

DANCING IN BODY AND SPIRIT: DANCE AND SACRED PERFORMANCE IN  
THIRTEENTH-CENTURY BEGUINE TEXTS

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## DEDICATION

To my mother, Valerie Van Oort (1951-2007), who played the flute in church while I danced as a child. I know that she still sees me dance, and I am sure that she is proud.

## ABSTRACT

Dancing in Body and Spirit: Dance and Sacred Performance in

Thirteenth-Century Beguine Texts

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This study examines dance and dance-like sacred performance in four texts by or about the thirteenth-century beguines Elisabeth of Spalbeek, Hadewijch, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Agnes Blannbekin. These women wrote about dance as a visionary experience of the joys of heaven or the relationship between God and the soul, and they also created physical performances of faith that, while not called dance by medieval authors, seem remarkably dance-like to a modern eye. The existence of these dance-like sacred performances calls into question the commonly-held belief that most medieval Christians denied their bodies in favor of their souls and considered dancing sinful. In contrast to official church prohibitions of dance I present an alternative viewpoint, that of religious Christian women who physically performed their faith.

The research questions this study addresses include the following: what meanings did the concept of dance have for medieval Christians; how did both actual physical dances and the concept of dance relate to sacred performance; and which aspects of certain medieval dances and performances made them sacred to those who performed and those who observed?

In a historical interplay of text and context, I thematically analyze four beguine texts and situate them within the larger tapestry of medieval dance and sacred performance. This study

suggests that medieval Christian concepts of dance, sacred performance, the soul, and the body were complex and fluid; that medieval sacred performance was as much a matter of a correct inner, emotional and spiritual state as it was of appropriate outward, physical actions; and that sacred performance was a powerful, important force in medieval Europe that various Christians used to support their own beliefs or to contest the beliefs and practices of others.

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## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION: ENTRY POINT

## Prelude

The church is not air conditioned, so all the windows are open in the summer heat, and oscillating fans hum in the corners. Twenty-five to thirty people are gathered in the building, some seated on the padded burgundy chairs, some standing. The curving rows of chairs all angle toward a central area where the music ministry plays. There are two guitars, a French horn, a flute, and a piano. My mother plays the flute. She has a music stand in front of her, with spiral-bound song books, but she is not looking at them. Her eyes are closed as she plays, and she sways back and forth to the rhythm of the music.

On the wall behind the musicians are banners made by church members. One is decorated with a cup made of gold cloth, and a few stalks of wheat stitched to the fabric. Another says, "Rejoice!" in bright letters.

I sit in my chair, beside my father and my little brother, singing along with the words projected on the screen at the front of the church. "Lord, you are more beautiful than diamonds, and nothing I desire compares with you." As the music builds, I feel my heart begin to beat faster and louder, until I can hear it even above the music. I breathe faster, too, and somewhere inside my heart or my stomach I am trembling. I stop singing, stop watching my mother play her flute, and focus on what I feel.

I know what this feeling means. It often happens to me, almost every Sunday. It means I am supposed to get up and dance. I feel like I need to move, need to dance, even though I'm shy and nervous about standing up in front of everyone. One time when I felt this urging, this tug of the Spirit, I was afraid and stayed in my chair. The feeling passed, the song ended, and I felt so terribly wrong and ashamed that I cried.

This time I answer the call. I stand up and move down the aisle to the open space at the back of the church. My heart is still beating terribly fast. I catch the rhythm of the song and begin to move, and as I move I feel a sense of calm, of floating or flying. I don't feel my heart any longer, just the music. I dance with movements I've learned in ballet class, and with other movements that come to me in that instant. I whirl and leap.

A few heads turn to glance at me, but most of the congregation is deep in their own worship. Many have their eyes closed. The music ministry, however, is facing me, and the music leader smiles at me. He nods to the musicians, and they play an impromptu musical interlude between the song's chorus and its verse, improvising the music as I improvise the dance.

None of the other congregation members are dancing, though a few sway in place and many hands are raised. One woman is weeping as she sways.

Slowly the music winds to a finish, transitions into the next song. I feel that my dancing is complete, so I bring myself to a resting point, slip back to my seat, and join in the singing again.

After the service a woman comes up to me and says, “Your dancing really blessed me. The Spirit was moving today.”<sup>1</sup>

### A Journey Toward Questions

As a child, I danced in church almost every Sunday. This expression of faith seemed natural to me. Even though I knew that there were other Christian churches in which no one danced, I did not question why that might be. I did not ponder the complicated history of dance and attitudes toward the body in the Christian church. I was part of a religious community in which dance was accepted and valued as a form of worship. Praising God with my body seemed right. When I danced I was filled with joy and that was enough. At the time, no explanation was required.

