

The Virgin in the *Hortus conclusus*: Healing the Body and Healing the Soul

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Introduction: The Iconography of the Virgin and the Song of Songs

THE RELIGIOUS image of the *hortus conclusus* has emerged largely from the hermeneutics of the Song of Songs, playing a significant role in contemplative discourse. From the time of the Song's first allegorical interpretation, the bridegroom was identified with Christ and the bride with the Church, who in turn, was mystically equated with the Virgin and with the individual soul. With the growth of the cult of the Virgin in the late Middle Ages, however, a new totally Marian interpretation became common in the second half of the twelfth century.¹ Commentators on the Song of Songs, such as the Rhenish Benedictine Rupert of Deutz (d. ca. 1129) and Honorius of Autun (d. ca. 1154), interpreted the whole poem as an epithalamium for the nuptials between Christ and the Virgin. Honorius expounds that "Omnia quae de Ecclesia dicta sunt, possunt etiam de ipsa Virgine, sponsa et matre sponsi, intelligi" (everything that is said of the Church can also be understood as being like the Virgin herself, the bride and mother of the Bridegroom).² St. Bernard of Clairvaux ardently venerates the

1. For the Marian commentary on the Song of Songs, see E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990); Anne W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990). For the Latin commentary of the twelfth century, see Rupert of Deutz, *Commentaria in Canticum Canticorum (de incarnatione Domini)*, ed. H. Haacke, Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis 26 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1974).

2. Honorius of Autun, *Expositio in Cantica Canticorum*, PL. 172. 494. Translation mine.

Virgin in his mystical theology because he is convinced that the Virgin is the embodiment of the most intimate relationship between divinity and humanity and thus mirrors the most sacred aspects of the spiritual union to which the human soul aspires.³ Christian art found no difficulty in adopting this interpretation of the Song of Songs. The mosaic of the apse of Santa Maria in Trastevere in Rome (1140) shows the increasing tendency to identify the Virgin and Christ as the Bride and Bridegroom.⁴ The two figures are seated on a throne, and the Bridegroom has his right hand around the shoulders of his Bride, who holds a scroll inscribed: “His left hand is under my head, and his right hand shall embrace me” (Song of Songs 2.6).

Significant to the image of the *hortus conclusus*, the bridegroom identifies the bride with an enclosed garden and a sealed fountain: “My sister, my spouse, is a garden enclosed, a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up” (4.12). Towards the end of the Middle Ages, the Virgin came to represent the Immaculate Conception and her womb was conceived as the garden of the Incarnation. This doctrine held that the Virgin was exempt from original sin, illuminating the world through her purity, and the image was widely disseminated through the institution of the feast of the Immaculate Conception (ca. 1140).⁵ But it must be noted that controversy over the doctrine developed in the late Middle Ages: opponents held that the Virgin was not conceived asexually but conceived in original sin and then was sanctified in the womb, while some theologians

3. See St. Bernard’s sermon on the Assumption in *St Bernard’s Sermons on the Blessed Virgin Mary*, trans. A Priest of Mount Melleray (Chulmleigh, Devon: Augustine Publishing, 1984), 169-70.

4. See Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Vintage, 1976), color plate 4, fig. 6.

5. For the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and its iconography, see Emile Mâle, *Religious Art in France: The Late Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 197-210; Anne Winston-Allen, *Stories of the Rose: The Making of the Rosary in the Middle Ages* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 92. See further Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa, “Marian Virtues and Margery Kempe: The Influence of Carmelite Devotion to the Virgin,” *Carmelus: Commentarii ab Instituto Carmelitano Editi* 50 (2003): 89-112, 98-101.

maintained that the Virgin was conceived at the moment of Anne and Joachim's kiss at the Golden Gate. The doctrine was still controversial in the fifteenth century, and it was not Catholic doctrine until 1854.⁶

In Christian art, the Virgin in the *hortus conclusus* is often represented as sitting in the middle of a walled garden, surrounded by female saints, flowers, and trees, and this iconography gained popularity from the mid-fourteenth century. It has been taken for granted that the Marian image originated in the *hortus conclusus* of the Song of Songs and was developed into the representation of the Madonna in the rose garden in the fifteenth century.⁷ This essay, however, argues that the Virgin is not merely the bride of the Song of Songs or an immaculate receptacle of the divine Child, but also, given the increasing awareness of therapeutic power of horticulture following the onset of plague (1347-50) in later medieval society, suggests that the Virgin in the garden also plays a therapeutic role in maintaining the health of the body and the soul.⁸ In a pre-Cartesian society where body and soul were inextricably linked, aspects of devotional literature and images were predicated

6. See Sheila Delany, *Impolitic Bodies: Poetry, Saints, and Society in Fifteenth-Century England: The Works of Osborn Bokenham* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 82-85.

7. Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death: The Arts, Religion, and Society in the Mid-Fourteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 140. Meiss argues that the composition of the Virgin seated in a garden was the later development of the Madonna of Humility and appeared first in Italy in the late fourteenth century. As Meiss discussed, the emergence of the iconography of the Madonna of Humility bears witness to the impact of the plague on devotional images. For a brief summary of Mary and gardens, see Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 310-12.

8. Proliferation of plague literature in the wake of the plague with its emphasis on preventive medicine attests to a widespread concern for the *regimen sanitatis* in late medieval society: see my article, "The Translation of the *Regimen Sanitatis* into a Handbook for the Devout Laity: a New Look at the *Kalender of Shepherds* and its Context," in *In Principio Fuit Interpres*, ed. Alessandra Petrina, *The Medieval Translator/Traduire au Moyen Age 15* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013): 303-15. doi: 10.1484/M.TMT.1.101441.

upon an interaction between medical and religious discourses, cure of the soul being seen as an essential aspect of medical care. Indeed, the idea of Christ the Physician and the Virgin, who acts as a nurse in the service of her Son, was widespread in the Middle Ages, as evidenced, for example, in devotional works such as *Le Livre de Seyntz Medicines*, written by Henry of Lancaster (d. 1361). Moreover, there was also a belief in the Virgin as healer in contexts that went beyond her more generally recognized association with childbirth.⁹

Medieval Women as Healers

In terms of women's contributions to medicine and its cultural role, however, the medieval response to the female body was essentially ambivalent. On one hand, the healing powers of the Virgin encapsulated those of women as nurses and nourishers. On the other, the Church not only dismissed women as daughters of Eve or, in the famous words of Tertullian (d. ca. 235) as "the gateway of the devil,"¹⁰ but it also explained their weakness by means of Hippocratic (Galenic) medical theories. Arguing that women's damp and fleshy bodies make them phlegmatic, theologians supported stereotypes of female inferiority. The Aristotelian view of women is more pejorative in defining women as being "not as fully human as men"¹¹ and asserting the idea of the female as a defective male. As Nancy Caciola argues, "the thirteenth century, in fact, saw the gradual substitution of a highly polarized (Aristotelian) model of sex differences in place of the more complementary (Galenic) model that had prevailed in earlier centuries," which subsequently disseminated such misogynistic ideas throughout Christendom.¹²

9. Diane Watt, "Mary the Physician: Women, Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages," in *Medicine, Religion and Gender in Medieval Culture*, ed. Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, forthcoming 2015).

10. Tertullian, *The Appearance of Women (De Cultu Feminarum)*, 1.1, in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, ed. Alcuin Blamires (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 51.

11. Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 140.

12. *Ibid.*, 141; Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages:*

Nevertheless, although the world of academic medicine was monopolized by university-trained physicians, clearly women were actively participating in care and cure.¹³ They were expected to supervise the health and welfare of their families, to say the least, and played a notable part in medical treatment, which usually began at home in the kitchen where food was prescribed in accordance with humoral therapy. At medieval hospitals women attended the sick through hands-on caring while midwives and empirics fed their patients in accordance with an appropriate regimen, cleansing and comforting them, all of which demanded exhausting labor and courage. The image of St. Elizabeth of Hungary (d. 1231), who tends the lepers by bathing them and feeding them with chicken, conveys the caring nature of women.¹⁴ In addition, towards the end of the Middle Ages, women's medicine converged with popular devotion to the Virgin and female members of the Holy Kindred (notably St. Anne).¹⁵ As holy women throughout Europe became devotional patrons and exemplars for medieval women, they were increasingly enlisted for intercession, protection, and miraculous cures. In this connection, the Virgin was increasingly implored for the wellbeing of the devout soul. Arguing for the multifaceted role the Virgin assumed in late medieval society, this essay will now explore the interaction of spiritual and physical health in the iconography of the Virgin in the *hortus conclusus*: examining her role as healer, it will first focus on the context of the medieval *regimen sanitatis* and then consider more broadly

Medicine, Science and Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

13. Medical history was predominantly a history of great men written by retired doctors who were less interested in women's activities or folk remedies.

14. See an altarpiece of ca. 1500 from the Collegiate Church of Laufen near Basel, reproduced in Carole Rawcliffe, "Hospital Nurses and Their Work," in *Daily Life in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. Richard Britnell (Stroud: Sutton, 1998), 43–64, 60.

15. The late medieval proliferation of images of the Virgin and female saints might also underscore growing power for medieval women in the realities of family life. For a recent study on popular devotion, see Carole Hill, *Women and Religion in Late Medieval Norwich* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2010).

the convergence of medical and religious discourses embedded in this iconography.

