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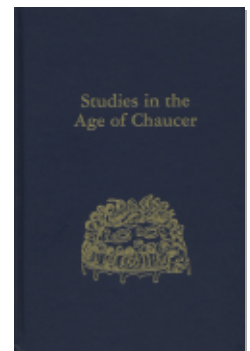
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Amy Appleford, Corinne Saunders

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Reading Women in the Medieval Information Age: *The Life of Elizabeth of Spalbeek* and *The Book of Margery Kempe*

Amy Appleford and Corinne Saunders
Boston University and University of Durham

Abstract

In fifteenth-century England, information about the natural and supernatural worlds came to be broadly distributed in texts that circulated well beyond the institutional contexts in which this knowledge was first produced. Vernacular texts that deal with natural philosophy, medicine, and science, alongside a range of religious topics, were created in record numbers for a widening audience. Many of these testify to intensified interest in all aspects of the human body. Religious works written by, about, and for women participate in this ferment of ideas and information, crossing the boundaries between secular and transcendent themes and concerns. Because religious women were understood to have a special relationship to forms of physical piety, their *vitae* served as important vehicles for the production and dissemination of thinking about corporeality. The radical asceticism of the thirteenth-century Low Countries visionary Elizabeth of Spalbeek, as detailed in an important Middle English collection from the 1420s, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 114, can be read as an investigation of the possibilities of the fleshly, this-worldly human body to materialize divine truth, and thus by extension as participating in local and intimate ways in the distribution and deinstitutionalization of knowledge. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, a work often seen as taking up the conventions of affective piety,

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similarly participates in a current discourse concerning the materiality of the divine. As the work's complex treatment of the spirit as breath, fire, inspiration, or *pneuma* suggests, the *Book* is at once a contributor to and a product of the late medieval information era.

Keywords

information age; holy women; Elizabeth of Spalbeek; Bodleian Library, MS Douce 114; transubstantiation; embodiment; *The Book of Margery Kempe*; breath; spirit; affective piety

C ONTEMPORARY CULTURE IS DISTINGUISHED by an ever-increasing bombardment of “information,” false and true: an unstoppable, multi-media, and global onslaught. In a different sense, England in the later Middle Ages also experienced what Peter Murray Jones has called an “information age,” in which knowledge about the natural and supernatural worlds came to be increasingly widely distributed in texts and books beyond the institutional contexts in which it had been produced: universities, monasteries, courts. According to Jones, the “production of books of information and science took off quickly after 1375,” with “most of the demand” for these books developing “outside the universities, amongst people with no stake in purely academic knowledge of science and medicine.”¹ Vernacular texts in particular, newly translated or composed in the vernacular on secular subjects, including natural philosophy, medicine, and science, along with numerous texts on an equally broad range of religious subjects, were produced in record numbers for consumption by an ever-widening audience. Read aloud in households or by individuals, these works circulated in self-taught communities from a range of social classes, limited only by their ability to afford reading materials.²

¹Peter Murray Jones, “Information and Science,” in *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes: Perceptions of Society in Late Medieval England*, ed. Rosemary Horrox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 97–111. Jones bases his analysis on Dorothy Waley Singer, “Hand-List of Scientific MSS in the British Isles Dating from before the Sixteenth Century,” *The Library* 15 (1917): 185–99.

²For a sense of the range of materials newly available, see George Keiser, “Scientific, Medical, and Utilitarian Prose,” in *A Companion to Middle English Prose*, ed. A. S. G. Edwards (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 231–47; Linda Ehrsam Voigts and

The explosion of informational literature during this period puts particular pressure on our modern desire to sort texts in relation to their genre, purpose, or audience. Texts that we categorize as pastoral, meditative, literary, or medical, as well as utilitarian texts of all kinds, were routinely copied together, with no discernible hierarchy or pattern, in the same books.³ Texts ostensibly written for professional religious, the secular clergy, or the laity, or that seem to skew their address toward readerships of women, or of men, often circulate in the same, apparently haphazard way, failing to conform to the expectations they appear to us to have created. Fifteenth-century book culture is notable for the ways it exacerbates the general medieval tendency toward “flexible or imprecise understandings of what and how particular genres were constituted,” with a newly rich mixing of potential audiences.⁴

Although we do not often think of them in this context, religious works written by, about, and for women participate actively in this ferment of ideas and information, crossing and recrossing the boundaries between secular and transcendent themes and concerns with particular fluidity. The author of the fifteenth-century *Mirror to Devout People* (also known as *Speculum devotorum*), a text that combines elements of Christian anthropology (“How man was fyrste made only of þe goodnesse of God, and what worthynesse he was inne bothe in body and soule”) with a *vita Christi*, states that “þe grounde of the boke” is the “gospel and doctorys,” including the glosses and commentary of that “worthy doctour of dyuynytee,” Nicholas of Lyra. But information about Christ’s birth and death is also supplied, he tells the reader, by the “reuelacyonys of approuyd wymmen”: formal theology and biblical exegesis is here supplemented with the experiential knowledge of divinity and of Christ’s earthly life found in women’s texts.⁵ The overlap of domains—the transcendent

Patricia Deery Kurtz, *Scientific and Medical Writings in Old and Middle English: An Electronic Reference*, CD-ROM (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

³See, for example, London, British Library, MS Royal 8 F.VII, dating from the mid-fifteenth century, which brings together texts of pastoral instruction, selections from the work of Richard Rolle, and extracts from the *Secreta secretorum*; and Lincoln Cathedral, MS A.5.2, Robert Thornton’s massive collection that combines romances, didactic and meditative religious verse and prose, and utilitarian and informational works of practical medicine.

⁴Alfred Hiatt, “Genre without System,” in *Middle English*, ed. Paul Strohm, Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 277–94 (278).

⁵*Mirror to Devout People (Speculum devotorum)*, ed. Paul J. Patterson, EETS o.s. 346 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016 for 2015), 7 (lines 3–4), 6 (lines 116–17), 120, 126–27. The main works associated with women used in this text are the life of Catherine

and the material and this-worldly—can at least in part be explained by the explicit exploration in many women’s texts of issues associated with human embodiment and createdness: pressing topics in medieval thought in which holy women, understood to have a special relationship to forms of physical piety and bodily devotion, became exemplary of a wider intellectual problematic.⁶ Kathryn Kerby-Fulton has rightly called attention to the special importance of “[w]riting by women and for women” recently imported from the European continent in fifteenth-century English vernacular theology. Kerby-Fulton argues that the significantly increased demand for these novel and often startling texts in the decades after the Council of Constance typifies what she characterizes as the period’s “energy for conversion away from the status quo . . . and towards more challenging spiritual alternatives.”⁷ While these texts may indeed have had a widespread effect on religious praxis and attitudes, however, we suggest that many of them—particularly the *vitae* of saintly or holy women—also did important intellectual work, providing audiences with an accessible forum for engagement with recent philosophical and theological understandings of the body.

For the most part, the writings Kerby-Fulton points to worked within the careful normative orthodoxies of the period. But they did so in innovative and experimental ways that complicate any account that seeks to confine their impact to the devotional sphere. In her work on late medieval English *physica* and medical writing, Julie Orlemanski notes that “[b]y the later fourteenth century, it had been more than two

of Siena by Raymond of Capua (*Legenda maior*); and the *Revelaciones* of Bridget of Sweden (see the “summary table of sources” in *Mirror to Devout People*, ed. Patterson, 236–44).

