspersed by chapters 58, 61, and 62 that concern themselves with the reading of named and unnamed devotional works, including the "swech oþer" texts mentioned above. What we are positing, therefore, is that there is a direct, albeit unstated, link between the "swech oþer" books enumerated in chapters 58, 61 and 62 and the Mechthildian elements that seem to have been appropriated into Margery's narrative in the intervening chapters: the one sets off use of the other, so to speak. For Anna Harrison, Mechthild's book, as a collaborative venture between an at first reluctant Mechthild and at least two other nuns at Helfta, reflects what she terms "a protracted tangle of talk" between the women about the sources that went into its production.[121] Such a "tangle of talk" – another version, perhaps, of Hope Emily Allen's "flotsam and jetsam" analogy – probably best reflects the way in which Margery's orally-received intertextual materials – including Mechthild's writing – were assimilated into her book. By far the greatest

[112] Kempe, *Book*, 1.57: 139-42.
[113] *Boke*, I. 51, fol. 39r.
[114] Kempe, *Book*, 1.64: 159.
[115] Kempe, *Book*, 1.64: 158.
[116] *Boke*, V. 8, fol. 94v.
[117] *Boke*, V. 10, fol. 95v.
[118] *Boke*, I. 69, fol. 49r.
[119] Kempe, *Book*, 1.7: 20.
[120] See Newman's essay, "On the Threshold of the Dead: Purgatory, Hell, and Religious Women," in *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia, PA, 1995), pp. 108-36.
[121] Anna Harrison, "'Oh! What Treasure is in This Book?' Writing, Reading, and Community at the Monastery of Helfta," *Viator* 35.1 (2008): 75-106 (p. 94).

amount of influence, moreover, appears to have been exerted by Part V of Mechthild's text – in fact, the very same part that, as McAvoy has argued at some length elsewhere, had a discernible influence upon the anonymous writer of the early fifteenth-century *A Revelation of Purgatory*.[122] This text also revolves around the visions of purgatory and successful intercessory intervention of an enclosed holy woman. Indeed, with Margery having been directly exposed to works like Mechthild's by her priest from 1413 to 1421, or by her daughter-in-law some years afterwards in her old age, and with *A Revelation of Purgatory* dating itself as written in 1422, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that Book V of Mechthild's text was circulating independently – and perhaps even anonymously – from the rest of the work and that its special appeal to women like the Winchester visionary and Margery Kempe led to its absorption into aspects of their own writing without direct citation.[123] Here, Nicholas Royle's view on the subtle dynamics of intertextual appropriation is helpful for understanding the type of process we are arguing for here, within which the source materials can become "textual phantoms which do not necessarily have the solidity or objectivity of a quotation, an intertext or explicit, acknowledged presence and which, in fact, do not come to rest anywhere." As Royle pointedly adds: "Phantom texts are fleeting, continually moving on, leading us away," a concept that chimes perfectly with Hope Emily Allen's "flotsam and jetsam" and the "tangle of talk" that Anna Harrison sees as characterizing the productive environment of the Helfta writings.[124]

By way of conclusion, therefore, we would like to posit a complex entanglement of influence, with Mechthild's writing in its variety of forms – as textual phantom, lexical inspiration and discursive rumination – having left its mark upon Margery's spirituality and her writing. Indeed, given the evidence presented here, it not only speaks to the inconceivability of Mechthild's *Boke* having remained unknown to Margery and her contemporaries but also to the certainty of Mechthild as a central – albeit long overlooked – figure within the devotional canon of fifteenth-century England.

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[122] McAvoy, "'O der lady'."

[123] We contend also that the entire *Boke*, whose lengthy Part One contains primarily liturgical visions more relevant to the cloister than to lay consumption, would have been too voluminous to be circulated easily and speedily in the way that other material from the text seems to have been.

[124] Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (London, 2003), p. 280.

The Penitential Wilderness and the Holy Land:
Robert Thornton reads *Sir Isumbras* and Northern *Octavian* devotionally

Yuki Sugiyama

Abstract

Late medieval Christian devotion to the Holy Land is said to be marked by a "penance-inflected crusade rhetoric," in Suzanne M. Yeager's words, the idea that the faithful could recover Jerusalem through penance, both in the forms of personal spiritual cleansing and the social reform. I will argue that the popular topos of the wilderness facilitates such a virtual reclaiming of the Holy Land, taking, as a case study, the context of one of the two surviving manuscripts compiled by the fifteenth-century Yorkshire gentleman, Robert Thornton (c.1397–c.1465), Lincoln Cathedral Library, MS 91. The manuscript's distinctive versions of the two Middle English romances, *Sir Isumbras* and Northern *Octavian*, reveal that not only overtly devotional writings but also romance texts could have offered Thornton a mental stage, where he would have pursued his own spiritual enlightenment, by imagining the protagonists' penitential journey in a blighted land adjacent, or leading, to Jerusalem.

The fall of Acre in 1291, so Christopher Tyerman posits, triggered an efflorescence of what he calls "recovery literature,"—"books, pamphlets and memoranda concerned with the crusade, the restoration of Jerusalem and the advance of the Turks."[1] Taking Tyerman as his starting point, Robert Rouse proposes that a number of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Middle English romances function as "recovery literature" by inviting their audiences to conjure up "fantasies of the victorious restitution of Eastern lands to Christian control."[2] The practice of recovering Jerusalem did, of course, neither start with the fall of Acre nor was it limited to political pamphlets, memoranda, and vernacular romances. Jerusalem was reproduced in numerous ways throughout the Middle Ages since travel to the Holy Land was often neither possible nor fitting for many laypeople as well as enclosed religious. Monastic movements, for instance, from the eleventh century onwards, sought to replace the earthly Jerusalem not just with a physical monastery but with the spiritual practices within it; here, Jerusalem was invoked in both monastic architecture and rules.[3] Likewise, Jerusalem liturgies developed firstly as a way to seek God for help in fighting crusades and later as an occasion for priests to ask for spiritual reform from their congregation.[4] Additionally, the Holy Sepulchre was replicated across Europe in church architecture, including in Easter Sepulchre shrines and round churches; such reproduced Holy Sepulchres allowed the viewer to remember and

[1] Christopher Tyerman, *God's War: A New History of the Crusades* (London, 2006), p. 827.

[2] Robert Rouse, "Romance and Crusade in Late Medieval England," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the Crusades*, ed. Anthony Bale (Cambridge, 2019), pp. 217–31 (p. 218).

[3] The enclosed monastic space was regarded as one of the most secure places for a Christian to proceed to the celestial Jerusalem. See Suzanne M. Yeager, "The Earthly and Heavenly Jerusalem," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the Crusades*, pp. 121–35 (pp. 128–29).

[4] According to Cecilia M. Gaposchkin, liturgical prayers, masses, and alms were sought both in Outremer and at home to support the crusades. It was thought that the sinful states of all Christians had invited God's wrath, which had resulted in Christendom's loss of the earthly Jerusalem. Through equating the city to the human soul, both the victory of the crusade and personal salvation were pursued by communal repentance at liturgical celebrations. See Cecilia M. Gaposchkin, *Invisible Weapons: Liturgy and the Making of Crusade Ideology* (Ithaca, NY, 2017).

internalise the events of sacred history.[5]