The Medieval *Regimen sanitatis*

The late medieval idea of the *regimen sanitatis* is based on Hippocratic and Galenic medicine, which recommended that the best weapon against diseases was a healthy system of physical and spiritual care, the ethos of which was in accord with Christianity. Indeed, classical medicine and the teachings of the Church were smoothly integrated by means of the translation of the classical theory of humors into the context of Christian history. Since St. Augustine (d. 430), the Church maintained that Adam and Eve possessed a perfect mixture of humors in Paradise.¹⁶ With the advent of sin, however, the balance was destroyed, and diseases entered into the world. This, in turn, means that the chief cause of sickness was Original Sin—a result of Eve’s disobedience in tempting Adam with the apple of forbidden knowledge. Yet, the coming of Christ allowed humankind to recapture the harmony of body and soul by reversing the malignant effects of the Fall.¹⁷ According to the Galenic system, the body’s humoral balance could be affected by “non-naturals,” variable aspects of the environment as well as of human behavior, which were loosely grouped under the categories of ambient air, exercise, and rest, sleeping and waking, food and drink, evacuation and repletion, and the passions or accidents of the soul. One could also understand these non-naturals according to a spiritual model by means of which the body’s humoral balance was vulnerable to the deadly sins, acting both externally and internally.¹⁸ As “each of the deadly sins carried a humoral penalty,”

16. Joseph Ziegler, “Medicine and Immortality in Terrestrial Paradise,” in *Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, ed. Joseph Ziegler and Peter Biller (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2001), 201-42, 204-5.

17. St Augustine, *Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), bk. 10, chap. 27, p. 432.

18. See further Pedro Gil Sotres, “The Regimens of Health,” in *Western Medical Thought from Antiquity to the Middle Ages*, ed. Mirko D. Grmek (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 291-318.

sinful humanity had to endeavor to avoid sins and keep a good humoral balance through the proper management of the six non-naturals, so preserving the health of both body and soul.¹⁹ From the eleventh century onwards, the Hippocratic Corpus spread across Christendom largely through the *Isagoge* (Introduction to Medicine), a succinct explanation of key determinants of health, written by Hunayn (d. ca. 873) in Arabic and translated into Latin by Constantinus Africanus (d. before 1098) at Monte Cassino between ca. 1075 and 1085.²⁰

Among the six non-naturals, ambient air or smell, in particular, was the main element that preserved life.²¹ It was thought to exert a powerful effect on the natural, vital, and animal spirits. Defined by Bartholomaeus Anglicus (d. 1272) as “a smoky vapour arising from the substance of a thing,”²² smell was regarded as a real substance, or corporeal entity,

19. Christopher Bonfield, “The *Regimen Sanitatis* and its Dissemination in England, c.1348-1550” (PhD thesis, University of East Anglia, 2006), 90. The interconnection between physical and spiritual health was reinforced around the time of the Gregorian Reform and the Fourth Lateran Council. Canon 21 (*Omnis utriusque sexus*), which demanded annual confession and communion, enabled one to achieve reconciliation with God and to restore humoral imbalances. See my article, “Holy Medicine and Disease of the Soul: Henry of Lancaster and *Le Livre de Seyntz Medicines*,” *Medical History* 53, no. 3 (2009): 397-414. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0025727300003999>.

20. The *Isagoge* laid a foundation for how to diagnose a patient and organize therapy, and its emphasis on the six non-naturals as key determinants of health and illness influenced western medical thinking. The *Isagoge* was later included in a popular compendium of medical texts, the *Articella* or *Little Art of Medicine*: see Vivian Nutton, “Medicine in Medieval Western Europe, 1000-1500,” in *The Western Medical Tradition, 800 BC to AD 1800*, ed. Lawrence I. Conrad, Michael Neve, Vivian Nutton, Roy Porter, and Andrew Wear (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 139-205, 141-42.

21. Constance Classen, David Howes, and Anthony Synott, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1.

22. Richard Palmer, “In Bad Odour: Smell and its Significance in Medicine from Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century,” in *Medicine and the Five Senses*, ed. W. F. Bynum and Roy Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 61-68, 63.

“somewhere between water and air.”²³ When good smells penetrated the brain, they would work as healing smells that nourish and restore the spirits and humoral balance effectively.²⁴ Therefore, aromatic medicines had wide applications. As Avicenna (d. 1037) advised, “where several remedies brought about the same effect, the best one to use was the sweetest and most pleasant smelling.”²⁵ Smells could be used to influence the spirits and even to move them about the body such as when the vital spirit retreats to the heart in the experience of fear and anxiety.²⁶ Fragrances were also used as prophylactics: floral perfume strengthened the body by fortifying the vital spirit, protecting it against disease and illness. For this purpose, the small walled garden (especially a rose garden) was important because the scent would be intensified by being enclosed and it would create a barrier against miasmas, which were thought to be the main cause of the plague.