⁶The scholarship on the cultural associations of women with embodiment and physical piety in the period is extensive, but see foundational discussions by André Vauchez, *Les laïcs au Moyen Âge: Pratiques et expériences religieuses* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1987); and Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). Important critiques and extensions of Bynum’s work include, especially, Sarah Beckwith, ‘A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe,’ in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology and History*, ed. David Aers (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), 34–57; Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); and Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

⁷Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, “The Fifteenth Century as the Golden Age of Women’s Theology in English: Reflections on the Earliest Reception of Julian of Norwich,” in *Devotional Culture in Late Medieval England and Europe*, ed. Stephen Kelly and Ryan Perry (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 573–92 (574), her italics.

hundred years since new Latin translations of Galenic medicine, Aristotelian natural philosophy, and their Arabic commentators began circulating in western Christendom, offering distinctive accounts of why the physical world was as it was,” opening the way to an investigation of the natural order that “scaled itself” into new forms of “inquiry into the body.” This newly intensified interest in all aspects of the human body reached a broad audience during the fifteenth century by way of religious and secular genres that included “encyclopedias, how-to manuals, sermons, vernacular translations, miracle collections and poetry.”⁸ Our contention is that late medieval vernacular religious writing—and specifically here *vitae* and writings associated with religious women—represents an important addition to this challengingly open list.⁹

This essay thus explores what we take to be a potentially widely dispersed fifteenth-century phenomenon, the use of religious women’s *vitae* as vehicles for the production and dissemination of knowledge about the human body, by way of two case studies, which we place within their wider intellectual contexts. In the first study, we see how the radical asceticism of the thirteenth-century Low Countries visionary Elizabeth of Spalbeek, as detailed in an important Middle English collection of continental women’s *vitae* from the 1420s, can be read as an investigation of the possibilities of the fleshly, this-worldly human body to materialize divine truth, and thus by extension as participating in local and intimate ways in the new distribution and deinstitutionalization of knowledge. In the second, we then consider how *The Book of Margery Kempe*, a work often seen as taking up the conventions of affective piety, also participates in a current discourse concerning the materiality of the divine. As its complex treatment of the spirit as breath, fire, inspiration, or *pneuma* suggests, the *Book* is at once a contributor to and a product of the late medieval information era.

⁸Julie Orlemanski, *Symptomatic Subjects: Bodies, Medicine, and Causation in the Literature of Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 2, 25.

⁹Katie Walter has also recently argued the need to “conceive of a late medieval practice of reading between medical and religious traditions” to reconstruct late medieval English understandings of the human body; for her, “natural philosophy, medical and pastoral works are counterparts in the care of selves,” and “knowledge about the body . . . encompassing physiology, psychology, anatomy, pathology, medicinal remedy, surgery and regimen—is written into the knowledge necessary for salvation”; Katie L. Walter, *Middle English Mouths: Late Medieval Medical, Religious and Literary Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 7, 10.

Elizabeth of Spalbeek: Ascetic and Divine Body

Ascetic writing plays a significant part in the new distribution and deinstitutionalization of knowledge in the fifteenth century. Indeed, its role can be seen as a natural extension of the way in which eremitic practitioners, including women ascetics, had always functioned in somewhat tangential relation to formal religious institutions. The Middle English *vita* of the ascetic Elizabeth of Spalbeek provides a strikingly original exploration of one of the great preoccupations of the late medieval information age: the significance of the human body, in its relation to linguistic or material signs on the one hand, and its relation to divinity on the other. Written in Latin around 1267, Philip of Clairvaux's account of the devotion of Elizabeth of Spalbeek is one of the most startling texts in the canon of medieval women's hagiography. Translated into Middle English around the 1420s, this vernacular version of the work is found in a single manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 114, copied between 1425 and 1450, alongside Middle English versions of four further items, all from the continental mainland, three of them about women. These are Jacques de Vitry's *Life of Marie of Oignies* (c. 1215); Thomas of Cantimpré's *Life of Christina Mirabilis* (c. 1230s); Stephen Maconi's epistolary *Life of Catherine of Siena* (1411); and the *Seven Points of True Love and Everlasting Wisdom*, an early fifteenth-century adaptation of Heinrich Seuse's *Horologium sapientiae* (1339). All these translations find ways to emphasize their role in conveying new knowledge to a new, and newly expanded, audience. The translator of the Elizabeth account, for example, presents his new work for "the edificacyone" of devout souls not learned "in Latyn tunge," while the translator of the Catherine letter prays that "*alle men and wymmen*" that happen to "redith or herith this Englyshe" forgive its "variauns" of style.¹⁰ The group of translations

¹⁰*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 (Brepols: Turnhout, 2008), 27 (lines 6–7 [my italics]); all subsequent in-text references are to this edition by page and line number. The Latin *vita* survives in England in two versions, one of which is much redacted, and in five manuscripts: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 694 (short version); Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 138; Cambridge, Jesus College, MS 24; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 240; and Oxford, St. John's College, MS 182. Walter Simons points out that of the ten surviving copies of Philip's description of Elizabeth's devotional praxis, five are connected to England; "Reading a Saint's Body: Rapture and Bodily Movement in the *Vitae* of Thirteenth-Century Beguines," in *Framing Bodies*, ed. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin

gathered into MS Douce 114 thus provides an energetic example of how works derived from proximate but different religious cultures participated actively and deliberately in the knowledge revolution of the English fifteenth century.

The collection carries the *ex libris* of the Beauvaile Charterhouse in Nottingham, while Latin books with similar contents were owned by the Carthusians of Witham in Somerset, and the Augustinians at the scholarly house of Thurgarton in Northamptonshire. Yet the translators' association of the texts with the non-Latinate suggests that this work and its manuscript colleagues were intended to find an audience outside such institutions. Indeed, the Beauvaile *ex libris* can itself be used to locate MS Douce 114 in the environs of a network of bookish Nottinghamshire laypeople. Among these is Sir Thomas Chaworth (d. 1459), an especially active participant in Jones's late medieval "information age." Chaworth's will testifies both to his interest in recent English translations of informative and educational works, and his *lack* of interest in discriminating between secular and religious topics. Besides primers and liturgical books, his bequests include not only Heinrich Seuse's *Horologium sapientiae* (the work of which Douce 114's *Seven Points* is an abbreviated adaptation) and a collection of saints' lives by John Lydgate, but also John Trevisa's enormous translation of Bartholomeus Anglicus's encyclopedic account of the natural sciences, *De proprietatibus rerum* (*On the Properties of Things*).¹¹ Trevisa's preface to this work argues that knowledge of the material world is "of great valeu to them that will be desirous to vnderstand the darknesse of holy Scriptures . . . given to us under figures," since according to Pseudo-Dionysius "it is a thing impossible, that the light of the heauenly diuine brightnesse couered and closed in the Deitie . . . should shine vpon us if it were not by the diuersities of holy couertures." The life of Elizabeth in MS Douce 114 would have spoken to a man like Chaworth, who had dedicated significant resources to gaining access to Trevisa's account of the "propirtees of kyndeliche

(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 10–23 (10). For some discussion of the relation between the Latin versions and the Middle English translator of the text in MS Douce 114, see Brown, *Three Women of Liège*, 200.

¹¹Gavin Cole and Thorlac Turville-Petre, "Sir Thomas Chaworth's Books," in *The Wollaton Medieval Manuscripts: Texts, Owners and Readers*, ed. Ralph Hanna and Turville-Petre (Woodbridge: York University Press, 2010), 20–29. As Cole and Turville-Petre summarize, Chaworth had a "strong preference for English, and apparently for learned prose works" that were "informative and educational in the broad sense" (29).

things.”¹² Yet the *vita* of Elizabeth also complicates Trevisa’s and Bartholomeus’s optimistic understanding of the relationship between the “kyndeliche” and the supernatural: the work demonstrates how the ascetic body works to produce knowledge of the divine, but it also reveals how the body can *resist* being made into knowledge.

The *Life of Elizabeth of Spalbeek* is an account of a visit made by Philip of Clairvaux to Elizabeth’s cell, attached to a chapel in the centre of Spalbeek (some thirty miles northwest of Liège), to investigate reports that she had been blessed by God with the stigmata. Philip swiftly confirms that she indeed bears the “tokens” of “the wounds of our Lord Jhesu Cryste” but also finds that this is only one aspect of her *imitatio Christi*, which also involves a devotional practice in which she “schewith in a merueylous manere the representacyone of [Christ’s] blyssed Passyone” (29 [28–29]) by shaping her body and movements into figurations of Passion scenes. Organizing her daily representation of the Passion narrative according to the liturgical office, she becomes the image of Christ and of his tormentors: dragging herself across the room as the soldiers did Christ, hitting herself in the face and throwing herself to the ground, and making other violent gestures appropriate to the particular episode she is currently enacting.