What characterises Christian devotion to the Holy Land in the late medieval period, especially from the fall of Acre onwards, is an increasing obsession with sin. The preoccupation with penance that duly followed simultaneously influenced how one might spiritually recover Jerusalem. The considerable loss of life, relics, and territory during the Third Crusade (1187–1192) was regarded as a divine punishment brought upon contemporary sinful Christians. As a result, a "penance-inflected crusade rhetoric," in Suzanne M. Yeager's words, developed under ecclesiastical guidance,[6] based ultimately on biblical conceptions of the heavenly Jerusalem alongside the earthly one.[7] This rhetoric, in conjunction with the allegorical interpretation of the earthly city as a Christian soul, allowed the faithful to reclaim the Holy Land through penance, both in the forms of personal spiritual cleansing and of the social reform of Christian communities. While Suzanne Conklin Akbari argues that this spiritual recovering of Jerusalem, "the pilgrimage of the soul," in her words, became increasingly prominent by the time of the Reformation,[8] both forms of pilgrimage, spiritual and bodily alike, were regarded as beneficial throughout the later medieval period.[9] Indulgences were thus granted to both crusaders and pilgrims who strove to regain or visit Jerusalem either physically or spiritually. In both cases, travel to the Holy Land was regarded as a penitential act and could contribute to the return of the individual crusader/pilgrim and of all of Christendom to God's good grace. If an individual sinner virtually made a penitential journey to approach salvation, i.e., the heavenly Jerusalem, such spiritual cleansing through penance could, it was understood, eventually make the whole Christian community worthy of the city again.[10] Furthermore, popular affective devotion to the humanity of Christ worked to bring a devotee particularly close to holy places. In an affective virtual pilgrimage, key sites which witnessed the events of sacred history were traced through the practitioner's *imitatio Christi* and *imitatio Mariae*.[11] Such Christocentric devotion was widespread among the laity by the fifteenth century so that some devout pilgrims claimed to have travelled to the real, physical Holy Land in their visions.[12] The Holy Land which witnessed Christ's

[5] Bianca Kühnel, "Virtual Pilgrimages to Real Places: The Holy Landscapes," in *Imagining Jerusalem in the Medieval West*, ed. Lucy Donkin et al., Proceedings of the British Academy, 175 (Oxford, 2012), pp. 243–64. According to Kühnel, there were two types of the so-called Calvary, i.e., the reproduction of the sites of Christ's passion, burial, and resurrection: one is integrated into church architecture in the forms of Easter Sepulchre and round churches while the other is life-sized reproductions of events of sacred history. For instance, medieval Bologna had an artificial mound and a valley in imitation of the Mount of Olives and the Valley of Jehoshaphat.

[6] Suzanne M. Yeager, *Jerusalem in Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 8.

[7] The roots of the "Earthly and Heavenly binary" are found in the notion that life in this world is a period of exile or captivity, in which one waits to enter the heavenly homeland, *patria*. This idea is expressed both in the Old and New Testaments. Medieval Christians believed that the heavenly Jerusalem would replace the earthly parallel at the Last Judgement, as shown in Revelation 21–22. See Yeager, "The Earthly and Heavenly Jerusalem," pp. 122–25 (p. 122).

[8] It should be emphasised that this figurative spiritual pilgrimage itself was recommended throughout the Middle Ages as Augustine and his disciple, Orosius, urged their readers to do it. See Suzanne Conklin Akbari, *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100–1450* (Ithaca, NY, 2012), pp. 19, 119, 284.

[9] There were many contemporary criticisms against the literal travels to shrines which consecrated relics and saints. The negative views towards the real pilgrimage were no doubt shared among the readers of Middle English narratives, including the popular romance, Chaucerian writings, and William Langland's *Piers Plowman*. Those who were hostile to the practice of the bodily pilgrimage often, instead, recommended "the pilgrimage of the soul," which is also defined by Dee Dyas as "life pilgrimage," which consists of "a detachment from worldly values, a commitment to moral obedience and a heartfelt desire to reach the heavenly homeland." See Dee Dyas, *Pilgrimage in Medieval English Literature, 700–1500* (Woodbridge, 2001), pp. 3–4.

[10] Both crusade and pilgrimage were indirectly profitable to the entire Christian community as such penitential acts augmented the treasury of merits, which was distributed to members of the Church by the pope, the steward of the earthly Christian community. See Robert W. Shaffern, "The Medieval Theology of Indulgences," in *Promissory Notes on the Treasury of Merits*, ed. R. N. Swanson (Leiden, 2006), pp. 11–36.

[11] Kathryn M. Rudy, *Virtual Pilgrimages in the Covent: Imagining Jerusalem in the Late Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 2011), pp. 35–38.

[12] For example, Bridget of Sweden and Margery Kempe, who visited the physical Jerusalem as pilgrims, had the visions of Christ's Passion there. Their visions were based on devotional writings, liturgical dramas, and sermons, on which they had often relied to meditate upon Christ's life before travelling to the actual sites. See Ora Limor, "Jerusalem," in *Europe: A Literary History, 1348–1418*, ed. David Wallace (Oxford, 2016), pp. 217–43 (pp. 231–22);

life, death, and resurrection, was, in other words, sought for and recovered through both real and virtual penitential journeying.

In this paper, I will argue that in such a virtual reclaiming of the Holy Land by the fifteenth-century English reader, the popular topos of a penitential wilderness often plays a fundamental role. As a case study, I will examine the context of one of the two surviving manuscripts compiled by the fifteenth-century Yorkshire gentleman, Robert Thornton (c.1397–c.1465), Lincoln Cathedral Library, MS 91.[13] The texts I discuss are the manuscript's distinctive versions of *Sir Isumbras* and so-called Northern *Octavian*. Although Thornton copied many more overtly devotional writings, such as Passion narratives, lyric prayers, and a substantial body of the English work of the mystic and hermit Richard Rolle (1305/10–1349), my interest is in his romances. This is because, as will become clear, these romance texts conjure up precisely the kind of penitential wilderness that devotional texts, elsewhere in his manuscript, repeatedly invited Thornton to imagine. My exploration of the narrative geography of these romances will clarify how readily a symbolic, allegorical dimension slips into the ostensibly secular, real-world spaces of romance, in order, I suggest, to prompt and, in turn, to facilitate readers' devotional performance. In what follows, I will first introduce Robert Thornton and his particular interest in penance, in the context of the lively social networks of late medieval Yorkshire, where lay and religious readers shared devotional texts and practices. I then examine, briefly, Thornton's admiration for Richard Rolle, since the Rollean model of eremitism was regarded, among literate late medieval Yorkshire men and women, to embody the ideal of devotional reading as well as of an affective longing for Christ. Here, I focus on the metaphorical wilderness in Rolle's *Oleum effusum nomen tuum* (the Middle English translation of the beginning of Rolle's *Super Canticum Canticorum*), as the concept of the wilderness in it is tightly bound up with Rolle's ideas of penance and the promise of salvation through the humanity of Christ. Finally, I turn to the narrative geography of *Sir Isumbras* and to that of the first third of Northern *Octavian*, to explore how the topos of the wilderness contributes to a conflation of the narrative geography of the Holy Land with allegorical landscapes. As I will argue, the wilderness which these romances offer Thornton functions as a mental stage, a jumping-off point. Thornton would have been able to pursue his own spiritual enlightenment from it, by imagining for himself the protagonists' penitential journey in a blighted land adjacent, or leading, to Jerusalem.

Robert Thornton and late medieval Yorkshire religiosity

Robert Thornton was a fifteenth-century Yorkshire gentleman, famous principally for having compiled, across two manuscripts, the second-largest surviving collection of Middle English romances. These manuscripts are Lincoln Cathedral Library, MS 91 (the so-called Lincoln Thornton MS) and London, British Library, Additional MS 31042 (the so-called London Thornton MS). Although Thornton's two vast manuscripts are often singled out as one of the most important repositories of Middle English romances, they are also jammed packed with many other kinds of texts, including Passion narratives (such as the Pseudo-Bonaventuran *Privity of the Passion* and the *Northern Passion*), devotional lyrics, religious guidebooks, catechetical works, prayers, and quasi-liturgical writings. Religious guidebooks, including the *Mirror of Saint Edmund*, the *Abbey of the*

Jesse Njus, "Margery Kempe and the Spectatorship of Medieval Drama," *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 38 (2013): 123–51.

[13] Robert Thornton, the fifteenth-century gentleman, is a suitable example of the readership of the so-called English popular romances. While the romance itself generally proposes cultural, social, and religious principles and ideologies which were traditionally associated with aristocracy, some of the so-called "popular romances" were often sought by those who wished to "mark them[selves] off as part of the aristocracy," according to Michael Johnston. The two romances discussed here, *Octavian* and *Sir Isumbras*, are classified into what Johnston calls the "gentry romance," which appeals and responds to the gentry's socio-economic concerns. See Michael Johnston, *Romance and the Gentry in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 2014), p. 9.