When I went to college and began to study dance history, I noticed that the history of sacred dance in Christianity was only briefly covered. My official textbook summed it up in a few sentences: “Christianity is a religion in which for most of its history dancing has played no regular part in worship services. Traces of the notion that dance is somehow essentially profane still linger in our culture, and choreographic visionaries who have proclaimed the spiritual significance of dance have sometimes been greeted with incomprehension.”<sup>2</sup> While I knew that

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from lived experience description written by myself in 2006 about my childhood dance experiences in church between the ages of approximately 8-12.

<sup>2</sup> Jack Anderson, *Ballet and Modern Dance: A Concise History*, 2d ed. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Book Company, 1992), 19-20. Since the title of the textbook is *Ballet and Modern Dance* it is not surprising that sacred dance of any religion receives short shrift. The author specifically states that his objective is to create “a narrative focused on the development of Western theatrical dance.” (xii) However, simply stating such a focus does not absolve an author from bias. The omission from dance textbooks of social dance, sacred dance, and non-

many people in Western culture saw dance as profane—I had met people who frowned on my choice of dance as a career for just that reason—I also knew that there were many Christians who, like me, had experienced the spiritual through dance. I felt a dissonance between the story told in my textbook and the one told by my own experiences, but at the time I did not pursue the questions that arose. After all, the dance history text was talking about the past, and my experiences existed in the present. Perhaps the Christianity of the past had been essentially hostile to dance, and it was only in the present that people like me had discovered dance as a form of worship.

Questions about dance, Christianity, and worship resurfaced recently, when I was teaching an undergraduate university course entitled “Dance in Human Society.” This course introduced non-dance majors to the different ways that cultures across the world and throughout history have used dance for entertainment, art, religion, and socialization. A chapter in the course’s textbook compared the different attitudes toward dance found in the traditional religion of the Yoruba of West Africa, in Indian Hinduism, and in European Christianity.<sup>3</sup> The text

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Western dance amounts to a privileging of Western theatrical dance, even when such omission is acknowledged. Other dance history textbooks that also focus on Western theatrical dance include Selma Jeanne Cohen, *Dance as a Theatre Art: Source Readings in Dance History from 1581 to the Present*, 2d ed. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Book Company, 1992); and Janet Adshead-Lansdale and June Layson, *Dance History: An Introduction*, 2d ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that this comparison was drawn with *European* Christianity. Christian churches in Africa and African-American Christian churches in the United States often have a strong tradition of dance in worship. Many authors have discussed the fusions of African and European traditions in African-American Christianity. For a specifically dance perspective, see P. Sterling Stuckey, “Christian Conversion and the Challenge of Dance,” in *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, ed. Thomas F. DeFrantz (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 39-58; and Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, “Dancing under the Lash: Sociocultural Disruption, Continuity, and Synthesis,” in *African Dance: an Artistic*,

explained that “the split in the Christian world view between the sacred and the secular—a distinction that is profoundly alien to the Hindu and Yoruba traditions—may be related to Christianity’s denial of the body as something holy in and of itself.”<sup>4</sup> During a class discussion, I found myself attempting to describe this sacred/secular split and how it mirrored the privileging of mind and spirit over body. I told my students that, in comparison with other religions such as Hinduism, Christianity tended to see the body and things done with the body as sinful rather than sacred. At this point a student raised her hand and asked, “But what about my church where we have praise dance? Is it just if the body is used badly that it’s sinful?”

In a moment of profound confusion, I found myself unable to answer the question. The textbook, my handout for the chapter, and in fact most books I had ever read on the subject told me that Christianity found the dancing body sinful and secular. My childhood experiences, and evidently also the experiences of this questioning student, gave the dancing body a different place. I felt the same dissonance that I had before, in my undergraduate dance history course, but now as a doctoral student I was well placed to not simply accept the answers I was given, but to seek out new answers and ask new questions.

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*Historical and Philosophical inquiry*, ed. Kariamuw Welsh Asante (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1994), 101-30.

I believe that African-derived concepts of sacred dance have influenced American Christians of many ethnicities, especially through the spread of the Charismatic, Pentecostal, and Spirit-filled movements. With their emphasis on the Holy Spirit moving within individual Christians and on spontaneity rather than liturgy, Spirit-filled churches, whether African-American or not, tend to embrace dance and movement. The church in which I was raised was located in an overwhelmingly white rural area, and yet the congregation used bodily movement and Holy Spirit possession in a way that I have since come to recognize as African-influenced.