Therapeutic Gardens

Medieval preoccupation with the therapeutic value of gardens is witnessed, for example, in an assemblage of gardens of the hospital of St. Giles, Norwich—a walled herb garden, cultivated for medicinal purposes by the sisters, a large kitchen garden, and orchards of apple and pear. There was another garden called “paradyse,” where the brethren were able to engage in quiet contemplation as they strolled over the scented lawns.²⁷ According to Carole Rawcliffe, “almost all Benedictine and Cistercian houses maintained such enclosed places, designed as allegorical representations of the Garden of Eden to offer tranquil space for

23. Carole Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2006), 227.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Palmer, “Bad Odour,” 64.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Carole Rawcliffe, “Delectable Sightes and Fragrant Smelles’: Gardens and Health in Late Medieval and Early Modern England,” *Garden History* 37 (2008): 3-21, 6. Rawcliffe remarks that “the profusion of gardens and vineyards in urban monasteries is not unusual” (18n24).

meditation upon man's fallen nature."²⁸ Indeed, the garden was originally contrived for monastic spirituality and monastic medicine.²⁹ Since early medieval monasticism adopted the ancient ideal of *otium sanctum* (holy leisure), the medieval garden offered space for penitential meditation upon man's fallen nature and for the quest for union with the divine. In this context, "paradise" implies the garden of heavenly paradise where the Virgin is often depicted enthroned. Sharply contrasted with Eve, who was expelled from Paradise, the Virgin in the *hortus conclusus* was worshipped by those who wished to return to a state of prelapsarian grace and regain bodily and spiritual health through meditation, a therapeutic experience deemed necessary for union with God.

The medical theory of smell supported the healthiness of the Garden of Eden. Scholars believed that "the fruit, leaves or perfume of the Tree of Life had arrested the natural process of desiccation and decay that led, inevitably, to death, while also protecting the couple against anxiety and stress."³⁰ Pleasant smells became therapeutic means to vivify the spirits and to control the passions of the soul. Mystical texts, which often display a convergence of the senses, convey their experience as accompanied by good smells, since it was believed that a floral fragrance permeated Heaven where one may breathe eternal bliss into the soul.³¹ Conversely, Purgatory and Hell were associated with a vile stench. Julian of Norwich, for example, describes temptation by the devil as a feverish state in which Julian, in her sickbed, smells his stench.³² Nor is it any

28. Ibid. The laity also used their gardens for meditation and prayer: see 18n25.

29. For the garden as an allegory of the cloister and the virtues of plants as moral symbols, see Walahfrid Strabo's *Hortulus*, in *Medieval Medicine: A Reader*, ed. Faith Wallis (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 98-109.

30. Rawcliffe, "Garden and Health in England," 7.

31. Catherine of Siena, in the *Dialogue*, speaks of tasting the fragrance of the sacrament; cited in Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 174.

32. See *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* (known as her short text), in *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and*

coincidence that Christ appeared to Mary Magdalene as a gardener on Easter morning (John 20:15).³³ Similarly, in Richard Rolle's comparison of Christ's body "to a meadow ful of swete flours and holsome herbes,"³⁴ the healing powers of floral perfume are attributed to Christ who, by extension, is conceived as the Physician and Apothecary in a healthy, redeemed garden.³⁵

The Virgin as Healer in the *Hortus conclusus*

The Virgin in the *hortus conclusus* is no less a potent symbol of bodily and spiritual health. Like Heaven where lilies and roses are always florescent, the enclosed garden is full of the sweet smells of flowers. In medieval iconography, the rose was one of the Virgin's most popular attributes. A stained glass window at Browne's Hospital in Stamford, Lincolnshire, for example, depicts her holding red roses and white lilies.³⁶ In the medieval hospital, where the fears of miasmatic infection took hold, the sweet smell of roses and lilies must have had soothing effects on body and soul. Roses were also a staple of medical care: Theodoric of Bologna (d. 1298), the most celebrated of the Dominican friars to practice surgery, recommended rosewater cooled over snow to treat burns because it prevents blistering and keeps the area cool and moist.³⁷ The word rosewater

A Revelation of Love, ed. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts* 5 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 23. 18-22.

33. See "Resurrection of Christ," Book of Hours, France, ca. 1410, Brugge, Openbare Bibliotheek, MS 321, f. 26v.

34. *English Writings of Richard Rolle*, ed. Hope Emily Allen (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 36; see also Rawcliffe, "Gardens and Health in England," 7-8.

35. For the image of Christ the Apothecary, see *Chants royaux sur la Conception couronnées au Puy de Rouen*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Fr. 1537, f. 82v.

36. See Penny Hebgin-Barnes, *The Medieval Stained Glass of the County of Lincolnshire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 290.

37. Theodoric, *The Surgery of Theodoric*, ca. A. D. 1267, trans. Eldridge Campbell and James Colton, 2 vols (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955), 2: 135.

designated two sorts of liquid—a dew or juice that was expressed from rose petals and a distillate.³⁸ The fourteenth-century *Tacuinum sanitatis* [A Table of Health], a handbook on health translated from *Taqwīm al-Sibha* by Ibn Butlān (d. ca. 1038), a Christian physician who studied Arabic medicine in Bagdad, describes the process of preparing rosewater using only the petals' natural moisture.³⁹ But because this liquid could only be produced in limited quantities, a more economical method was to grind the petals and soak them in water. This variety of rosewater was used to produce the other principal genre—a distillate. This spirit seems to have had three main purposes, “as a medicine, as a culinary ingredient, and as a perfume.”⁴⁰