Holy Ghost, and Walter Hilton's *Epistle of the Mixed Life*, are noteworthy among the manuscript's contents, for they suggest that Thornton sought to live a mixed life, across lay and religious boundaries. While the *Mirror of Saint Edmund* was originally written for an enclosed religious, the *Abbey of the Holy Ghost* encourages lay readers to build an allegorical nunnery in their conscience in order to help them emulate religious practice and to introduce some aspects of monastic discipline into their active lives. Similarly, Hilton, in the *Epistle of the Mixed Life*, advises the addressee, a lay lord who has both religious leanings and secular responsibilities, to carefully separate his duties in his active life from his private spiritual pursuits. Thornton likely understood himself to be just like Hilton's addressee, for he seems to have copied his two manuscripts, especially the writings related to Christ's life and Passion, in response to Hilton's advice which foregrounds meditation on Christ's humanity as the safest recourse for a layman's spiritual pursuits.[14] Thornton, we know, was, for much of the fifteenth century, lord of the manor at East Newton, in the wapentake of Ryedale, in the North Riding of Yorkshire. Evidence suggests that he engaged energetically in both family and communal devotion at Stonegrave Minster, his parish church, as well as in the family chapel of his manor house.[15] Thornton, no doubt, given the contents of his manuscripts, would also have made the time for private, meditative reading amid his busy worldly responsibilities. Thornton's private spiritual pursuits were not, however, necessarily solitary. Rather, Thornton seems to have had at least one clerical advisor, who would have provided him with a number of his religious texts alongside spiritual guidance.[16] The content of the manuscripts which Thornton compiled attests to his keen spiritual ambition to lead a mixed life in collaboration with his spiritual advisor(s).

Many of the texts found in Thornton's manuscripts testify to a wide, lively network of textual circulation, among the landed gentry and possibly too a civic elite (i.e., among both rural and urban communities) and members of religious houses, in his locality. As Rosalind Field posits, romances could readily have been sourced from a member of one of the local aristocratic families, like Thornton's friends and neighbours, the Pickerings of Oswaldkirk.[17] Thornton's collection of religious and devotional writings points to a wider book-lending network in which material produced for female religious was likewise shared by the secular clergy as well as lay women and men. As George R. Keiser argues, the Benedictine Priory of Nun Monkton possibly provided Thornton with key religious writings, for Richard Pickering's sister was a nun there.[18] Indeed, we know that elsewhere it was quite common for monastic discipline and religious writings to be shared among female religious and local gentlewomen, and subsequently to be disseminated to the wider lay society.[19] Since female religious houses in Yorkshire were generally poor, from their foundation to their surrender, they were inevitably more dependent on—and so more in communication

[14] George R. Keiser, "Robert Thornton: Gentleman, Reader and Scribe," in *Robert Thornton and His Books: Essays on the Lincoln and London Thornton Manuscripts*, ed. Susanna Fein and Michael Johnston (Woodbridge,2014), pp. 67–108 (p. 103). Also see Nicole R. Rice, *Lay Piety and Religious Discipline in Middle English Literature* (Cambridge, 2009).

[15] As Keiser reveals, the Thorntons had been allowed to celebrate masses and other services at the chapel erected at East Newton since 1398, when Robert Thornton's father was the lord of the manor. See George R. Keiser, "More Light on the Life and Milieu of Robert Thornton," *Studies in Bibliography* 36 (1983): 111–19 (pp. 111–12).

[16] Rob Lutton, "'…But Have You Read This?': Dialogicity in Robert Thornton's Holy Name Devotions," *English* 67. 257 (2018): 119–40 (p. 123).

[17] Rosalind Field and Dav Smith, "Afterword: Robert Thornton Country," in *Robert Thornton and His Books*, pp. 257–72 (pp. 261–62).

[18] Thornton was not only personally close enough to be one of the executors of Richard Pickering's will but he was also regarded as a valued enough friend to deserve the sharing books. Keiser finds that Thornton borrowed his copy of the *Liber de Diversis Medicinis* from someone of the Pickerings or their parish priest. If their connection with Nun Monkton enabled Richard or others to obtain religious texts, there is no reason to think that he did not pass them on to Thornton. See Keiser, "More Light," pp. 114–19; George R. Keiser, "Robert Thornton's *Liber de Diversis Medicinis*: Text, Vocabulary, and Scribal Confusion," in *Rethinking Middle English: Linguistic and Literary Approaches*, ed. Nikolaus Ritt and Herbert Schendel (Frankfurt, 2005), pp. 30–41. Also see Julie Orlemanski, "Thornton's Remedies and the Practices of Medical Reading," in *Robert Thornton and His Books*, pp. 235–56 (pp. 236–41).

[19] It should be emphasised that religious writings were not only disseminated by female religious houses to their local lay readers, but they were also often bequeathed to nunneries by nuns' close female friends and family

with—their local lay communities.[20] Books and devotional practices were regularly shared among enclosed female religious and the laity, as the result of this close mutual reliance, which included the nuns' highly valued intercessory prayers, their role in educating children, and the practice of nunneries providing space for lay burials.[21] Since some of the devotional writings contained in the Lincoln Thornton MS clearly address a female readership,[22] Thornton arguably participated in a devotional culture which was sustained by the active circulation of texts among well-to-do Yorkshire lay men and women, but also between the laity and, particularly, female religious.

Among the devotional practices that flourished in late medieval Yorkshire, "devotional performances," or "performative reading," in Jessica Brantley's words, are especially relevant to my examination of how Thornton experienced the texts he copied.[23] Brantley, in her analysis of the Carthusian miscellany, London, British Library, Additional MS 37049, proposes the idea of "imagetexts," what she describes as a collaborative relationship between text and image in the process in which readers decode the meanings of each text. According to Brantley, the Carthusian readers of Additional MS 37049 were so trained in devotional, meditative reading, that they could envision from the imagetexts the particular space in which the narrative unfolds and they could perform the textually required roles, such as that of a participant in an eremitic life in the desert or as an attendee of liturgical celebrations. Equally, Boyda Johnstone, investigating the interaction between the text and illustrations of the *Abbey of the Holy Ghost* in London, British Library, MS Stowe 39, which is thought to have been compiled for a Benedictine nunnery, draws an analogy between its reader's engagement with the manuscript and an audience's experiences of theatre.[24] According to Johnstone, a mentally-created convent, produced through reading/viewing the *Abbey of the Holy Ghost*, offered a kind of a stage on which readers/viewers were easily able to re-enact the religious life according to their own preferences. Brantley's and Johnstone's studies suggest that pious readers in late medieval Yorkshire, including laypeople, were often trained to construct religiously laden spaces like a desert and an abbey in their minds, and, indeed, both manuscripts which Brantley and Johnstone examine may well have circulated in the textual networks which connected the religious and the laity in the north of England, including Yorkshire. Additional MS 37049 was likely composed in a Yorkshire or Lincolnshire Carthusian monastery, possibly Axholme, Mount Grace or Kingston-upon-Hull, and its dialect is Northern.[25] MS Stowe 39 was also compiled in West or North Yorkshire.[26] Although both Additional MS 37049 and MS Stowe 39

members, as well as by local clerics. For the literary culture shaped through mutual communication and conversation between nuns and devout gentlewomen in late medieval England, see Felicity Riddy, "Women Talking about the Things of God: A Late Medieval Sub-Cult," in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150–1500*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 104–27; Mary Carpenter Erler, *Women, Reading, and Piety in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge, 2002). For a textual and more general interaction between the lay society and female religious houses in late medieval England, see Marilyn Oliva, *The Convent and the Community in Late Medieval England: Female Monasteries in the Diocese of Norwich, 1350–1540* (Woodbridge, 1998); Carole Hill, *Women and Religion in Late Medieval Norwich* (London, 2010).

[20] Janet Elizabeth Burton, *The Yorkshire Nunneries in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*, Borthwick Papers 56 (York, 1979).