<sup>4</sup> Gerald Jonas, *Dancing: the Pleasure, Power, and Art of Movement* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992), 38.

Why was I teaching such an oversimplification? I had blindly assumed that mind/body dualism was a basic element of Western Christian thought. Like many other dancers, I had lamented that such dualism still had a strong hold in Western society and had hoped for a day when more people could accept their bodies, not just their minds, as sites of knowledge and inspiration. Many dancers have looked to Asian and African models of physical and spiritual integration. The popularity of yoga and Asian-influenced meditational practices among dancers demonstrates this desire to move beyond what is seen as Western culture's distrust of the body.

In their zeal for holism between all aspects of the human creature, however, I believe many dancers have both oversimplified and overstated the hatred of the body that they see as derived from European Christianity. In books about dance, I find the same story being told again and again about Christian attitudes toward dance. The story goes something like this: the early Christians danced, but very soon the church authorities began to denounce the body as sinful and dance as a heathen practice, and while secular folk largely ignored ecclesiastical bans on dance, within the church such prohibitions were effective, and by the time of the Renaissance most sacred dance was stamped out.<sup>5</sup>

While it is hard to find fault with any of the particulars of this story, as a whole it is too neat, too monolithic, too full of explanation and causality. In a time when scholars of all disciplines are being asked to question grand narratives and find divergent voices, it seems to me that dance scholars would do well to question the accepted story of Christian attitudes toward dance. It is being told from a single point of view, that of church authorities who denounced

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<sup>5</sup> This is the sort of story that appears in the two textbooks mentioned above, Anderson's *Ballet and Modern Dance*, and Jonas' *Dancing*. For a fuller discussion of the treatment of medieval dance in books about dance, see chapter three.

dance. While it is undoubtedly true that certain Christian theologians have had disparaging things to say about the body and about dance, their opinions, even if influential and long-enduring, did not represent the opinions of all Christians. Where were the alternative viewpoints? In a religion that has been practiced by diverse people for more than twenty centuries, there cannot possibly have been a single, unified opinion. Dance must have had varied meanings to Christians in different centuries, to men and women, to people of various social classes, to the educated and the uneducated, to Christians in Poland, Spain, and Ireland. In what new ways might this story about dance be told? There must be other threads to the tapestry besides the negation of the body in favor of the spirit.

At the same time that these questions about Christian attitudes toward dance and the body were resurfacing, I was also developing an interest in medieval European dance. While many dance scholars have written about the dances of the Renaissance, the preceding centuries have not been subjected to a similar level of scholarship.<sup>6</sup> This may be due to the fractured nature of the evidence that remains to testify to medieval dance. The written record of dance history does not seem to leap to life until the middle of the fifteenth century, when three Italian dance masters wrote the first known treatises on how to properly perform court dances.<sup>7</sup> However, medieval Europeans danced before the existence of these manuals, although the evidence is not gathered in

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<sup>6</sup> For Renaissance dance see, for example, Mark Franko, *The Dancing Body in Renaissance Choreography* (Birmingham, Alabama: Summa Publications, 1986); the several articles on dance in the anthology edited by Timothy J. McGee, *Improvisation in the Arts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute, 2003); Ingrid Brainard, *The Art of Courtly Dancing in the Early Renaissance*, 2 vols. (West Newton, Massachusetts: I. G. Brainard, 1981); and Julia Sutton's introductory chapters to Fabritio Caroso's *Courtly Dance of the Renaissance: A New Translation and Edition of the "Nobilità di Dame"* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 1-47.

<sup>7</sup> Cohen lists the three dance masters from the mid-fifteenth century who wrote dancing manuals—Guglielmo Ebreo, Antonio Cornozano, and Giovanni Ambrosio (6).

one text but instead scattered throughout altarpieces, illuminated manuscripts, books of visions and courtly poetry. Because this evidence does not give specific instructions on how to do particular dances, it is not possible to reconstruct medieval dance, unlike the reconstructions that can be created of later Renaissance or Baroque dances. Reconstruction of dances has been an important focus of dance history and this may be one reason why medieval dance is not as well researched as other eras.