It is, however, not just roses that nurture bodily and spiritual health. Such flowers as violet and iris were known as medicinal flowers, and they are rendered in late medieval Marian paintings. One notable example is “The Madonna at the Fountain” (The Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp) executed by Jan van Eyck in 1439 (fig. 1). The Flemish master depicted the Virgin in an enclosed rose garden, standing by the fountain with the Child. In front of the enclosing hedge of roses is a low brick bench, which is planted with violets and iris. Violets produced a cold and moist “humectant aroma” and were used to “perfume, moisturise and cool the skin.”⁴¹ Bartholomaeus Anglicus also indicates, “if he be ymedled wiþ sucre and ydo long tyme in þe sunne in a glasene vessel violette laxeþ þe wombe, and abateþ swellyng, and chaungeþ feuerous hete, and quencheþ furst.”⁴² Iris emits the scent of frankincense, thus

38. Terence Scully, *The Art of Cookery in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1995), 164.

39. *The Four Seasons of the House of Cerruti*, trans. Judith Spencer (New York: Facts on File, 1984), 64.

40. Scully, *The Art of Cookery*, 165. For the same method of distillation for domestic use, see, *Le Menagier de Paris*, ed. Georgine E. Brereton and Janet M. Ferrier (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), 272–73.

41. Rawcliffe, *Leprosy*, 227; *La grande chirurgie of Henri de Mondeville*, ed. E. Nicaise (Paris, 1890), 622.

42. Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus De proprietatibus rerum*, ed. M. C. Seymour et al., 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 2: 16: 1087; Angela



Fig. 1: The Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp. Jan van Eyck, “The Madonna at the Fountain” (1439). By kind permission of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp.

improving the quality of ambient air. Such flowering garden plants as lilies, iris, violets, carnations, and columbine are present also in Hugo van der Goes's "Portinari altarpiece" (ca. 1475-78, Uffizzi Museum, Florence): these plants not only symbolize purity, humility, and meekness—those virtues the Virgin traditionally assumes, but also convey the painter's interest in and knowledge of medicinal flowers.⁴³ In Hugo's day, the root of the white iris, in particular, was used "to cauterize wounds," while columbine blossoms were "applied to wounds, and consumed for stomach pains and female disorders."⁴⁴ The popularity of medicinal flowers in Marian paintings bears witness to the way that the Virgin in the *bortus conclusus* emerges as a healer dispensing medicinal herbs to the onlookers.

Importantly, these aromatic, medicinal flowers are no less charged with symbolism associated with Christ's Passion. Violet and iris are symbolic of the Virgin's sorrow over the sacrifice of Christ. Iris, alias sword-lily, is a symbol of the sword of the Seven Sorrows of the Virgin, the sword that according to the prophecy of Simeon, would pierce her heart (Luke 2:22-35).⁴⁵ In traditional Christian iconography, roses symbolize Christ and the Virgin, and they are usually red and white, signifying

Montford, *Health, Sickness, Medicine and the Friars in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 201.

43. Hugo had a mental illness and suffered an episode of mental disturbance sometime after 1477. See further Peter Murray Jones, "Music Therapy in the Later Middle Ages: The Case of Hugo van der Goes," in *Music as Medicine: The History of Music Therapy since Antiquity*, ed. Peregrine Horden (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 120-44.

44. Robert A. Koch, "Flower Symbolism in the Portinari Altar," *The Art Bulletin* 46, no. 1 (1964): 70-77, 76, doi:10.2307/3048141. Koch also points out that the lilies and irises are contained in an *albarello*, a drug jar imported from Spain (76).

45. The cult of the Sorrows of the Virgin, which developed in the later Middle Ages, had various functions, "high among them that of serving as an objective correlative for the discharge of grief and suffering in the face of successive waves of plague sweeping through Christendom." Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c.1400-c.1580* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 259.

the Passion and purity respectively. Importantly, as devotion to Christ's humanity, shown by his sufferings during the Passion, developed in the later Middle Ages, red roses were often identified with his wounds. Moreover, this piety is germane to the related devotion to his blood, heart, and wounds, all of which symbolized the eucharist.⁴⁶ Grounded in eucharistic piety, Henry of Lancaster, for example, deploys wound imagery in his penitential meditation. By transforming his medical knowledge into a eucharistic metaphor, Henry conceives of rosewater as a liquid distilled from the rose petals of Christ's bleeding wounds into the Virgin's tears, the function of which is to free the patient from the heat of sin.⁴⁷ He appreciates the rosewater's soothing effect on his feverish body wounded by sins committed during his life.