Philip presents himself as relating a careful eyewitness account of Elizabeth’s devotional praxis. Yet his descriptions initially belie this objective testimonial stance, as he continually adds commentary that reads her praxis in normalized, orthodox terms. Many of these take the form of scriptural glosses on her gestures, as when he likens her slapping her cheeks at the beginning of matins to the cymbals that praise God in Psalm 150, and reads detailed liturgical references into her movements, seeing some of them as “prayers,” others as “lessons,” and so forth. Elizabeth, we are told, is usually unable to support the weight of her own body or move on her own, having been “holden with so mikel febilnesse of body and lymmes” from when she was five (30 [52–54]). As Philip interprets it, this is a tribulation salutary to her spiritual development. But for him it also confirms the miraculous aspect of her muscular devotional practice, showing that Christ, not Elizabeth, is at work to turn

¹²“*On the Properties of Things*”: *John Trevisa’s Translation of “Bartholomaeus Anglicus De proprietatibus rerum,”* ed. M. C. Seymour and Gabriel M. Liegey, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975–88), 1:244.

her into a signifying body.¹³ Philip's stress throughout is on Elizabeth's function as a sign created by Christ whose referent is the sacred history of the Passion, and the language of representation proliferates to a remarkable degree.¹⁴ In the Middle English version of the *vita*, which for the most part closely follows the Latin, Elizabeth "*representith* the schappe of the cross" (36 [192]); her body is made into an instrument for "*betokenynge*" (31 [84]) different personages and for multiplying "many maneres of *representacyoun*" (40 [271]) of events from the Passion. She is an "ymage" (37 [217]) whose movements and gestures "*signifyth* and *schewith*" (38 [228]) or in several cases "*figureth*" (41 [294]) (all italics mine). The different connotations of these words matter less than their presentation of Elizabeth's existence as a material but hermeneutically explicable sign of the divine.

The work's emphasis on Elizabeth as *showing* the Passion has encouraged scholars to describe the text using the modern language of performance or drama, calling Elizabeth's ascetic work an "act," even a representational "dance."¹⁵ But accepting Philip's interpretation of her

¹³In this way, Philip's attempt to read Elizabeth's non-normative body as a miraculous sign could be read as participating in what Edward Wheatley argues is the medieval Church's tendency to make disabled people into "docile bodies," obliging them "to internalize the discipline of the doctrines of the church"; *Stumbling Blocks before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 14. As we'll see, however, Elizabeth's body is far from "docile," and Philip's account falters in the face of her complex ascetic praxis, which works to associate her human body with the divine body in ways that are not simply mimetic. For criticism of Wheatley's "religious model" of medieval disability see Joshua R. Eyler, "Introduction: Breaking Boundaries, Building Bridges," in *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations*, ed. Eyler (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 7–10.

¹⁴Philip's eagerness to see Elizabeth as a corporeal sign of Christ recalls Sarah Salih's observation that "women's bodily performances of bodily pieties frequently suited orthodox clerical categories and agendas. Their unschooled access to the divine might be a valuable spectacle for men"; "Margery's Bodies: Piety, Work, Penance," in *A Companion to "The Book of Margery Kempe"*, ed. John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 161–76 (162–63). For further discussion of the need to "read with suspicion" "male-authored" lives of religious women, see Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, 26–56.

¹⁵See Susan Rodgers and Joanna E. Ziegler, "Elizabeth of Spalbeek's Trance Dance of Faith: A Performance Theory Interpretation from Anthropological and Art Historical Perspectives," in *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality*, ed. Mary A. Suydam and Ziegler (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 299–355; Jesse Njus, "What Did It Mean to Act in the Middle Ages? Elisabeth of Spalbeek and *Imitatio Christi*," *Theatre Journal* 63, no. 1 (2011): 1–21. For an evocative phenomenological reading of the work, see Sarah McMillan, "Phenomenal Pain: Embodying the Passion in the *Life of Elizabeth of Spalbeek*," *postmedieval* 8, no. 1 (2017): 102–19.

as a signifying sign in this way obscures important aspects of her asceticism. Elizabeth indeed obviously desires to become an image of Christ, but she is not “playing” the Passion. Instead, her practice of figuration demonstrates a desire to be *a sign that is also the thing itself*: an *imago*, or *eikon*, that makes Christ immanent in the human world—or what Heinrich Seuse, writing half a century after Elizabeth under the influence of Low Countries women’s mysticism, calls an *exemplum*, the incarnation of a quality in a figure. As Niklaus Largier argues, Seuse’s instruction that one must go “through the images beyond the images” to become a “pure, bright mirror of the divine majesty” expresses the idea that images enable “union with God and the transfiguration that makes mankind again an integral, non-alien part of divine creativity.” In order to do so, however, images must first lose all their specifically hermeneutic and representational value. Working with language derived from Cassian, Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart, Seuse rejects the common-sense view of the image as a “tool that helps our conceptual understanding.” Rather, as Largier puts it, the image is “an expression of the creation itself that brings everything back to the spontaneous coming-forth from the divine ground,” and thus “brings the unity of Christ and man to the surface.”¹⁶ The concept of apophatic figuration described by Seuse may begin to capture the desire animating Elizabeth’s ascetic routine.

In its complex exploration of the limits and possibilities of the human body to become an image of the divine, incarnate body of Christ, the Elizabeth *vita* evokes central and timely concerns for its fifteenth-century readers. The period’s official teaching on images of Christ was that they were worthy of veneration in the fullest sense (*latría*, worship, not merely *dulia*, reverence, in the scholastic terminology of the period). But this worship had to be carefully directed and modulated in relation to the material object. According to the early fifteenth-century treatise *Dives and Pauper*, in a proper act of adoration, the actual object of worship is always God, who is “abovyn alle thyngge.” The worshipper venerates “nought the ymage, nought the stok, stoon ne tree, but hym that

¹⁶Niklaus Largier, “The Poetics of the Image in Late Medieval Mysticism,” in *Image and Incarnation: The Early Modern Doctrine of the Pictorial Image*, ed. Walter S. Melion and Lee Palmer Wandel (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 173–86 (181). For further discussion of Seuse’s understanding of images in a different context, see Steven Rozenski, “‘Your ensauple and your mirour’: Hoccleve’s Amplification of the Imagery and Intimacy of Henry Suso’s *Ars moriendi*,” *Paregon* 25, no. 2 (July 2008): 1–16.

deyid on the tree fro thin synne.” Further, to mistake the thing for what it represents—to “doo it *for* the ymage or *to* the ymage” rather than for what the image signifies—is to commit the grave sin of “ydolatrye.”¹⁷

The complexity of Elizabeth’s image praxis becomes apparent in the second half of the account. As she begins her figuration of the climax of the Passion, Christ’s death on the cross, Philip’s efforts to interpret Elizabeth’s actions as representational signs falter and his *admiratio* of her bodily praxis overwhelms his sense of theological propriety. Instead of glossing her movements and offering explanatory commentary, he begins simply to report how Elizabeth shapes herself (through a “wonderful bowynge of alle her body” [37 (211)]) into Christ as he is laid onto the cross, then levers herself up to become Christ crucified, standing “all starke as an image of tree or stoon withouten felynge or mouynge and brethe” (29 [46–47]), demonstrating a virtuoso sense of balance and control over limbs, muscles and her body’s position in space. Her vacillation between stillness and movement, the rhythm by which she alternates between the rigid and the pliable, further directs the reader’s attention to her vital materiality. Sometimes she hardens to become nonhuman and stone-like; sometimes she softens to become plastic, shaping the expressive faces of tormentors or of Christ; at other times she becomes at once strong and flexible, a skilled contortionist taking on the postures required by the Passion sequence.

The *vita*’s involvement with the theological and conceptual complexities involved in manifesting the divine in material form intensifies further when Philip reports Elizabeth’s interaction with a large wooden panel-painting of the Crucifixion. It is unclear exactly when and how often in her devotions she encounters this painting, although Philip describes it in full after recounting the practices he identifies with the “secounde nocturne” of matins. At this time, this “tabil ful wele depeynte with an ymage of our Lorde crucified” is taken to her “[a]nd holding that open and vncouerd with booth handys, ful deuoutly she lokith on oure Lorde.” Elizabeth then speaks to the image, saying “Swete Loord,

¹⁷*Dives and Pauper*, ed. Priscilla Heath Barnum (London: Oxford University Press for EETS, 1976), 1.85.51–2, 61, my italics. For discussion of the status and controversies around images in late medieval England, see the essays in *Images, Idolatry, and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England: Textuality and the Visual Image*, ed. Jeremy Dimmick, James Simpson, and Nicolette Zeeman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Sarah Stanbury, *The Visual Object of Desire in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

swete Lord” and kissing the painted feet of Christ (34 [135–49]). Although Elizabeth’s response here might be understood as what we think of as affective piety, her actions exceed any conventional emotional and physical response. In its desire to fuse the human with the nonhuman, her devotion can more usefully be understood as a form of Christian *askesis*.