Since the early 1990s, however, dance scholarship has broadened its horizons, moving away from a narrow focus on choreographers, steps, and theatrical dancing. Current dance research now embraces social dance, non-Western dance, and dance as part of culture.<sup>8</sup> I have seen this widening of approaches in my own training. As a doctoral student I have taken courses in dance ethnography, cultural studies, and non-Western dance forms, not just the dance history of significant figures in Western concert dance.

This shift in emphasis in dance studies opens up new possibilities for researching medieval dance. When considered as a part of culture instead of as high art, the resources for studying medieval dance explode as dance becomes not just steps but attitudes and ways of living. Once I began searching for sources that spoke about medieval people's ideas and attitudes toward their bodies, which must have influenced their ideas and attitudes toward dance,

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<sup>8</sup> In Adshead-Lansdale and Layson's *Dance History*, the authors say that dance history's focus on Western theatrical dancing has recently broadened somewhat. As evidence of this, they point out that the 1994 edition includes a chapter on West African dance, whereas the 1983 first edition did not. In Alexandra Carter ed., *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), Carter critiques the past interests of dance historians: "the focus on the history of the stars, the often self-promoting mythologization of the performer/choreographer and the lack of any conscious attempt to locate dance within the broader aspects of its cultural context" (193). Carter then lists some studies that do place dance within its cultural context; these studies date from the late 1980s and early 1990s.

I found myself inundated by a large literature base, written by people from many disciplines. The last few decades have seen a trend in history, cultural studies, feminist studies, and literary studies toward examining “the body,” a trend that has led medieval scholars to a renewed interest in physicality, though not necessarily in dance. The word “body” appears again and again in titles of anthologies and names of conferences.<sup>9</sup>

One of the seminal works that spurred on this interest in medieval bodies was Caroline Walker Bynum’s *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*.<sup>10</sup> In this book, Bynum investigates the food-related physical practices that characterized the spirituality of many medieval female saints and mystics. One of Bynum’s goals is to refute the commonly held notion that women’s fasting and food-related practices were negations of physicality prompted by internalizing body/mind dualism. Instead, Bynum argues, these bodily practices, despite their strangeness to the modern eye, were an embrace of physicality as women used their bodies to express religious faith.

As I encountered Bynum’s concept of women’s flesh as an instrument for spiritual expression, my research on medieval dance began to connect with my questions about the place of dance within Christianity. Though Bynum focuses on food, she is speaking more broadly

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<sup>9</sup> An interdisciplinary symposium entitled “Female ‘Bodies’ of Knowledge” was held at Temple University in April 2002. It was organized by a dance department doctoral student, Indira Etwaroo, but was attended by scholars from many fields. A few examples of books or anthologies that explore ideas about the body, in particular the medieval body, include Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991); Benjamin C. Withers, ed., *Naked before God: Uncovering the Body in Anglo-Saxon England* (Morgantown, West Virginia: West Virginia University Press, 2003); and Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin, eds., *Framing Medieval Bodies* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

about physical expression, a heading under which dance falls. As I read Bynum's examples of women who floated, expanded, trembled, knelt, entered trances, or put themselves through various physical penances, I wondered how related these bodily manifestations might be to forms of expression that, today, are called dance. I was reminded of dances such as Anna Halprin's "Exorcism of Cancer" in which Halprin, a cancer survivor, performed a sometimes-violent, sometimes-startling solo dance that was not meant primarily as entertainment but was instead performed for a specific function, to defeat the cancer within her own body.<sup>11</sup> This ritual strikes me as similar to some of the ways in which medieval women used their bodies to perform healing.

After reading Bynum's work, I came across an article by Walter Simons about a thirteenth-century woman named Elisabeth of Spalbeek who physically performed Christ's Passion every day in a manner that sounded, to me, very like dance.<sup>12</sup> Elisabeth's life and actions are known to scholars today because she came to the attention of a Cistercian abbot, Philip of Clairvaux, who observed Elisabeth's performances and, impressed with her spirituality, wrote her *vita* (story of a saint's life).<sup>13</sup> Philip even compared Elisabeth's holiness to that of Francis of Assisi, founder of the Franciscan Order. I found this concept, a dancing woman who

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<sup>11</sup> A thorough examination of Anna Halprin's work is found in Elizabeth Templeton, "Anna Halprin's 'Exorcism of Cancer' (1975) and the Surrounding Discourses of Dance as a Healing Art in the United States," Ed. D. diss., Temple University, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Simons, "Reading a Saint's Body: Rapture and Bodily Movement in the Vitae of Thirteenth-Century Beguines," in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), 10-23.