Significantly, early in his meditation Henry envisions the Virgin's tears as clear white wine. Comparing the Virgin to the grapes grown on Jesse's vine (Isaiah 11:1), Henry equates her with the bunch nearest the sun ripened under the burning love of God. The grapes are then placed in "the press of sorrow" to yield the precious wine, as clear as tears, in abundance for washing the wounds of sinners:

Benoite doit estre clamee celle bon grap qe si meure devient par ceo qe si pres cressoit de solail et si haut en foy, qe si chaude estoit le ray de solail, qe un ardant amour si entroit en celle grape, qe si tresmeure la fist, qe quant elle estoit myse en pressour de dolour, elle nous engetta si precieuse vyn de ses douz oeux, qe celui a qi cest vyn ne purroit savourer est en malveise poynt, et les plaies serroient trop perillouses et trop pleines d'ordure qe ceo vyn ne purroit nettoier par laver, et ceo vyn estoit blank come de mult cleres lermes et a grande foison come d'un grap; et ausi grande est la bosoigne pur tant de plaies laver et si ordes.

46. Eucharistic piety intensified in the wake of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215). For a recent study, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

47. *Le Livre de Seyntz Medicines: The Unpublished Devotional Treatise of Henry of Lancaster*, ed. E. J. Arnould, Anglo-Norman Texts 2 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1940), 150-51. See also Yoshikawa, "Holy Medicine and Disease of the Soul," 405-6.

(Blessed be the name of that fine bunch of grapes, which so ripened because it grew so close to the sun and so high in the faith, that the sun's ray was so hot, that an ardent love entered that bunch, which ripened it so fully that when it was put into the winepress of sorrow, it exuded for us so precious a wine from its sweet eyes that whoever does not find that wine sweet is in a bad way, and his wounds would be too dangerous and too full of filth were that wine unable to clean them through washing. And that wine was white, as if from very clear tears, and most plentiful, as if from a bunch of grapes; and the need of it for cleaning so many filthy wounds is just as great.)⁴⁸

Assuming such eucharistic implications, the Virgin's tears become an instrument of redemption, one that even rivals the efficacy of Christ's blood.

Mechtild of Hackeborn and the Iconography of Flourishing⁴⁹

The idea of eucharistic medicine is predominant in the *Liber specialis gratiae* (*Liber*), the revelations of Mechtild of Hackeborn (1240–98), a German mystic and chantress at the Benedictine/Cistercian convent of Helfta (a text discussed also by McAvoy in the following essay). At Helfta a cult devoted to Christ's heart had developed at the end of the thirteenth century.⁵⁰ Widely circulated in various versions throughout

48. *Le Livre de Seyntz Medicines*, 145–46. I am grateful to Dr. Catherine Batt for kindly sharing her translation in progress with me.

49. The “theology” of flourishing as particularly attractive to medieval women writers is a subject dealt with in greater detail by Liz Herbert McAvoy in her essay following this one.

50. The earliest Latin manuscript containing all seven books is Wolfenbüttel (Guelferbytanus), Herzog August Bibliothek, codex 1003, copied in 1370 by Albert, Vicar of St Paul in Erfurt. The only Latin edition available today is *Revelationes Gertrudianae ac Mechtildianae* (hereafter *Revelationes*), ed. Dom Ludwig Paquelin, 2 vols (Paris, 1875–77), 2: 1–422, although this edition has some editorial problems. The *Liber* was translated into Middle English in the early fifteenth century and is known as *The Booke*

Europe, and then in various vernaculars, Mechtild's revelations seem to have had an impact on late medieval spirituality and iconography.⁵¹ The *Liber* consists of five parts, concentrating on revelations connected with the Church's liturgy and those associated with Mechtild's affective piety. A unique product of highly sophisticated Helfta spirituality, an array of allegories representing the heart, in particular, helps us to understand the development of the conceptualization of spiritual interiority and invites us to appreciate an intricate interplay between eucharistic symbolism, popular piety, and the emerging discourse of medicine, a discourse that, in turn, contributes to the progress of Mechtild's understanding of mystical union in terms of spiritual health.

In one revelation, Christ confides in Mechtild that his fresh red wounds are "verrey medycine of heyle to mannys sawle" (183). Another revelation explains how a person should thank the Lord for the health that s/he receives from Christ's five wounds:

[T]he lauour of heyle was heldede or pourede to vs fro þe wounde of the lefte foote. Also fro the ryght foote come to vs the floode of pees. Ande fro the lefte hande come to vs the plenteuosnes of grace. Ande fro þe ryght hande come to vs the medycine of sawles heyle. Ande fro the wounde of þat blesfulle herte come to vs þe watere of lyfe ande wyne of gostely moystour be þe excessyefe deuocioun or contemplacioun ande plente withowtynne ende of alle goodenes (179).

Christ's blood from the left foot is the "lauour of heyle" that washes away

of Gostlye Grace. All references to Mechtild's revelations are from the Middle English translation, *The Booke of Gostlye Grace of Mechtild of Hackeborn*, ed. Theresa A. Halligan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1979), fiche, and will be cited by page number. The Middle English translation survives in two fifteenth-century manuscripts, London, The British Library MS Egerton 2006, and Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 220.