According to the great early theorist of asceticism, John Cassian, the ascetic life involves the creation of “very precious vessels . . . forged out of holy souls.”¹⁸ Asceticism is an “art” that imbues “this dense and solid matter, that is, flesh” with particular shapes and surfaces, an orientation to and engagement with the physical world that, as Catherine Chin suggests, intends to forge a “complex unit of human, divine, and material convergence.”¹⁹ In Philip’s report, the “tabil” is large enough that Elizabeth must use two hands to hold it “open” while responding to it with her whole body. In rapture, she appears to become continuous with its rigid surface. Kissing the painted foot of the image, she remains “unstirred and starke,” with part of her body “clevynge to the pament” and part touching the painting. Prone in rapture, with the “tabil” “leaned upon hir breste,” or “above her face,” her body becomes hard, like the wooden board itself, so that when the painting is “shaken, moued, or drawn of anybody, as with enfors to haue it aweye, hit departith neuer, but alle hir body is stiryd after the sterynge” of the painting (34–35 [147–57]). An assemblage of the human and the material object, ascetic body and devotional image are both working to give material form in this world to the divine *logos*.

According to Philip, Elizabeth is Christ’s representation, the Lord’s own sign of his Passion, a signifying and figuring image. But Elizabeth’s interactions with the painted “tabil” suggest that, in her own ascetic praxis, she understands herself as a different kind of sign and a different kind of image. Elizabeth’s fusing of herself to the painted picture is in fact best described as an encounter not between human and nonhuman, but between two images. Both are physical and give this-worldly material form to the divine. Her ascetic work throughout is directed to transfiguring the material world, specifically that part of the world nearest at

¹⁸John Cassian, “Preface,” in *The Institutes*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (New York: Newman Press, 2000), 11.

¹⁹Catherine Chin, “Cassian, Cognition, and the Common Life,” in *Ascetic Culture: Essays in Honor of Philip Rousseau*, ed. Blake Leyerle and Robin Darling Young (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 147–66 (149).

hand—that is, her human body—by repetitively re-forming scenes from the Passion. This is a daily practice—indeed more than a daily practice. We are told that at matins she images the same scenes from the beginning of the Passion twice: once at the first nocturne, then again, after a brief rest, at the second. She is stuck on a kind of a loop, her work of transforming herself into a spiritualized body—an image of Christ’s humanity—always and necessarily incomplete. She cannot become Christ, cannot materialize him fully, and so must repeat her work over and over. The gap between the human and the divine ensures this recursive liturgical iteration.

Elizabeth’s fusion with the painted image would have been understood as experimental but also as just conceptually and doctrinally tenable for the fifteenth-century reader. Ultimately, after all, according to the account of the cosmos given by Trevisa, in his translation of the *De proprietatibus rerum*, both her body and the wood of the image are continuous, since both are manifestations of the divine. But Elizabeth’s other form of encounter with Christ, through the Eucharist in the mass, sets loose more challenging questions about matter, form, and divine representation. For her prone, mimetic, and instantaneous response to the consecration of the Host is disturbingly similar to her response to the painted image. “In the selfe momente of the sighte therof,” Philip reports, “sche berith over . . . alle hir body overthwarte the bedde, strecchyng forthe hir armes on booth sydes hir, and makith a crosse of hirselfe. And so sche abidith alle starke as a stok in a swogh, and ravischyng” until the mass is complete (43 [363–74]). Here, Elizabeth’s body moves into its own materialization of Christ, by assuming the form of the cross, responding sympathetically to the bread’s natural materiality as it is transformed into divine body through the priest’s words. Because the doctrine of transubstantiation was so recurrently controversial, this physical affirmation of its reality may itself have been viewed sympathetically, not only in thirteenth-century northern Europe but also in fifteenth-century England.²⁰ Yet since the transubstantiated host is doctrinally the *real* substance of Christ’s body in material form, Elizabeth’s identification with the Host is doomed to be merely aspirational, as the logic of asceticism, according to Cassian, indeed requires.

²⁰See, for example, the carefully orthodox Middle English articulation of the doctrine of transubstantiation in Nicholas Love’s widely circulating *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*; Nicholas Love, “A Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ”: A Full Critical Edition, ed. Michael Sargent (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2005), CLIII.21–CLIV.6.

Elizabeth can become identical with the painted image, since both are in some way images of the divine body. She cannot become the consecrated Host, substantially real divine flesh.

This Middle English account of Elizabeth's praxis, complicated but not much occluded by Philip of Clairvaux's desire to see her in hermetic terms as a sign controlled by Christ and simply representing the Passion sequence, raises questions about the possibility of making the divine visible in the material world that might be of urgent interest to fifteenth-century readers: not only on the use of images in devotion, as others have noted, but also on the more troubled matter of the nature of the divine presence in the Eucharist, both resonant in fifteenth-century England, when the manifestation of God in the material was central to issues of priestly control of the sacraments. In this reading, Elizabeth does not occupy any identifiable position on either matter. For fifteenth-century readers, rather, the attraction of her *vita* lies in its exploration of the potential of materiality as such—beyond the reach of any theological doctrine or religious institution—to manifest divine presence.

Margery Thinking, Feeling, Breathing

Many of the concerns that underlie Douce 114's *vita* of Elizabeth of Spalbeek are also prominent emphases in *The Book of Margery Kempe* (c. 1436–38), with its unique depiction of embodied spiritual experience and its vivid evocation of the materiality of divine presence within and around Margery Kempe. Like the *Life of Elizabeth of Spalbeek*, the *Book* offered readers a vernacular exemplar of holy life, rendering in immediate and contemporary terms the model presented by celebrated holy women. The early reception history of the *Book* demonstrates the esteem in which it was held not just as a sacred *vita* but also as a book of contemplation, its visionary narrative corresponding with the Carthusian interest in psychic experience.²¹ Annotations by four fifteenth- and sixteenth-century readers suggest that Kempe was viewed as a mystic and contemplative. One fifteenth-century reader appears to connect her cryings to the “clamor” of Richard Rolle, while the latest, most extensive,

²¹See Vincent Gillespie, “Dial M for Mystic,” in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition: England, Ireland and Wales, Exeter Symposium VI*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 241–68.

annotator refers both to Rolle, and to the sixteenth-century Carthusians Richard Methley and John Norton, all of whom describe the bodily manifestation of spiritual experience.²² The pamphlet of extracts printed by Wynkyn de Worde (c. 1501), reprinted by Henry Pepwell as one of seven mystical treatises in *The Cell of Self-Knowledge* (1521), is likely to have been directed to audiences similarly interested in the contemplative tradition.²³ Like the *Life of Elizabeth*, the *Book* also pushes at various kinds of boundaries in its response to the “information age.” Recent scholarship has emphasized the richness of lay mystical activity, and the extraordinarily diverse range of texts that circulated among both lay and clerical readers in fifteenth-century England. Barry Windeatt points to the “variety and profusion,” the “vibrant vitality” of the contemplative culture of the period, and the rootedness, often ignored, of Kempe’s *Book* in that culture.²⁴ Religious life in Lynn and its environs was rich, including the parish church of St. Margaret’s, with its highly educated priest, Kempe’s confessor Robert Spryngolde; other churches and chapels; monastic houses; and the four orders of friars that had houses in the city (Augustinians, Dominicans, Franciscans, Carmelites).²⁵ The wealth of their libraries is suggested by the number of celebrated scholars associated with Lynn: Nicholas of Lynn, learned in astrology; Kempe’s particular supporter, the Carmelite Alan of Lynn, compiler of a series of indices; the Norfolk Dominican Geoffrey, compiler of the first Latin–English dictionary; and John Capgrave, theologian, historian and prior of Bishop’s Lynn, whose series of hagiographies included English

²²Kempe was born c. 1373; the *Book* is dated c. 1436–38. The unique manuscript, a copy written by a Norfolk scribe named “Salthows”, dates to c. 1450. For the annotations, see *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Barry Windeatt (2000; repr., Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 439–52: Annotator 2, 2216. krying] “nota de clamore”; Annotator 4, references to Rolle, 1258 and 2898, and to Richard Methley and John Norton, 929 and 2224. All references to the *Book* are from this edition, cited by line number.