[21] Claire Cross points out that the Yorkshire laity missed the local nunneries partly because of their role in children's education. See "Yorkshire Nunneries in the Early Tudor Period," in *The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England*, ed. James G. Clark (Woodbridge, 2002), pp. 145–54; and Claire Cross, "Monastic Learning and Libraries in Sixteenth-Century Yorkshire," *Studies in Church History* 8 (1991): 255–69. Michael Carter also reveals how much northern nuns' holiness and power in offering intercession were revered by their local societies. See Michael Carter, *The Art and Architecture of the Cistercians in Northern England, C.1300–1540*, Medieval Monastic Studies v. 3. (Turnhout, 2019), pp. 203–50.

[22] Keiser, "More Light," pp. 114–19.

[23] Jessica Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness: Private Devotion and Public Performance in Late Medieval England* (Chicago, IL, 2007).

[24] Boyda Johnstone, "Reading Images, Drawing Texts: Performing *The Abbey of the Holy Ghost* in British Library Stowe 39," in *Editing, Performance, Texts: New Practices in Medieval and Early Modern English Drama*, ed. Jacqueline Jenkins and Julie Sanders (New York, 2014), pp. 27–48.

[25] "Add. MS 37049," in *British Library, the Digitised Manuscript*, <http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_37049> [accessed 6 September 2020]

[26] *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* [*LALME*], ed. Angus Mclntosh, M. L. Samuels, and Michael Benskin, vol.1(Aberdeen, 1986), p. 116; Peter Kidd, "Codicological Clues to the Patronage of Stowe MS. 39: A Fifteenth-Century Illustrated Nun's Book in Middle English," *Electronic British Library Journal* (2009): 1–12 (p. 9).

seem to have been intended mainly for the use of religious houses (a Carthusian charterhouse and a Benedictine nunnery, respectively), they could also, readily, have been consulted by lay readers.[27] While it is unlikely that Thornton was as devotionally trained as his contemporary female religious, the geographical proximity of these manuscripts' places of origin to Thornton's locality suggests his belonging to a devotional culture not too far removed from that of the readers of these manuscripts. In other words, it is not too far-fetched to think that Thornton was also familiar with their mode of performative, devotional reading.

The fact that Thornton copied the *Abbey of the Holy Ghost*, the *Mirror of Saint Edmund*, and the *Northern Passion*, in conjunction with *John Gaytryge's Sermon* (or the *Lay Folk's Catechism*), further suggests the likelihood of his familiarity with such devotional performance. The main purpose of performative, devotional reading was to heighten the reader's concentration on the text at hand as well as to elicit religiously desirable feelings such as compunction, contrition, and compassion.[28] Mentally conceptualised spaces, including those of an abbey, a desert, and the holy sites that witness Christ's life, serve particularly well for this purpose. They enabled readers to easily follow the instructions offered by the text. The mentally created landscapes, moreover, are often claimed (by the texts themselves) as places for readers to cleanse their souls from sins, to feel compassion and contrition, and to do penance. For example, the narrator of the *Abbey of the Holy Ghost* emphasises that an allegorical abbey should be built beside a river of specifically penitential tears, such as the tearful river shed by Mary Magdalene, who, with contrition for her former way of life, flees into a desert.[29] The Lincoln Thornton MS's *Mirror of Saint Edmund* contains a short section which instructs how to conduct a Passion meditation. The devout reader's imitation of Christ (and often also of the Virgin) is effected by envisioning Christ's life from birth to death and resurrection. This active engagement in the meditation of Christ's life is presented as an efficacious way to stir compassion and the repentance of sins.[30] The idea that a meditative reading of the Passion was spiritually profitable is equally suggested by the *explicit* of the London Thornton MS's *Northern Passion*. Its narrator assures that "alle þat hase herde this passioune / Sall haue a thowsande ȝeris to pardone" (all who heard this passion / shall have a thousand years of pardon).[31] The devotional, performative envisioning of events in the Gospel narratives was, no doubt, understood by Thornton as meritorious for the remission of sins.

These texts thus suggest that Thornton's enactment of the requirements of devotional practice clearly resonated with his concerns with the way of doing penance properly. According to Phillipa Hardman, Thornton likely felt a need for penance, an essential component of "devotions and meditation in preparation for a good death."[32] Hardman's claim derives from the *incipit* added by Thornton to *John Gaytryge's Sermon*: "Here begynnes A sermon þat Dan Iohn Gaytryge made þe / whilke teches how scrifte es to be made & whareof and in scrifte / how many thyngeȝ solde be consederide" (Here begins a sermon which was delivered by John Gaytryge, which instructs how and why a confession should be made, as well as what things should be examined in a confession).[33] Middle English prologues often inform readers how the subsequent writings should

[27] Johnstone points out that some men's names are observable on the margin of folio 22r of MS Stowe 39, which suggests the circulation of the manuscript beyond the walls of a Benedictine nunnery, including among laymen. See Johnstone, "Reading Images, Drawing Texts," p. 34. Likewise, Brantley does not reject the possibility of a wide circulation of Additional MS 37049. See Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness*, p. 13.

[28] Allan Westphall, "The Passion in English: *Meditations on the Life of Christ* in Michigan State University Library MS 1," *Neophilologus* 97 (2013): 199–214 (p. 200).

[29] "The Abbey of the Holy Ghost," in *Religious Pieces in Prose and Verse*, ed. George G. Perry (London, 1867; repr. 1898), pp. 51–62.

[30] "The Mirror of S. Edmund," in *Yorkshire Writers: Richard Rolle of Hampole, an English Father of the Church, and His Followers*, ed. Carl Horstmann (London, 1895), pp. 219–40.

[31] Frances A. Foster ed., *The Northern Passion*, EETS, o.s., 145 (London, 1913; repr.1971), p. 248.

[32] Phillipa Hardman, "Domestic Learning and Teaching Investigating Evidence for the Role of 'Household Miscellanies' in Late-Medieval England," in *Women and Writing, c.1340–c.1650: The Domestication of Print Culture*, ed. Anne Lawrence-Mathers and Phillipa Hardman (Woodbridge, 2010), pp. 15–33 (pp. 22–24).

[33] Susanna Fein, "The Contents of Robert Thornton's Manuscripts," in *Robert Thornton and His Books*, pp. 13–66

be read, by suggesting, among other things, their genres or dominant themes.[34] Thornton's scribal gesture here thus reveals his special interest in "scrifte" (confession to a priest). The allegorical abbey in the *Abbey of the Holy Ghost* and the meditative enactments of Christ's life in the Holy Land would have been entwined with Thornton's desire to do proper penance. The mental spaces, which were created through the reading of these texts, would have served as a support for Thornton to perform his spiritual exercises.

Richard Rolle and eremitism as a model for contemplation and penance

If Thornton understood penance and meditation as ways to approach spiritual perfection (and subsequently, salvation), the teachings of Richard Rolle and the topos of the wilderness no doubt attracted his attention. Of course, the topos of the *locus horribilis* (the wild, horrible place), which abounds with wild beasts, thorns, and nettles, but which is fitting for penance and contemplation had already, by the fifteenth century, a long history. As John Howe explains, Scripture itself offers numerous examples of wildernesses, including Deuteronomy's account of Moses "in a desert land, in a place of horror, and of vast wilderness" (32.10); the ruined landscapes of Edom, where thorns and nettles grew up (Isaiah, 34.13–13); and Christ's forty-day withdrawal into a wilderness (Mark 1.13).[35] The figures of the desert fathers, who sought a sacred, solitary life of penance and contemplation in a wilderness, were also well known throughout the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, Rolle, the hermit of Hampole, embodied the eremitism of a late medieval English, in particular, Yorkshire thinking, as is clearly shown in the illustrations of some northern manuscripts which offer portraits of Rolle praying in his solitary hermitage.[36] Thornton's interest in Rolle and his eremitic ideal is well attested in his manuscripts, for Thornton copied a short but dense collection of works ascribed to the hermit in the Lincoln Thornton MS (on folios 192v–96v). In addition, Rolle was, of course, a local celebrity. Rolle was born in Thornton le Dale, near Pickering, in Thornton's immediate neighbourhood; and Thornton would likely have known the anecdote of Rolle's withdrawal into a hermitage in clothing borrowed from his sister.[37] As Elizabeth Freeman points out, late medieval Yorkshire, "a popular breeding ground for local cults," cultivated an admiration for Rolle in expectation of his canonisation, while the Cistercian Priory of Hampole became a pilgrimage site for admirers of Rolle from the late fourteenth century.[38] Thornton could hardly have remained unaware of the increasing veneration of Rolle, a local candidate for sainthood. In fact, the *incipit* to a prayer, which Thornton ascribed to Rolle, describes him as "Richerd hermet [. . .] þat es beried at hampulle" (Richard the hermit [. . .] who is buried at Hampole).[39] Thornton's

(p. 41).