51. For example, images made for a Dominican nun of St. Walburg, Eichstätt (Germany) in about 1500 bear witness to the influence of Mechtild's revelations; see Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 137-41, fig. 85, plate 12.

the stains of sin, while the blood from his right hand is deemed to be the “medicine of sawles heyle.” Significantly, contemplation on Christ’s wounds causes “þe watere of lyfe ande wyne of gostely moystour,” the liquids indispensable for spiritual health in attaining mystical union, to issue from the wound in his heart. These liquids are no less associated with baptism and with eucharistic wine.⁵²

Together with Christ, the Virgin participates in this eucharistic therapy. A stunning image of Christ as a source of spiritual medicine emerges in a revelation on the feast of the Virgin’s nativity. Induced by the response “Stirps Iesse,” sung on that day, Mechtild sees the Virgin in “lykenes of a fulle fayre tree streyhtyd oute ande spredd oute abowne alle þe breede ande hyghteþ of þe e[rth]” (263). When the congregation sings the verse *Ora virgo*, the Virgin lifts up her child, from whom runs out “a precieuse lycoure plenteuoslye as þe liquoure of bawme” (264) and enters into the souls of the congregation. Then, at the verse *Fac fontem dulcem*, the Virgin applies each of the nuns to the divine heart and says: “makys swete alle 3owre bitternes in this welle, ande in þe same welle ouercommeyes allle 3our temptacions” (264). The Virgin is identified as a tree that bears a life-giving fruit from which flows the liquor of balsam.⁵³ As a healer, she gives the devout medical treatment by administering medicinal liquor and curing disease of the soul in the well of the divine heart. This image corresponds with a popular Marian iconography: as she is sometimes called the *radix sancta*, the Virgin is literally depicted as a root from which grows the tree of life. A painting entitled “Il sogno della Vergine” (ca. 1355–60, National Gallery of Ferrara) executed by Simone dei Crocefissi, a Bolognese painter (fig. 2), shows

52. For the image of Eucharistic Baptism, see *The Carmelite Missal*, London, British Library, MS Additional 29704-5, f. 36v.

53. In this connection, Jill Ross connects the Virgin’s body with a meadow that yields a profusion of flowers and trees; see *Figuring the Feminine: The Rhetoric of Female Embodiment in Medieval Hispanic Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 108–44. Ross argues that through a metaphor of the Virgin’s chastity and virginity, the *hortus conclusus* represents the “metaphorical seat of female sexuality and fertility” (111). It also emphasizes “the feminine nature of the body of Mary who is mother (mater) and earth or matter (material)” (113).



Fig. 2: Pinacoteca Nazionale, Ferrara. Simone dei Crocefissi, “Il sogno della Vergine” (ca. 1355-60). By kind permission of the Pinacoteca Nazionale, Ferrara.

the Virgin lying asleep on her bed: from her womb emerges a tree of life on which Christ is crucified.⁵⁴ Such an iconography of flourishing, as

54. A prolific artist, Simone completed another “Vision of the Virgin” (ca. 1365-80), now in the National Gallery, London. Although the Virgin assumes the same posture with a tree of life/crucifixion emerging from her

McAvoy argues in her essay in this issue, exalts the Virgin as the vehicle of the Incarnation and praises her for the virginal yet fertile womb that contained Christ.

Furthermore, Mechtild's revelation illuminates the iconography in which the images of a tree of life and a well of life are integrated into a symbol of spiritual health and salvation. In van Eyck's painting of the Madonna in the garden, the brass fountain prominently features next to her. The Virgin had been identified as a fountain as early as the fourth century, and a fountain with flowing water was usually referred to as the fountain of life.⁵⁵ Rupert of Deutz explains that the Virgin is not only physically a garden, but also spiritually a fountain, because "although protected from impurity by the seal of the Spirit, she provides the water of life for the joyous chorus of her friends."⁵⁶

The garden of this painting can be understood as "an allusion to the fountain of life, out of whose body flowed the rivers that were to bring

womb, there is an iconographical development: her left hand, although awkwardly, reaches down to Adam, who is to be rescued from Limbo with Eve. This iconography illuminates the Virgin's role as "co-redemptrix" rather than her more traditional and modest role as "mediatrix." For the London version, see Caroline Villers, Robert Gibbs, Rebecca Helen, and Annette King, "Simone dei Crocefissi's 'Dream of the Virgin' in the society of Antiquaries, London," *Burlington Magazine* 142, no. 1169 (2000): 481-86, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/888854>.