²³The modern title of the *Book* echoes the description given in the pamphlet, *A shorte treatyse of contemplacyon taught by our lorde Ihesu cryste, or taken out of the boke of Margerie kempe of Lynn*. See *The Cell of Self-Knowledge: Seven Early English Mystical Treatises, Printed by Henry Pepwell, 1521*, ed. Edmund G. Gardner (New York: [n.p.], 1966), available at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/gardner/cell/files/cell.html> (accessed February 14, 2020). On the readership, see G. R. Keiser, “The Mystics and the Early English Printers: The Economics of Devotionalism,” in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Exeter Symposium IV*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987), 9–26.

²⁴Barry Windeatt, “1412–1534: Texts,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism*, ed. Samuel Fanous and Vincent Gillespie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 195–224 (196).

²⁵On religious culture in Lynn, see Anthony Goodman, *Margery Kempe and Her World* (London: Longman, 2002), 79–99.

verse lives of Sts. Norbert and Katherine.²⁶ The *Book* repeatedly emphasizes Kempe's contact both in Lynn and beyond with doctors of divinity, learned priests and friars, indicating her situatedness within the intellectual ferment of the period. It engages in particular with questions of the materiality of the divine, drawing on the physiological and theological understandings of breath and spirit that were "in the air" in the late Middle Ages.

The *Book's* great subject is that of being moved or stirred to holiness, being literally "inspired" with the Holy Spirit. The imagery of tears, hearts, and flames that typically signified such inspiration extends back at least to the writings of St. Bernard of Clairvaux and is employed by St. Bonaventure, Walter Hilton, and Richard Rolle. It is not coincidental that, as well as other indications of devout responses, such as pointing hands or faces or comments, hearts and flames are drawn in the margin by the same sixteenth-century annotator of the *Book* who makes reference to Rolle, Methley, and Norton. The phrase "flawme of fyer" is annotated "ignis divini amoris," marked with a drawing of a flame (2894) and glossed as "A tokyn of grace" (7370); hearts are drawn to accompany references to Margery's heart (2961, 5408, 7124, 7364). While such images are familiar, placing the book within the tradition of affective piety for its readers, they also possess a powerful material meaning that keys into medieval understandings of the connections between mind and body; the workings of affect; and, especially, the concept of the animating spirit. Kempe's down-to-earth, literalist narrative of spiritual revelation and grace is often dismissed for its conventionality, yet it taps into current physiological models of feeling and being in surprisingly acute ways. The images of fire at the heart and the water of tears are not only symbolic but are rooted in ancient notions of the vital spirits of air and fire arising from the heart, whose movements were seen as producing the deep affects of emotion—both the bliss and the tears of ecstatic experience. Kempe's is not the performance of piety so much as an embodied devotion in keeping with its thought world. Through its cultural intersections and explicitly gendered perspective, Kempe's *Book* reworks the genres of spiritual life and the contemplative text.

²⁶On Kempe's connections with the friars, see Barry Windeatt, "Margery Kempe and the Friars," in *The Friars in Medieval Britain: Proceedings of the 2007 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. Nicholas Rogers, Harlaxton Medieval Studies 19 (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2010), 125–41.

The Physiology of the Spirits

As already noted, works such as John of Trevisa's translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus's *De proprietatibus rerum* rendered physiological and psychological theories much more accessible from the later fourteenth century onwards, including to the clerical circles with which Kempe came into contact. Such works set out the physiology of the emotions and bodily spirits, taking up the Galenic theory on which medieval medicine relied, which had been disseminated to the Christian West via Latin translations of Arabic and Greek medical texts in the early twelfth century, in particular the works of Constantine of Africa. These entered the university curriculum in the thirteenth century, and strongly influenced, for example, St. Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus.²⁷ According to Galenic theory, elaborated most extensively by Avicenna, *pneuma* (air), "the life breath of the cosmos," was taken into the body and transformed into three kinds in the three principal organs: in the liver, the "natural spirits," carried through the veins and governing generation, growth, nutrition, and digestion; in the heart, the "vital spirits," created through the mixture of air and blood and carried through the arteries, heating and animating the body and governing breathing; and in the brain, the "animal spirits," carried through the nerves and controlling sensation, movement, and thought.²⁸

John of Trevisa, translating Bartholomaeus's *De proprietatibus rerum*, which draws directly on Constantine's *Pantegni*, describes the centrality of the "virtue of life", the vital spirits:

²⁷Constantine's *Pantegni theorica*, translating parts of the tenth-century Galenic medical encyclopedia of "Haly Abbas" (Alī ibn al-'Abbās al-Majūsī), and a translation of the treatise on the Galenic theory of humors and spirits by the ninth-century physician "Johannitius" (Ḥunayn ibn Iṣḥāq), were foundation texts in the *Articella*, the collection of six medical works forming the basis of western medical theory. On medieval medicine see Faye Getz, *Medicine in the English Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Carole Rawcliffe, *Medicine and Society in Later Medieval England* (Stroud: Sutton, 1995); and Nancy G. Siraisi, *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine: An Introduction to Knowledge and Practice* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990).

²⁸Roy Porter, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind: A Medical History of Humanity from Antiquity to the Present* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), 76–77. On *pneuma* in classical and early Christian thought, see G. Verbeke, *L'évolution de la doctrine du "pneuma" du stoïcisme à S. Augustin: Etude philosophique* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1945); on classical thought, Philip van der Eijk, *Medicine and Philosophy in Classical Antiquity: Doctors and Philosophers on Nature, Soul, Health and Disease* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 119–35; and on Avicenna, see Nancy G. Siraisi, *Avicenna in Renaissance Italy: The Canon and Medical Teaching in Italian Universities after 1500* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), Chapter 2, 19–40.

Out of þe herte comeþ lif to al þe limes. . . . Þis vertu of lif openiþ þe herte by worchinge of þe longen and draweþ in aier to the hert and sendiþ forþ from þe herte to oþir limes by smale weyes. And by help of þe vertu þat closith and riueþ and openith þe herte þis vertu worchiþ and makeþ breþinge in a beest. And by breþinge þe brest meueþ continualliche, but sinewis and brawnes beþ first imeued. Þis blast, breþ, and onde is nedeful to slake þe kindeliche hete, and to foode of þe spirit of lif, and also to þe gendringe of þe spirit þat hatte animalis þat ʒeueþ felinge and meuyngē.²⁹

Breath both cools the heart and generates the vital spirits, which in turn create the animal spirits.

Within this framework, breath is intimately connected with the emotions, believed to occur through the movements of the vital spirits and natural heat, produced in the heart and traveling through the arteries. According to this model, emotions could be caused by direct sensory experience, but also by imagination and memory, and had both physiological and mental consequences. In extreme joy or anger, the vital spirits and accompanying heat moved out of the heart to other parts of the body, causing the physical response of blushing. In extreme grief, distress, or fear, by contrast, the vital spirits and heat withdrew from the arteries into the heart. Such withdrawal of spirits meant withdrawal of breath and might cause unconsciousness or even death. The swoon is thus a flashpoint signaling great grief, distress, joy, or ecstasy. The sigh has a special role as a means to purge and cool the overburdened and overheated heart. Sighs also came to be seen as dangerous, however: too many sighs might cause the heart to dry out and wither. It is not coincidental that the terms “swoon” and “sigh” are closely related, both probably deriving from the same Old English verb, *swogan/aswogan*, to rush out/overcome. This physiological model of the emotions stemming from Galenic medicine was widely known in general terms. It was discussed in detail by twelfth-century commentators such as Adelard of Bath and William of Conches, and elaborated in the thirteenth century by medical theorists such as Gilbertus Anglicus, Bartholomeus Anglicus and Arnaldus de Villa Nova, all of whose writings were available in later medieval intellectual circles. Such ideas were also taken up in a wide

²⁹John Trevisa, *On the Properties of Things*, ed. M. C. Seymour (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), III.15 (vol. 1, 104–5); for the Latin, see Bartholomeus Anglicus, *De rerum proprietatibus* (1601; Frankfurt: Minerva, 1964).

range of theological works treating the soul and body.³⁰ Guides to health such as the *Regimen sanitatis Salernitatum*, which circulated across Europe, served to disseminate them in simpler and memorable form to lay readers.³¹ Such widespread knowledge exemplifies the burgeoning of a medieval information age.