[34] Andrew Galloway, "Middle English Prologues," in *Readings in Medieval Texts: Interpreting Old and Middle English Literature*, ed. David F. Johnson and Elaine M. Treharne (Oxford, 2005), pp. 288–305.

[35] John Howe, "Creating Symbolic Landscapes: Medieval Development of Sacred Space," in *Inventing Medieval Landscapes: Senses of Place in Western Europe*, ed. John Howe and Michael Wolfe (Gainesville, FL, 2002), pp. 208–23 (pp. 212–14).

[36] As Brantley points out, both Additional MS 37049 and MS Stowe 39 provide portraits of Rolle in a hermitage while the picture of Rolle, sitting in a solitary wood, appears as the illustration of the *Desert of Religion* in London, British Library MS Cotton Faustina B.VI. See Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness*, pp. 137–48. Bryan suggests the connection between Rolle and the northern wilderness. See Jennifer Bryan, *Looking Inward: Devotional Reading and the Private Self in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia, PA, 2008), pp. 15–19, 42–48.

[37] This anecdote was recorded in the *Officium* (the Latin Office for Rolle and the story of his life), which was prepared in expectation of the hermit's canonisation by someone related to the Priory of Hampole. Thornton could easily have heard this anecdote although the Lincoln Thornton MS does not record it.

[38] The Priory of Hampole (located between Wakefield and Doncaster in the West Riding of Yorkshire) was celebrated as the place where Rolle's body, writings, and the memory of his miracles were preserved. However, Freeman simultaneously highlights a lack of evidence for the generally accepted idea that Rolle wrote the *Form of Living* for Margaret Kirkby, who is assumed to have been a former nun of the priory and anchoress of East Layton, Richmond. See Elizabeth Freeman, "The Priory of Hampole and Its Literary Culture: English Religious Women and Books in the Age of Richard Rolle," *Parergon* 29 (2012): 1–25 (pp. 13, 15–16).

[39] Fein, "The Contents of Robert Thornton's Manuscripts," p. 36. Thornton's consistent adding of incipits naming Rolle to his collection of Rollean writings equally suggests his esteem for the hermit.

religious sensibility, which was unavoidably shaped by the devotional trends of his locality, would have encouraged him not only to associate the topos of the wilderness with "Richerd hermet" but also to understand the eremitic wilderness as a place suitable for penance and contemplation. Of course, there were limitations to the eremitic ideal. Many hermitages and anchorages were not actually located in remote, desolate lands but instead stood in populated areas. Many hermitages, for instance, were situated near bridges, and many anchorages had windows which faced onto streets, sometimes *en route* to busy urban market areas. Moreover, the Rollean model of solitary longing for Christ through love, penance, and contemplation was technically impossible for those living in religious communities no less than for the laity. Nonetheless, as Jennifer Bryan argues, solitaries, i.e., recluses and hermits, and in particular, Richard Rolle, represented "the ideal devotional reader," one who kept "a solitary self[,] collected and drawn into itself, communing only with God in its devotions."[40] The Rollean model of devotion, though inseparably tied with the eremitic ideal, was, crucially, regarded as something mentally imitable for unenclosed readers. This idea was widely shared among devout readers as a result of the proliferation of the "literature of eremiticism," including the writings of Rolle and Hilton, as well as vernacular rules like the *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God*.[41]

We can find in Thornton's collection of Rollean works an example of his writings which present the wilderness as something that can be internalised through the reader's penitential longing for Christ. The Middle English translation of the Latin *Oleum effusum nomen tuum* (also known as the *Encomium nominis Jesu*), the opening work of Thornton's Rollean collection, proposes a metaphorical wilderness as the place for contemplation and the discovery of Christ/salvation.[42] According to Denis Renevey, this Middle English work shows that devotion to the Holy Name was particularly associated with Rolle and was widespread in Yorkshire.[43] Thornton's selection of the Middle English *Oleum effusum nomen tuum* as the first item in his selection of Rollean works likely resulted from this local religious trend. However, it simultaneously conveys the importance of fleeing from a worldly, sinful society into a solitary, penitential life associated with a wilderness:

> I ȝede abowte be couaytyse of reches and I fande noghte Ihesu. [. . .] I satt in companyes of worldly myrthe and I fand noghte Ihesu. In all thire I soghte Ihesu bot I fand hym noghte, for he lett me wyete by his grace þat he ne es funden in þe lande of *softly lyfande*. Tharefore I turned by anothire waye, and I rane abowte be pouerte and I fande Ihesu […]. I satt by myn ane, fleande þe vanytes of þe worlde, and I fande Ihesu in *deserte* fastande, in þe monte anely prayande. I ran by payne [and] penaunce, and I fand Ihesu bownden, scourgede, gyffen galle to drynke, naylyde to þe crosse, hyngande in þe crosse and dyeand in þe crosse. Tharefore Ihesu es noghte funden in reches bot in pouerte, noghte in delytes bot in penance, noghte in wanton ioyeynge bot in bytter grettynge, noghte emange many bot in anellynes.
>
> (I went about out of greed for riches, and I did not find Jesus. [. . .] I sat in companies of worldly mirth and I did not find Jesus. In all of them, I sought Jesus, but I did not find Him; for He let me know by His grace that He is not found in *a life of luxury*. Therefore, I turned to another way, and I ran about in poverty and I found Jesus [. . .] I sat alone, fleeing the vanity of the world, and I found Jesus fasting in *a desert* and praying alone on a mountain. I ran painfully and penitentially, and found Jesus, who was bound, scourged, given gall to drink, nailed to the cross, hanging on the Cross, and dying on the Cross. Therefore, Jesus is not found in riches but in poverty, not in delights but in penance, not in extravagant joy but in bitter weeping, not among

[40] Bryan, *Looking Inward*, p. 13.

[41] Ibid., p. 16.

[42] The *Encomium nominis Jesu* circulated both on its own and as part of Rolle's *Super Canticum Canticorum*.

[43] Denis Renevey, "Northern Spirituality Travels South: Rolle's Middle English *Encomium oleum effusum nomen tuum* in Lincoln College Library, MS 91, and Dublin, Trinity College, MS 155," in *Revisiting the Medieval North of England: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Anita Auer, Denis Renevey, Camille Marshall and Tino Oudesluijs (Cardiff, 2019), pp. 13–24 (p. 14).

many but in loneliness.)[44]

If one wishes to find Jesus, so Rolle suggests, it is necessary to avoid "softly lyfande" (a life of luxury) and alone to seek for "payne" (pain, sufferings) and "penaunce." Notably, the "deserte" or "monte," to which Christ withdraws himself, here becomes a metaphorical conceptualisation of penance and contemplation. The topos of an eremitic wilderness does not signify the literal desert in Judaea but urges readers to interiorise a spiritual life of poverty, penance, and contemplation through the devotion to Jesus, the humanity of Christ. Moreover, the reader's internal eyes are invited to move seamlessly from the wilderness to the suffering Christ on the Cross. A desert and a solitary mountain are thus starting points for readers who seek to meditate on the Passion. The mentally conceptualised wilderness functioned as a support for the reader to envision and to partake in Rolle's search for Jesus. Given the likelihood that the practices of devotional reading, which I have already discussed, were shared by devout readers in Thornton's locality, the wilderness described here would have been just one such narrative space that allowed Thornton to seek salvation through the humanity of Christ.

Bearing in mind the connections between the eremitic wilderness, penance, and Christocentric devotion, I will now turn to the narrative landscapes of *Sir Isumbras* and to those of the first third of Northern *Octavian*, for these romance texts suggest that secular narrative space, just as much as overtly devotional narrative space, could have offered Thornton the mental stage, on which he could have enacted his penitential journey, leading no less to the heavenly Jerusalem and to Christ.