55. Carol J. Purtle, *Marian Paintings of Jan van Eyck* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 164.

56. Rupert of Deutz, *Commentaria*, IV (4. 12-15), ed. Haacke, 26. 87, lines 96-104: "Ipse Spiritus sanctus signaculum amicorum gaudium, quia et uterus tuus nulli uiro, nulli carnali commercio accessibilis, et mens tua nulli uitio, nulli spirituali nequitiae fuit umquam penetrabilis. Mirum, quod cum ita sis hortus conclusus, ita fons signatus, nihilominus, immo et | eo amplius emit-tis Omnia bona quibus mundus impleatur"; paraphrased by Brian E. Daley, "The 'Closed Garden' and the 'Sealed Fountain': Song of Songs 4:12 in the Late Medieval Iconography of Mary," in *Medieval Gardens / Dumbarton Oaks Colloquium on the History of Landscape Architecture* 9, ed. Elisabeth B. MacDougall (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1986), 253-78, 264.

fruitfulness to the earth.”⁵⁷ More to the point, the Virgin’s body is both an enclosed garden that bore and nurtured Christ and the fountain out of which sprang the living water of salvation. However, the Virgin is not merely a vehicle for ushering in redemption, but as the second Eve, she reversed Eve’s deadly effects on man’s health by giving birth to the Christ Child and, as Mechtild envisions, by administering “a precieuse lycoure plenteuoslye as þe liquoure of bawme” (264) on humanity. Through an intricate web of symbolism associated with the *bortus conclusus*, the Virgin re-emerges as a potent healer of the body and soul next to her Son.

Interestingly, one of Mechtild’s revelations makes a sophisticated allusion to the therapeutic power of Christ’s heart as a well in an enclosed vineyard.⁵⁸ In this revelation, Mechtild talks to Christ in her soul at Mass: “a lorde, 3if hit plese the I walde 3at y might 3elde myne herte to þe as a chosene vyne afere thyne herte ande thyne wille in alle tyme.” As she wishes to offer her heart as a chosen vine obedient to the will of God, “sche sawe gostelye oure lorde within here herte goynge abowte as in a fulle fayre vyne3erde” (219). Mechtild identifies her heart with a vine—a eucharistic wine producer rather than with Christ, and with a vineyard. In the vineyard of her heart is a well, and around this vineyard is “a multitude of aungellys as thikke as 3itt hadde bene a stone walle” (219), as if to make her heart an enclosed garden. Moreover, there are four kinds of wine at the four cardinal parts (east, north, south, west) of this vineyard, each of which is associated with the progress of man’s life as often conceived as the “four ages of man.”⁵⁹

Ande in the este partye of the vyne3erde þare was cleere wyne ande

57. Purtle, *Marian Paintings*, 165.

58. Mechtild’s revelations are replete with spatial allegories centered on Christ’s heart that range from a house, a dining room, and a bridal chamber to an enclosed garden—all of which convey her intimate and developing mystical relationship with Christ.

59. See Constantine the African’s theory of *pueritia*, *iuuentus*, *senectus* and *senium* in J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 22. See also Elizabeth Sears, *The Ages of Man: Medieval Interpretations of the Life Cycle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

fulle swete whiche betokenede þe frewtys of alle goode werkes whiche a mane offreys vppe to God in childehede. In the north syde þare was rede wyne ande stronge whiche betokenede þat laboure wharewith a mane withstondeys vyces ande temptacions agayns the strenght of his enmye when he ys passed childehede ande waxes eldere. In the sowth partye þare was wyne full goode ande feruente whiche betokened vertues werkys whiche a man perforneys in 3onge manhede for the luffe of God. Ande in the weste partye of þat vynezerde þer was þe most noble ande swete spysede wyne which drowe with gladnes of herte dyuerse desyres with þe whiche a man desyres to God ande to heuenlye thynges in his olde aage with alle his strengthes (219-20).

Through this didactic image, Mechtild understands that such a vineyard betokens a righteous man and that the Lord is pleased with one who lives commendably and worships God all one's life. Mechtild, a chosen vine and a fair vineyard, is envisioned as a model of a healthy soul with moral integrity.

The image of a healthy garden is enhanced by Christ, who stands beside the well and sprinkles the water (his blood) from his heart on those who desire "gostelye regeneracioun" (219). Devotional and medical discourses converge in this eucharistic image illuminating Mechtild's heart as a healthy *hortus conclusus*—a site for spiritual rejuvenation. Although she is not on a level with the Virgin, Mechtild becomes a vehicle for administering spiritual medicine by virtue of her privileged relationship with Christ. Mechtild's revelations reveal that the image of the healthy, enclosed garden was firmly established in late medieval discourse on the health of the body and soul even before the outbreak of the plague.

Conclusion

The convergence of spiritual and bodily health in the iconography of the Virgin in the *hortus conclusus* thus bears witness to the increasing concern about the health of the body and soul in late medieval society. Nevertheless, it must also be argued that for all its iconographical complexity,

the garden was originally contrived for monastic medicine and monastic spirituality, offering space for the quest for contemplative experience. As the medieval garden accommodates space for the care of the soul, the Virgin in the *hortus conclusus* invites the devout to meditation and contemplation. As she nourishes quiet meditation, the soothing effect of aromatic smells pacifies the accidents of the soul, and meditation becomes the ultimate “means” by which one may be fully cured from sickness of the body and soul. The Virgin in the *hortus conclusus* is thus envisioned as an icon of a therapeutic experience, healing the body and healing the soul.

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