Secular literature, in particular, is imbued with—and takes for granted—the extreme affects of love. Swoons and sighs are fundamental to the medieval language of gesture and to romance sensibilities, signaling high emotional refinement. Romance treatments of love look back to classical notions of love-sickness but are also invested with realism, engaging with the physiology of the emotions in ways not likely to be apparent to modern readers. Romances assume the movement of the spirits, their affective play on the body, and writers such as Chaucer and Gower also include sophisticated medical detail. A striking example of physiological realism is found in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. On seeing Criseyde weep, Troilus feels “the crampe of deth to streyne hym by the herte” (III.1071), and swoons. Chaucer graphically depicts the withdrawal of the spirits into the heart, with the effect of loss of breath and consciousness:

Therwith the sorwe so his herte shette
That from his eyen fil there nought a tere,
And every spirit his vigour in knette,
So they astoned or oppressed were.
The felyng of his sorwe, or of his fere,
Or of aught elles, fled was out of towne;
And down he fel al sodeynly a-swowne.³²

The medical aspect is comically reiterated when Pandarus and Criseyde chafe Troilus's pulse and palms until breath returns. The progress of

³⁰See further Simo Knuutila, *Emotions in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 215–17.

³¹On regimens of health, see further Carole Rawcliffe, “The Concept of Health in Late Medieval Society”, in *Le interazioni fra economia e ambiente biologico nell'Europa preindustriale, sec. XIII–XVIII = Economic and Biological Interactions in Pre-Industrial Europe from the 13th to the 18th Centuries: Atti della “Quarantunesima settimana di studi”*, 26–30 aprile 2009, ed. Simonetta Cavaciocchi, Fondazione Istituto internazionale di storia economica “F. Datini” (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2010), 317–34 (320).

³²*TC*, III.1086–92, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 473–585. Subsequent references to *Troilus and Criseyde* are to this edition by book and line number.

Troilus's love is marked by his sorrowful sighs, tears, and swoons, and the affects of the fire of love—so extreme as to render him unrecognisable in Book V: “He so defet was, that no manere man / Unneth hym myghte knowen ther he wente” (V.1219–20). So enfeebled that he must walk with a crutch, Troilus complains of grievous pain around his heart, the effect of the vital spirits pressing on it, while their withdrawal is marked in his pallor, emaciation, and weakness. Chaucer notably enhances and medicalizes Boccaccio's *Il filostrato*—colouring his imaginative world with the physiological and psychological models of his time.

The Breath of the Spirit

The physiological theory that underpinned medieval representations of love and the workings of the emotions was complemented by theological notions of *pneuma*, the divine spirit or breath. Classical and Judeo-Christian understandings were readily integrated. St. Paul takes up and combines the ideas both of classical *pneuma* and Hebrew *ruach*, the breath of God. The Holy Spirit of divinity and life is envisaged as external to the individual, moving within the cosmos, but also as inspiring and inspired, moving the souls of men and breathing the new life of the Spirit into them. St. Augustine employs the concept of *spiritus* (*pneuma*) to explore both the immaterial quality of the divine and the life force.³³ The centrality of breath to the medical model of the vital spirits lent such notions a new materiality. Distinctions between soul and air not made by Galen, who had equated air with the notion of a world-spirit, were also required: St. Isidore of Seville emphasizes that soul is generated in the womb before air is breathed in.³⁴ Divine *pneuma*/*spiritus* was most typically viewed within a physiological framework as “the instrument of the soul” but it could also, in its “animal” form in the brain, be understood as the corporeal aspect of a tripartite soul.³⁵ The terminology and concepts of the “vital spirits” and *pneuma*/*spiritus* (Holy Spirit)

³³See Verbeke, *L'évolution de la doctrine du “pneuma”*, 489–508.

³⁴Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, and Oliver Berghof, with Muriel Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), XI.1.7.

³⁵Gerald J. Grudzen, *Medical Theory about the Body and the Soul in the Middle Ages: The First Western Medical Curriculum at Monte Cassino* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007), 63–64, 200–201.

inevitably overlapped, giving breath a special status as the animating force. The heat associated in medical theory with the heart also created a physiological rationale for the prevalent imagery of fire connected with the Holy Spirit, from the account of the tongues of fire descending on the apostles at Pentecost onwards (Acts 2:1–4). Rolle’s memorable description at the start of his *Incendium amoris* of the physical sensation of the flame of divine love so strong that his breast feels literally on fire seems to take up this idea.³⁶ Divine *pneuma* or *spiritus*, the Holy Spirit, is imaged as both air and fire, corresponding readily to the Galenic conception of *pneuma* as breath and vital spark of life.

Breath, and in particular the sigh, also have long histories in relation to the articulation of religious longing. Breath and prayer are near-synonymous: breath literally reaches up to God. Augustine writes in *Confessions*, “tu es deus meus, tibi suspiro die ac nocte!” (“you are my God: day and night I sigh for you!”), referencing Psalm 42:1, “As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God.”³⁷ Dante memorably evokes breath’s journey in the *Vita nuova*: “Oltre la spera che più larga gira / passa ’l sospiro ch’ esce del mio core” (“Beyond the widest of the circling spheres / A sigh which leaves my heart aspires to move”).³⁸ St. Paul merges the concept of *pneuma* with the idea of the sigh: “the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered” (Rom 8:26–27; “groanings” may also be rendered as “sighings”). Preaching on Psalm 129, “Out of the deep”, Augustine recalls Jonah crying out: prayer “is very often carried out more with sighs than words”; sighing is “the voice of the Spirit within.”³⁹ Augustine plays on the double meaning of Latin *gemere* as sigh/coo—the sound of the dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit: “For we do not know how to pray as we ought,” he says, “but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with unutterable sighing” (Rom 8:26, “gemitibus”); “The Holy Spirit teaches us to sigh, for he is reminding us that we are

³⁶The “*Incendium amoris*” of Richard Rolle of Hampole, ed. Margaret Deanesly (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1915), Prol.145.

³⁷St. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, ed. and trans. Carolyn B.-J. Hammond, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014–16), VII.x (16).

³⁸Dante Alighieri, *La vita nuova*; *Rime*, ed. Donato Pirovano and Marco Grimaldi, intro. Enrico Malato (Rome: Editions Salerno, 2015), XLI.10–11; trans. Barbara Reynolds (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 98.

³⁹St. Augustine of Hippo, *Opera: Enarrationes in Psalmos 119–133*, Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 95, no. 3 (Vienna: Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2000), 248–49, translated and discussed by William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995), 268.

on pilgrimage and teaching us to sigh for our home country, and, with that longing, we sigh."⁴⁰ Sighs emulate Mary Magdalene, lamenting at the Cross; they are proof of fervent belief; and they reach to the heavens. Rolle in *Incendium amoris* repeatedly uses images of sighing or panting: "Ad te suspirat anima mea" ("My soul pants for you"); the perfect lover of Jesus is defined by sighs, vows, and humility, and swoons at Jesus' embrace: "deliciis inenarrabilibus affluo" ("I swoon with unspeakable delight").⁴¹

In depictions of religious experience such ideas of the fervent breath of devotion intersect with the embodied, passionate responses to deep feeling characteristic of secular writing: romantic love and divine love mirror each other as the individual responds to and with overpowering love. The rushing out of the spirits may be marked by tears and sobbing, while the flight of the spirits into the heart causes not only sighs but also swoons. Thus the dreamer of *Pearl* falls into a swoon of grief as he laments his lost pearl, his spirit leaving the body to enter into a celestial, visionary world. This connection between swooning and vision is a repeated motif, central to religious writing but also found in romance writing, for example, in the Grail romances.

Margery Kempe's immediate predecessor, Julian of Norwich, offers an analogous account of the intersection of swoon and revelatory experience. The opening of the *Revelations of Divine Love* depicts an experience of illness that withdraws breath and opens onto vision. Here this visionary state is actively sought through Julian's prayer for three miracles, one of which is to approach death in illness: "In this sikenesse I desired to have all maner paynes bodily and ghostly that I should have if I should dye, with all the dredes and tempests of the fends, and all maner of other paynes, except the outpassing of the soule."⁴² When she becomes ill, all three of her wishes are fulfilled at once: illness that will empty her of all but spiritual comfort; visual experience of Christ's Passion; and the three wounds of contrition, compassion, and "willfull longyng to God" (30). Her sickness is so extreme that she loses movement and breath:

⁴⁰Sancti Aurelii Augustini In Iobannis Euangelium Tractatus 6, ed. R. Willems, CCSL 36 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1954), 53, translated and discussed by Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, 268–69.