A virtual pilgrimage to the Holy Land through the wilderness: The conflation of secular and symbolic space in *Sir Isumbras* and Northern *Octavian*

Since Andrea Hopkins proposed that the Middle English "penitential romances" depict the quests of sinful heroes in pursuit of absolution,[45] *Sir Isumbras* has been considered as "the typical romance quest narrative [which] take[s] on the instrumental value of the penitential pilgrimage."[46] It has thus often been read as a romance oscillating between hagiography and romance or, alternatively, as a romance that expresses a longing for Jerusalem, echoing the devotional concerns of its contemporary English readers, their quests for self-betterment intricately linked to their devotion to the Holy Land.[47] On the other hand, similar devotional concerns expressed in the first third of Northern *Octavian* have rarely been discussed. Neither version of *Octavian*, i.e., Northern or Southern,

[44] "Oleum Effusum," in *Richard Rolle: Uncollected Prose and Verse with Related Northern Texts*, ed. Ralph Hanna, EETS, o.s., 329 (Oxford, 2007), pp. 2–9 (pp. 8–9). The translation is based on Hodgson, but I also made some changes. See Geraldine Emma Hodgson, ed. and trans., *Some Minor Works of Richard Rolle with the 'Privity of the Passion' by S. Bonaventura, from the Middle-English rendering of S. Bonaventura's Meditations* (London: Watkins, 1923), pp. 47–55 (p. 52). Emphasis is mine.

[45] Hopkins analyses four Middle English romances, i.e., *Guy of Warwick*, *Sir Isumbras*, *Sir Gowther*, and *Robert of Sicily* as "penitential romances." See Andrea Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights: A Study of Middle English Penitential Romance* (Oxford, 1990).

[46] Rouse, "Romance and Crusade in Late Medieval England," p. 227.

[47] After Laurel Braswell argued that *Sir Isumbras* was based on the legend of Saint Eustace, the Latin *vita*, *Sir Isumbras*, and Eustace's Middle English *vita* in the *South English Legendary* have been compared to one another to elucidate the development of the so-called Eustace-Constance-Griselda type. See Laurel Braswell, "*Sir Isumbras* and the Legend of Saint Eustace," *Mediaeval Studies* 17 (1965): 128–51; Anne B. Thompson, "Jaussian Expectation and the Production of Medieval Narrative: The Case of *Saint Eustace* and *Sir Isumbras*," *Exemplaria* 5 (1993): 387–407. Also, Wendy Matlock discusses the reception of both the *vita* and romance by the supposed bourgeois audience of Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61. See Wendy Matlock, "Reading Family in the Rate Manuscript's *Saint Eustace* and *Sir Isumbras*," *Chaucer Review* 53 (2018): 350–73. For the crusading themes in *Sir Isumbras*, see Lee Manion, "The Loss of the Holy Land and *Sir Isumbras*: Literary Contributions to Fourteenth-Century Crusade Discourse," *Speculum* 85 (2010): 65–90; Leila K. Norako, "*Sir Isumbras* and the Fantasy of Crusade," *Chaucer Review* 48 (2013): 166–89.

has, to date, been examined in relation to penance. Both versions are, instead, more generally read as explorations of medieval class antagonism or of female agency, as well as being reflective of the ways in which the genres of romance and not hagiography (like *Sir Isumbras*) but fabliau intersect.[48] Nonetheless, as I will demonstrate, if we explore the narrative landscapes of *Sir Isumbras* and Northern *Octavian* together, and more particularly those versions that are preserved in the Lincoln Thornton MS, in the context of late medieval devotional practices typical of especially Yorkshire, we can see that devotion to the humanity of Christ and an emphasis on penance contribute to adding a symbolic, allegorical dimension to these romances' narrative geography. In conjunction with their Christocentric devotion, both romances share a marked interest in the wilderness, one which could well, I will suggest, have encouraged their readers to join the penitential pilgrimage of the romances' protagonists.

The idea that the landscapes of these romances can be interpreted not simply as literal spaces but also as symbolic ones has already been remarked by Emma O'Loughlin Bérat and Hopkins. Bérat, examining the episode of the Empress's exile in a wild forest, demonstrates how readily an allegorical dimension slips into the secular, literal space of *Octavian*. According to Bérat, who suggests a similarity between the exiled Roman Empress and the Woman of Revelation 12 (a common motif in Apocalypse cycles), the dangerous wood of Northern *Octavian* provides "a quasi-allegorical, quasi-literal wilderness" which witnesses the Empress's "literal adventures as a mother" as well as "her spiritual journey."[49] Late medieval English readers, who were familiar with the motif from Apocalypse narratives, would readily, she suggests, recall the figure of the Woman of Revelation 12 while reading the Empress's spiritual growth allegorically as the enhancement of secular motherhood. In a similar vein, Hopkins argues that it is possible to find in Isumbras's battles against Muslims a "symbolic dimension, that of the forces of good struggling against the forces of evil in the penitent's soul."[50] According to Hopkins, the narrative space of *Sir Isumbras* should principally be understood as literal, though enriched by symbolic, allegorical connotations. I contend, however, that Thornton would have recognized the blighted narrative spaces in *Sir Isumbras* and Northern *Octavian* as at once quasi-allegorical and quasi-literal as well as reflective of their protagonists' spiritual status. The narrative landscapes conjured up by these romance texts could well have served as the model for Thornton's own penitential search for salvation.

Let us now turn to the narrative geography of the Lincoln Thornton MS's version of *Sir Isumbras*. The "allusive combination of sparse geographic markers with the central resonance of the Holy Land" is, as it has been pointed out, the prominent feature of this romance's geographical descriptions.[51] For instance, Leila K. Norako reads the romance's abstract geography as a key element in its idealised vision of a permanent crusade and its fantasy of establishing a whole, united Christian Empire in the Holy Land. Equally, according to Lee Manion, this romance's use of Acre as a geographical marker resonated with the early fourteenth-century readers' concern with the

[48] For class consciousness in *Octavian*, see Martha Fessler Krieg, "The Contrast of Class Customs as Humour in a Middle English Romance: Clement and Florent in *Octavian*," *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 9 (1984): 115–25; William Fahrenbach, "Rereading Clement in Thomas Chestre's *Octavian* and in BL Cotton Caligula A. II.," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 26 (2010): 85–99; Nicola McDonald, "The Wonder of Middle English Romance," in *Thinking Medieval Romance*, ed. Katherine C. Little and Nicola McDonald (Oxford, 2018), pp. 14–35; and John Simons, "Northern *Octavian* and the Question of Class," in *Romance in Medieval England*, ed. Maldwyn Mills, Jennifer Fellows, and Carol M. Meale (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 105–11. Concerning the depictions of female characters, see Angela Florschuetz, "Women's Secrets: Childbirth, Pollution, and Purification in Northern *Octavian*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 30 (2008): 235–68. Regarding the relationship between the romance and the fabliau ethos in *Octavian*, see Glenn Wright, "The Fabliau Ethos in the French and English Octavian Romances," *Modern Philology* 102 (2005): 478–500.

[49] Emma O'Loughlin Bérat, "Romance and Revelation," in *Thinking Medieval Romance*, pp. 135–52 (p. 151).

[50] Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights*, p. 142. I chose Muslim over Saracen, concurring with Shokoofeh Rajabzadeh's argument that the deliberate choice of Muslim can reveal the racism and Islamophobia in primary texts. See Shokoofeh Rajabzadeh, 'The Depoliticized Saracen and Muslim Erasure,' *Literature Compass*, 16 (2019).

[51] Norako, p. 182.

failed attempts to launch a new crusade.[52] The port of Acre, through which Isumbras enters the Holy Land, was the last Christian stronghold in mainland Syria, and its fall was often painfully remembered in chronicle accounts. While it might be possible to find historical allusions in the text of *Sir Isumbras*, the romance's geography, at least that found in the Lincoln Thornton MS's version, could be read, especially, in the context of Thornton's devotion to the humanity of Christ, as the manifestation of his desire to learn a way to undertake proper penance. The Holy Land in this romance offers, I suggest, an emotional, devotional focus for Thornton, rather than functioning as a political, militaristic space bound up with the memory of unsuccessful crusading projects. The romance's narrative geography is shaped distinctively through the divine will and Christ's Passion, which is similarly evoked through the reading of Rolle's writings as well as the Passion narratives in the Thornton MSS. First of all, the goal of Isumbras's pilgrimage/crusade is presented not as the conquest of Jerusalem but as a visit to the places "thare God was qwike and dede, / That done was one the rode" (where God lived and died, / who perished on the cross, lines 130–31). The main purpose of Isumbras's journey is thus to revere the sites which witnessed Jesus's life and death; we can see devotion to the humanity of Christ here again. Equally, the Lincoln MS's version uses not Jerusalem, the ultimate destination of pilgrimages/crusades, but Bethlehem as a key geographical marker. While the Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College MS 175 (1425–50) version of the romance, the base-text of the TEAMS's edition (which is preferred by most critics), mentions Jerusalem as one of a few geographical markers, the Lincoln text instead refers to Bethlehem, the city which was more strongly associated with affective devotion to Christ's Infancy than with the crusades.[53] Moreover, the trajectory of Isumbras's pilgrimage is described only in terms of his plight and divine will. There is no explanation as to where he lived before his penitential pilgrimage/crusade and which regions of Christendom is invaded by the sultan (who, as I will explain soon, robs Isumbras of his wife before attacking of a Christian army). Isumbras's crossing of the Mediterranean Sea, for instance, is presented not so much geographically but as an expression of the will of "Jhesu Cryste": "[t]he righte waye thane takes he [Isumbras] / To a havene of the Grekkes see, /Als Jhesu Cryste hym sende" (Isumbras then takes the direct way / to a port on the Mediterranean Sea, / as Jesus Christ sent him, lines 503–5). Isumbras's travel to the Holy Land via Acre might vaguely recall the loss of that bastion. However, this abstract narrative geography, namely the lack of geographical markers except for Acre and Bethlehem, likely resonates with Thornton's Christocentric devotions, rather than any claim to the physical city of Jerusalem.

In the Lincoln MS's version of *Sir Isumbras*, the way to the Holy Land and the region itself are presented as a kind of a wilderness, as is fitting for the sinful hero's redemptive journey.[54] Isumbras's pilgrimage is characterised by desolate, blighted landscapes, which clearly echo the topos of the *locus horribilis*. Isumbras, a noble and brave knight, confesses his sins (prompted by a divine messenger bird) and sets off on a penitential journey with his wife and three children to remit the temporal penalty. After carving a cross into his shoulder with a knife—an exaggerated version of the crusader vow and crossing-ceremony—[55] Isumbras and his family head for the Holy Land

[52] Manion, pp. 83–84.

[53] Thornton's interest in the Christ Child is well attested by the fact that he copied three narratives of Child Jesus. We can find the *Three Kings of Cologne*, the Middle English rhyme royal translation of the Latin *Historia Trium Regum* (the Magi's legendary story, including their adoration of Christ, Saint Helena's finding of the Magi's bodies, and the bodies' ultimate travel to Cologne); the extract of the *Cursor Mundi*, which tells the events from the Virgin's conception of Christ to Christ's infancy, childhood, and ministry; and the *Childhood of Christ*, the apocryphal verse narrative of the Infancy gospels.

[54] In the latter half of the romance, the Holy Land is turned into the battleground between Isumbras's family and thousands of Muslims. Thus, the romance evokes the crusading imagery more explicitly in its latter part. For the incompatibility between Isumbras and the Christian Other, i.e., Muslims, see Stephen D. Powell, "Models of Religious Peace in the Middle English Romance *Sir Isumbras*," *Neophilologus* 85 (2001): 121–36; Norako, pp. 182–87.

[55] Manion, p. 86. Norako, p. 179. According to Norako, the practice of making a crusader vow by assuming a cross of cloth lasted into the late Middle Ages.

through bleak "holtes hore" (grey woods, line 167), which are full of beasts and thorns but devoid of anything "that come of corne" (that comes from cereal crops, line 165).[56] This journey across the forest costs Isumbras his family: all three of his children are kidnapped by beasts while a sultan, who stays at a seaside town outside the forest, forces Isumbras to sell his wife. After working as a blacksmith for seven years, Isumbras forges a suit of armour for himself and defeats the Muslim army led by the same sultan, who is subsequently killed by Isumbras. Isumbras then changes his armour for pilgrim's clothes and crosses the Mediterranean Sea. After entering the Holy Land via "Acris" (Acre, 508), he encounters an unrelenting "haythene stede" (heathen land, line 511), where alone he endures thirst, hunger, and exhaustion. Thus, the narrative landscapes of the first half of *Sir Isumbras* were dominated by a wild wood and a Holy Land under heathen rule. In these blighted lands, the knight encounters penitential torment.

This abstract geography, which is shaped by both Christocentric devotions and the topos of the wilderness, facilitates the addition of an allegorical dimension to the literal geography. Such a conflation of quasi-literal and quasi-allegorical space is most explicitly found in the episode in which Isumbras finally merits a divine visitation. An angel appears before him after his painful efforts to "serve Gode and haly kyrke" (serve God and Holy Church, line 518) and to "mende hi[s] are mysdede" (amend his former misdeeds, line 519):

> So it by-felle hym sonne onone,
> That alle a syde of a cunntre he hase thurgh gone,
> Bot mete ne drynke couthe he gete none,
> Ne house to herbere hyme inne
> Withowttene the burghe of Bedeleme,
> He layde hym downe by a welle streme,
> Fulle sore wepande for pyne.
> And als he laye, abowte mydnyghte
> Thare come an angelle faire and bryghte,
> And broghte hym brede and wyne.
> "Palmere," he sayse, "welcome thou bee,
> The kynge of hevene wele gretis the,
> Forgyffene erre synnes thyne!" (lines 521–33)
>
> (Thus it befell that in all the countries through which he travelled, he found neither food nor drink nor shelter. Outside of the city of Bethlehem, he lay down beside a freshwater spring, weeping for pain. And as he lay, at about midnight, a fair, bright angel came to him and brought him bread and wine. "Palmer," said the angel, "Welcome! The King of Heaven greets you. Your sins are forgiven!")

Isumbras suffers "pyne" (pain, torments) as he travels "alle a syde of a cunntre," i.e., all over the Holy Land under heathen rule. This unfriendly, blighted land does not offer him any food or drink or shelter until Isumbras fulfils the aim of his journey. Only after resting outside the "burgh of Bedeleme," that iconic place where "God was qwike and dede," does Isumbras recover his livelihood and gain remission for his sins. In other words, Isumbras is considered to have completed paying the penalty for his sins when he arrives at Christ's birthplace. At this point, the romance's geography acquires a distinctively allegorical dimension. Bethlehem becomes a kind of a metonym for the full atonement for sin while the desert traversed by Isumbras allegorises his painstaking process of

[56] All quotations from the Lincoln Thornton MS's version of *Sir Isumbras* are taken from James Orchard Halliwell, ed., *The Thornton Romances: The Early English Metrical Romances of "Perceval," "Isumbras," "Eglamour," and "Degrevant," Selected from Manuscripts at Lincoln and Cambridge*, Camden Society, o.s., 30 (London, 1844), pp. 88–120.

penance. A devout reader like Thornton would well have understood, in these symbolic landscapes, the message that the human soul could not attain salvation without proper penance and the help of Christ.