⁴¹Rolle, *Incendium amoris*, ed. Deanesly, II.152, XXVI.216; Richard Rolle, *The Fire of Love*, trans. Clifton Wolters (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 53, 123.

⁴²Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, ed. Barry Windeatt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), Long Text, II.30. All subsequent references to Julian's *Revelations* will be from this edition and will be cited by chapter and page number.

Thus I durid till day, and be than my body was dede fro the middis downewards as to my feleing. . . . After this my sight began to failen, and it was all derke about me in the chamber as it had be night, save in the image of the cross, wherein I beheld a comon light, and I wiste not how. All that was beside the crosse was uggly to me, as if it had be mekil occupied with the fendes.

After this the over party of my body began to dyen so ferforth that onethys I had ony feleing. My most payne was shortnes of onde and failng of life. And than I went sothly to have passid. And in this, sodenly all my peyne was taken fro me and I was as hole, and namely in the over party of my body, as ever I was aforn.

(III.31–32)

In this swoon-like state, Julian experiences fifteen of her sixteen visions. Her pain is suddenly taken from her while the visions last, until “at the end al was close and [she] saw no more” (LXVI.136); now her sickness returns, first in her head “with a sound and a dynne,” and then in her body: “sodenly al my body was fulfilled with sekenes like as it was aforn, and I was as baren and as drye as I never had comfort but lital” (LXVI.136). Now in the sixteenth vision breath is written in a newly dreadful way: Julian feels the devil’s touch and breath as he takes her by the throat. Sleep and waking overlap as “anon a lytel smoke came in at the dore with a great hete and a foule stinke” (LXVI.137); later the fiend comes again “with his hete and with his stinke.” This is the dark night of the soul, countered by Julian’s final vision of Christ ruling as king over the soul and by Jesus’ reassurance to her, “witt it now wele, it was no raving that thou saw this day” (LXX.144). In the eighth revelation, inspired by Christ’s words, “I thirst,” Julian sees his flesh drying in death and shriveling, like cloth hung out to dry, “with blowing of the wynde from withowten that dryed him with more, and peynd with cold, than myn herte can thynkyn” (XVII.57–58). These terrible images are connected with spiritual thirst, hell, and the cold breath of despair, but they are countered by the breath of the Holy Spirit, which brings both life and true rest: “the Holy Gost graciously inspirith [breathes] into us gifts ledand to endless life” (LV.117). Prayer can be “barren and dry” (XLI.93), but it is treasured by God, whom the soul will ultimately perceive with all the senses: “hym verily seand and fulsumly feland, hym gostly heryng, and hym delectably smellyng, and hym swetely swelowyng” (XLIII.98). He is breathed in by, as well as breathing spiritual life into, Julian, inspired and inspiring. The loss of breath in Julian’s extreme illness paradoxically leads to the intimate encounter with the

breath of the Spirit; the embodied, felt experience of the Passion as Christ loses his own earthly breath; and the battle between the forces of inspiration and demonic desolation.

Living Inspiration and Revelation

This rich set of ideas clustering around breath, then, was “in the air” and such ideas were treated in often sophisticated ways across secular and devotional writing. For Margery Kempe, they had the potential to provide powerful explanatory models and frameworks. In keeping with the active religious life of Norfolk, the many references to other religious works in the *Book* make clear Kempe’s deep engagement with vernacular devotional writings, and their formative role in her narrative. With a priest of Lynn she undertakes a course of such devotional reading: “He red to hir many a good boke of hy contemplacyon and other bokys, as the Bybyl wyth doctowrys [glosses] therupon, Seynt Brydys [Bridget’s] boke, Hyltons boke, Boneventur, *Stimulis Amoris*, [Rolle’s] *Incendium Amoris*, and swech other” (4818–21). While the English mystics are on the whole suspicious of physical manifestations of visionary experience, the works of Rolle in particular offered Kempe a model of ardent, embodied desire. There was no clear boundary between theology and natural philosophy, and the learned clerics with whom Kempe conversed so extensively are likely to have been familiar, at least in outline, with physiological concepts such as that of the vital spirits, and to have recognized the coincidence of this model with ideas of the Spirit as an inspiring, moving force. As the detailed engagement in secular works shows, physiological models of the bodily spirits and the emotions were relatively widely known, including through works such as Bartholomew’s *De proprietatibus rerum* and John Trevisa’s translation, and other Galenic medical works texts as Gilbert Anglicus’s treatise, all of which reached both lay and clerical readers. Late medieval religious compendia such as Peter of Ailly’s *Tractatus de anima* (c. 1380) offered “an introduction to psychology,” including discussion of the emotions, the passions, and the soul, and drawing on Aristotle’s *De anima*, Pseudo-Albertus’s *Summa naturalium*, and a wide range of other philosophical and theological works.⁴³ Works such as the Carthusian Nicholas Love’s *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, a translation of the early fourteenth-century

⁴³Knuuttila, *Emotions in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy*, 282.

Meditationes vitae Christi, written for a Franciscan nun (often misattributed to St. Bonaventure), and the early fifteenth-century Middle English *Speculum devotorum*, which in part also translates the *Meditationes*, combine narrative and image with scholarly discourse and commentary, suggesting a context in which mystical experience was invited, contextualized, and theorized. Love's translation was one of the most widely read of medieval works, its popularity rivaling that of the *Prick of Conscience* and the *Canterbury Tales*. The Long Text of Julian's *Revelations*, the fruits of reflection over twenty years on the meaning of her showings, demonstrates the practice of inviting and meditating on spiritual experience in action.

The appeal of Kempe's *Book* lies especially in the vivid immediacy of its spiritual experience, yet that experience too responds to and creates its own intellectual thought world. Physiological engagement is evident in Kempe's careful distinction between "seeing" with inward and outward eyes, which takes up and makes spontaneous the kind of practice, advocated by the *Meditationes vitae Christi* and Love's *Mirror* or the *Stimulus amoris*, of actively entering into the Passion and other events through the imagination.⁴⁴ Her inward life is intimately associated with the body. Like Julian's *Revelations*, Kempe's first visionary experience is occasioned by extreme illness, in this case the terrifying madness following the birth of her first child, probably what would now be diagnosed as postpartum psychosis. Kempe's vision of devils assaulting her, not unlike Julian's sixteenth vision, emphasizes their flaming breath: "sche sey, as hir thowt, develys opyn her mowthys al inflaumyd wyth brennyng lowys {flames} of fyr, as thei schuld a swalwyd hyr in, sumtyme rampyng at hyr, sumtyme thretyng her, sumtym pullyng hyr and halyng hir bothe nyght and day duryng the forseyd tyme" (202–6). The wondrous vision of Jesus that restores her is depicted in physiological terms: "lokyng upon hir wyth so blyssyd a chere that sche was strengthyd

⁴⁴See further Corinne Saunders, "Voices and Vision: Mind, Body and Affect in Medieval Writing," in *The Edinburgh Companion to the Critical Medical Humanities*, ed. Anne Whitehead and Angela Woods (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 411–27; Corinne Saunders, "The Mystical Theology of Margery Kempe: Writing the Inner Life," in *Mystical Theology and Contemporary Spiritual Practice: Renewing the Contemplative Tradition*, ed. Julianne McLean, Peter Tyler, and C. C. H. Cook (London: Routledge, 2017), 34–57; Corinne Saunders with Charles Fernyhough, "Reading Margery Kempe's Inner Voices," *postmedieval* 8, no. 2 (2017): 139–46; and Corinne Saunders, "Writing Revelation: *The Book of Margery Kempe*," in *Manuscript and Print in Late Medieval and Early Tudor Britain: Essays in Honour of Professor Julia Boffey*, ed. Tamara Atkin and Jaclyn Rajcic (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2019), 147–66.

in alle hir spyrytyz" (230–31). The vital spirits that also animate the mental faculties are restored, and she is "stablyd in hir wyttys and hir reson" (237–38).