Another example of the conflation of literal and allegorical space in the depiction of the Holy Land is found in Northern *Octavian*, or to put it more precisely, in its heroine's discovery of the *direct* way to the Holy Land. Before exploring this episode, I want to take a brief look at how the topos of the wilderness is also exploited in the first third of Northern *Octavian*. This part of the romance is set in Rome and in a wild forest adjacent to the Empire's capital, while the focus is on the Empress. Immediately after giving birth to twins, she is expelled with her new-born sons into an "vncouthe thede" (an unknown land, line 288) in response to a false accusation of adultery. Preoccupied with her thoughts and sorrows, the Empress loses the "ryghte waye" (right way, line 309). As a consequence, she wanders for three days without food in "a wyldirnes" (line 292), where she finds only woods, "dales [. . .] depe and cleues wykke" (deep valleys and hazardous cliffs, line 308).[57] In the wood, her twins are abducted; one by an ape and the second by a griffin, which is subsequently killed by a lioness (which then nurtures the child as its own). The Empress eventually manages to find a way through the forest, arriving at a seaside town. There, she boards a ship to Jerusalem. Once there, she is offered shelter by a Christian king, who recognises her as the Empress of Rome, in his palace. The Empress's wanderings from an unknown, wild forest to Jerusalem here again uses the topos of the *locus horribilis*. She encounters dangerous beasts, barren woods, extremely harsh natural environments, all of which offer her nothing, and simultaneously, deprive her of her twin sons. However, as we shall see, this wilderness, which ultimately leads her to Jerusalem, can be regarded as just the right space for her spiritual development through contrition.

In a manner similar to what we find in *Sir Isumbras*, the narrative landscape of this thick wood assumes a symbolic, allegorical dimension. As I explained above, the Empress has lost her way because of her preoccupation with her own sorrow. But in her plight, she finally finds the direct way to the Holy Land soon after she makes her address to "Jhesu:"

> Scho [the Empress] sais, "Jhesu, king of alle,
> With carefulle herte to þe I calle
> That þou be my socoure.
> [. . .]
> This sorowe, lorde, þat I am jn
> Full wele I wote es for my syn:
> Welcome be alle thi sande!
> To þe werlde will I me neuir gyffe,
> Bot serue the, lorde, whills I may lyfe."
> *Into þe Holy Londe*
> *A redy waye þere scho fand*.
> And ouir an hill þe waye scho name
> And to þe Grekkes se scho came,
> And welke appon þe strande.
> And byfore hir an hauen scho seghe,
> And a cete with towris full heghe. (lines 388–90, 400–11, emphasis added.)
> (She says, "Jesus, King of all, with a heavy heart I pray that you help me! [. . .] I know well that this sorrow, Lord, which I am suffering, is because of my sin. All your will may be welcome! I will never devote myself to the world but will serve you, Lord, while I live." *She then found a direct way to the Holy Land*. She took the way over a hill and she came to the Mediterranean Sea.

[57] All the quotations from Northern *Octavian* are taken from *Octovian*, ed. Frances McSparran, EETS, o.s., 289 (London, 1986).

She walked to the beach and before her she saw a port and a city with very high towers.)

The Empress recognises her predicament to be the result of her sin, declaring her resolution to pay the debt/penalty for her sin: she shall devote herself not to the "werlde" but to God for the rest of her life. Immediately after that, a "redy waye" (a direct, unimpeded way) to the Holy Land is found. Here, the wilderness somewhere around Rome is transformed into an allegorical space which reflects the Empress's spiritual status. As her rejection of worldly concerns triggers her progress to Jerusalem, the literal geography of the romance is aligned with her spiritual enhancement. In other words, while the wild, unrelenting forest arguably symbolises the Empress's ignorance of her sin and her unpaid debts of sin, the earthly Jerusalem is virtually equated to its heavenly counterpart. Just as the earthly city becomes accessible to the Empress only after confession and penance, the heavenly Jerusalem would become attainable only after obtaining remission of the temporal penalty for one's sin as well as absolution by confession. As this overlapping of the earthly and heavenly city was a religious commonplace, Thornton would have had no difficulty in understanding this allegorical interpretation of the narrative's landscapes.

It should also be noted that the long indented quotation above is based on my own transcription of the romance from the Lincoln Thornton MS and not on Frances McSparran's standard edition. The editor of the EETS's edition of Northern *Octavian*, McSparran, moves line 405 to line 411. Thus, in her edition's reading of the episode, the Empress finds the direct way not to the Holy Land but to a coastal town, which is found outside the forest and from whence she travels by boat to the Holy Land. McSparran, considering the lines a mistake made by Thornton or his source, emends the stanza. This emendation makes sense. If the line "A redy waye þere scho fand" is moved to line 411, the twelve-line tail rhyme scheme is preserved. McSparran's ordering of the lines also accords with the other extant manuscript of Northern *Octavian*, Cambridge University Library, MS Ff.2.38. The Lincoln Thornton MS's apparently corrupted version of these lines may well come from Thornton's source text, but it is just as likely to be one of Thornton's own interventions.[58] The allegorical space which is produced by the Lincoln Thornton MS's distinctive reading of the episode is more fitting in the specific context of his manuscript and its compiler's devotional preoccupations. It resonates perfectly with Thornton's own concerns for a proper way of engaging in penance and with the close relationship between the wilderness, penance, and Christocentric devotion.

Indeed, the Empress's calling to "Jhesu" resonates with Thornton's devotion to the humanity of Christ expressed in the texts he copied into his two manuscripts, and in particular, the *Oleum effusum nomen tuum*. Thornton highlights the passage of this work, where the narrator says that "þe nam of Ihesu es helefull and nedys byhouys be lufed of all couaytande saluacyone" (the name of Jesus is salvific and needs to be loved by all who are longing for salvation).[59] As I explained above, the *Oleum effusum nomen tuum* presents the search for Jesus as almost identical to the quest for salvation while simultaneously suggesting that Jesus/salvation becomes reachable after penance and the Passion meditation. The Empress's supplication to "Jhesu" to get her away from the perilous wood could thus have been read as an example of the manifestation of Christ's salvific power. The humanity of God is evoked as an essential support for the human soul traversing the penitential wilderness in order to proceed to salvation. Jerusalem, in which the Empress is granted a peaceful shelter from a Christian ruler, would have been easily read as its heavenly counterpart, where righteous, spiritually clean Christians dwell. Thornton's local religiosity was shaped, at least

[58] For Thornton's scribal intervention in the source texts, see, for example, John Ivor Carlson, "Scribal Intentions in Medieval Romance: A Case Study of Robert Thornton," *Studies in Bibliography* 58 (2007): 49–71. Carlson proposes that Thornton often replaced "poetic features" of romances with "more prosaic expressions" in order for readers to understand the senses of each text, without unnecessary confusion (p. 62).

[59] *Oleum Effusum*, p. 9.

in part, by an admiration for Rolle and for his teaching, which emphasises affective longing for Christ as a joyful, indispensable recourse to win salvation. It would therefore not have been difficult for Thornton to appreciate the conflation of literal and allegorical space in Northern *Octavian* as well as in *Sir Isumbras*. Both romances present their protagonists' penitential journey in landscapes which are imbued with the rich devotional topos of the wilderness and Christocentrism.

Conclusion

The allegorical dimension added to the blighted landscapes of *Sir Isumbras* and the first third of Northern *Octavian* offers space which would have allowed Thornton to envision the proper way to seek for the heavenly Jerusalem. The textually created wilderness served as a stage for devotional performance, in which Thornton could have put himself in the shoes of both Isumbras and the Empress of Rome, embarking on a penitential journey *en route* to spiritual enhancement. The redemptive wanderings of these protagonists provided Thornton with examples of proper penance, while demonstrating the indispensability of Christ's salvific mercy for the human soul to merit atonement. Since pious Yorkshire readers in the fifteenth century were readily familiar with modes of performative reading, it would have been easy for Thornton, himself a keenly pious layman, with what John Thompson has called a "voracious appetite for religious and moral reading,"[60] to apply the strategy of devotional performance to his appreciation of the didactic messages in his romance texts. The narrative space conjured up by these romances acquires a distinctly allegorical dimension, which merges secular and symbolic space. In the allegorical narrative geography, the wilderness adjacent, or leading, to the Holy Land, was virtually equated to the place in which the virtuous Christian searches for—and succeeds to—the heavenly Jerusalem.

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[60] John J. Thompson, "Another Look at the Religious Texts in Lincoln, Cathedral Library, MS 91," in *Late Medieval Religious Texts and Their Transmission: Essays in Honour of A. I. Doyle* (Woodbridge, 1994), pp. 169–87 (p. 177).