While the phenomenon of Kempe's cryings is most often the focus of discussions of her piety, it is part of a more holistic, embodied, and organic experience of devotion and the workings of grace, which extends from the heart to the mind, incorporating multisensory vision. Like Rolle's *Incendium amoris*, the *Book* attends carefully to being moved in physical terms by the spirit or breath of God. This is manifest both in Kempe's own "mevynggys and hyr sterryngys" as she is "enspyred of the Holy Gost," and the stirrings of others to believe in her (1071–72). Her conversion experience is closely connected with breath: she hears a heavenly melody "so swet and delectable, hir thowt, as sche had ben in paradysse" (325–26), which inspires "greet sobbyngys and syhyngys aftyr the blysse of heven" (333–34). The compulsive weeping that commences with this first vision of heaven continues over her entire life, the most conspicuous mark of her embodied piety. The extreme movements of breath manifest in Kempe's cryings reflect the extremity of spiritual inspiration. Both the heavenly sound and the term "drawt" (335, being drawn to God) evoke the notion of *pneuma*, the breath of God. Later Kempe returns to such experience, hearing "gret sowndys and gret melodiis" (6224) that signal heavenly merriment, and the sound of bellows, identified as "the sownd of the Holy Gost" (2968); the Lord turns the sound into that of a dove, the traditional symbol of the Holy Spirit, and then a robin, all followed by "gret grace" (2972). Sensory experiences merge as the divine breath is rendered in sound, touch, and sight. The ancient connection between the senses and the heart as seat of thought and feeling makes readily available the interpretation of these experiences and their affects as the *pneuma*, divine breath, entering directly into the heart.

Kempe's visions most often respond to liturgical festivals or places, and are closely connected too with meditative states and her conversations with Christ. Late in the book (Chap. LXXXV), however, a different model of involuntary revelation is introduced, that of the semi-swooning state akin to sleep in which the spirits are open to vision. Kempe recounts how 'sche myth not chesyn' but 'fel in a litel slomeryng' (6960–61), to experience a vision of the Book of Life. In the same chapter, she describes how she lay weeping in the choir of the church and 'sodeynly sche was in a maner of slep' (7005), seeing before her Christ's

crucified body. Tears and sudden sleep, both responses reflecting the heightened affects of breath, open onto the embodied experience of vision, recalling the connection between swoon and vision in other works.

The fire or flame of love is also a central motif, sustained across the narrative: “sche had many holy teerys and wepingys, and oftyntymys ther cam a flawme of fyer abowte hir brest ful hoot and delectabyl” (7369–72). As well as with weeping, the flame of love is often connected with other physical tokens of divine revelation evocative of *pneuma/spiritus*, including, in the passage directly following this, “a voys of a swet brydde” and “sowndys and melodiis” (7376–78). The flame is made new in Kempe’s reworking of the visionary life: it is not simply a metaphor for fervent love, but also a literal representation of the inspiration of the heart by the Spirit, profoundly and often painfully physical. Kempe’s heart is “consumyd wyth ardowr of lofe” (929–30); she is “unmythy to kepyn hirselve in stabilnes for the unqwenchabyl fyer of lofe which brent ful sor in hir sowle” (3242–44). The potential for tension between physiological and theological perspectives is suggested in the *Book’s* account of attempts by the Carmelite friar Alan of Lynn and other clerics to persuade Kempe’s enemy, the learned Franciscan William Melton, that her experience is revelatory; Melton suspects, by contrast, that she suffers from a disease of the heart (“a cardiakyl”; 5063)—that the experience is not spiritual but pathological.

The cryings that are intimately connected with the fire of love can also be understood in terms of the play of bodily spirits. Kempe’s tears are a crucial aspect of her revelatory experience and response to the trauma of the Passion, but this “synguler and . . . specyal yyft” (3268) is also extreme and compulsive, transformed when she travels to Jerusalem into a “kryng and roryng” (2216), “plentyvows terys and boystows sobbyngys, wyth loude cryngys and schille [*sic*] shrykyngys” (3534–36). While there are analogies with the weeping of Christ (described, for example, in Love’s *Mirror*); of the Virgin and Mary Magdalene; and of other holy women, such as Marie of Oignies, reading of whose tears inspires belief in the priest who condemns Kempe,⁴⁵ the *Book* also emphasizes the discomfort and wonder of the cryings. The repeated connection made between Kempe’s cryings and physical “fallyng” (2190) suggests the most extreme effect of the vital spirits drawn into the heart

⁴⁵See Love, *Mirror of the Blessed Life*, ed. Sargent, 178, 180; *Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Windeatt, 2207n.; 2212n.

through profound emotion (“the fervowr of the spiryt was so meche that the body fayld”; 6684–85), again recalling the swoon. The association with the breath is made differently explicit when Kempe turns blue, or the color of lead, from the extremity of her cryings (2256). Such responses led some of Kempe’s contemporaries to see her as possessed or suffering from “a sekenes,” presumably the “falling sickness,” or epilepsy (2245–46), and they have been emphasized in retrospective diagnoses.⁴⁶ These responses also, however, readily fit the model of the vital spirits rushing into and out of the heart in a combination of ecstasy and grief, of the kind so frequently depicted as causing the response of swooning. In Kempe’s *Book*, crying and falling, “these bodily mevyngys,” the effects of the rush of spirits and breath, are connected with the flame of *pneuma*/*spiritus* in the heart (2275–80): theological and physiological models intersect.

If we read this extraordinary account of embodied spirituality without placing it within its wider literary and intellectual contexts, we fail to appreciate its resonances. While Kempe may not have been conversant with the precise detail of medical or philosophical theory, at least some in her clerical circle are likely to have been able to offer generalized frameworks for understanding emotional and spiritual experience. These ideas were “in the air,” permeating the medieval thought world down to its popular roots. They were available in the texts and lives that influenced Kempe and shaped her own and her readers’ responses. They create at once a newly animated version of the *vita* and a visionary work of contemplation. To see Kempe’s behaviors simply as conventional, performative, or imitative—or indeed as exclusively medical disorders—ignores the physicality of contemporary understandings of divine inspiration and of emotion. Breathing connects mind and body; sends the vital spirits from the heart to the mind; kindles the fire of love; and in extreme emotion also stimulates the disturbance of the spirits that causes severe crying and falling, a rushing out of the fire, and a sudden

⁴⁶Retrospective diagnoses of Kempe’s behaviors have included hysteria, psychosis, or temporal-lobe epilepsy; see further Richard Lawes, “The Madness of Margery Kempe,” in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition: England, Ireland, and Wales. Exeter Symposium VI: Papers Read at Charny Manor, July 1999*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 147–67. Lawes argues for a diagnosis of temporal-lobe epilepsy. On the limits of psychopathological diagnoses see Alison Torn, “Madness and Mysticism: Can a Mediaeval Narrative Inform our Understanding of Psychosis?,” *History and Philosophy of Psychology* 13 (2011): 1–14; and Alison Torn, “Looking Back: Medieval Mysticism or Psychosis?,” *The Psychologist* 24, no. 10 (2011): 788–90. Tory Vandeventer Pearman places Kempe in the context of contemporary disability studies: *Women and Disability in Medieval Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 113–49.

withdrawal of the vital spirits into the heart. In Kempe's *Book*, gender and genre meet and are refracted by a unique thought world to shape an embodied spirituality that is strange yet explicable, not pathological but profoundly *passional*—a thinking, feeling, and breathing spirituality.

Conclusion

If read in relation to the surge of interest and availability of informational texts to a newly widened readership, the *vita* of Elizabeth of Spalbeek and *The Book of Margery Kempe* emerge as deeply involved in urgent fifteenth-century conversations regarding the potential of matter to make the divine present, and as contributing their own new knowledge as to the forms, limits, and possibilities of the human body. These conversations took place across a wide spectrum of professional religious and laypeople, both women and men. Expanding our sense of the information about the natural and supernatural worlds such works might offer medieval readers, they also suggest that a comparable approach to other female *vitae* might yield similarly intriguing results. One of the other *vitae* in the Douce manuscript, the life of Marie of Oignies, makes an especially promising case in point, since the scribe of *The Book of Margery Kempe* claims to have consulted it specifically in order to gain a better understanding of Kempe's difficult gift of tears (5127–34). But it may also be transformative to look beyond genre, to reimagine other women's writings and *vitae* that we presently read through the category of the devotional—from Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* to John Capgrave's *Life of St. Katherine*—in order to resituate them in relation to the larger search for knowledge about the human, the world, and the divine.