<sup>13</sup> Elisabeth's story, written by Philip of Clairvaux, is found in *Catalogus Codicum Hagiographicorum Bibliothecae Regiae Bruxellensis*, vol. 1 (Brussels: 1886), 362-79. This is a printed version of the original thirteenth-century manuscript.

gained church approval, to be startling and quite opposed to the common conception of Christianity as anti-body and anti-dance.

I began to search for more sources about medieval women who might have danced and discovered to my surprise that there are far more books written by medieval women than I had originally supposed. An initial perusal of two texts by thirteenth-century women (Hadewijch and Mechthild of Magdeburg) found descriptions of dancing souls in heaven, dance scenes in visions, and various physical performances that sounded very dance-like.<sup>14</sup> These texts offered alternative viewpoints on sacred Christian dance, the alternative viewpoints that I had imagined must exist, but had not previously found. The discourse on medieval bodies and medieval performance that had grown up around texts like Hadewijch's and Mechthild's offered theoretical insights that added to my grounding in dance history. With both primary sources written by or about medieval women who danced (the bones of the research), and a current discourse within medieval studies (the muscles that animate the bones), I envisioned a research journey in which I questioned and contested the binaries of soul and body that had been so prevalent in previous dance scholars' conceptions of medieval European Christianity.

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<sup>14</sup> Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: the Complete Works*, trans. Mother Columba Hart (New York: Paulist Press, 1980); Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist Press, 1998).

## CHAPTER 2

### RESEARCH PLAN

#### Introduction and Terminology

In this dissertation I examine textual evidence for the existence of sacred dance and sacred dance-like performance in late medieval Christian Europe. I also search for evidence of varying attitudes toward sacred dance, sacred performance, and the relationship between body and soul. By late medieval I mean the time between and encompassing the twelfth through fourteenth centuries, and by Christian Europe I refer to the people living in Europe who self-identified as Christian rather than as Jewish, Muslim, pagan, or another religious affiliation.

The terms “dance” and “sacred performance” require elucidation. I do not use them interchangeably but am instead seeking to be sensitive to the terminology of the texts I examine. What today’s dance scholars consider to be “dance” and therefore part of their field of study is different from the actions that were called “dance” by medieval Europeans. One often-quoted definition of dance, coming from prominent dance scholar Judith Lynne Hanna, gives a basic outline of what is considered dance today:

Dance can be most usefully defined as human behavior composed, from the dancer’s perspective, of (1) purposeful, (2) intentionally rhythmical, and (3) culturally patterned sequences of (4a) nonverbal body movements (4b) other than ordinary motor activities, (4c) the motion having inherent and aesthetic value.<sup>1</sup>

Although Hanna mentions rhythm, music is not necessary to make an action dance. Dance movements do not need to be particularly complex or difficult, merely different in some way

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Lynne Hanna, *To Dance is Human: A Theory of Nonverbal Communication* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 19.

from ordinary motor activities. According to this definition, dance does not require an audience or a particular emotional state. However, acknowledging that many dances convey emotion to an audience, Hanna adds in a later work: “The moving human body usually captivates an observer’s consciousness. Through perceptions of the multisensory stimulation of sight, sound, movement, touch, and smell, the dancing body excites emotions.”<sup>2</sup> No specific emotion necessarily dominates, though, and a dance performed without strong emotion is no less a dance. A definition like Hanna’s allows today’s dance scholars to view a broad range of human actions as dance, from a solo ballerina performing before an audience, to a group of folk dancers practicing, to a teenager jiving alone in her room, to a young girl moving ecstatically in the back of a church.

In medieval texts, however, I have found that the terms in the original languages that have been translated as “dance” refer to social or entertainment activities, with instrumental music or singing, often part of larger festivities and accompanied by feelings of happiness. Many people may dance together in a group or a single person may dance to entertain an audience, but a person never dances alone without an audience. Additionally, dance is not used to express emotions other than joy or sensuality. Today’s modern dancers often create works to express such dark emotions as anger, terror, or sorrow, or to promote political or social agendas. This sort of dance apparently did not exist in late medieval Europe. This is not to say that medieval Europeans did not create physical displays of dark emotions or promote political, social, or religious agendas through their actions. They certainly did all of the above. They simply did not call it “dance.”

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<sup>2</sup> Judith Lynne Hanna, *The Performer-Audience Connection: Emotion to Metaphor in Dance and Society* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 3-4.

Because of this shifting terminology, the difference between what late medieval writers meant by dance and what people today mean by dance, other words become necessary. When a text calls a certain action “dance” I give it that name as well. When a text describes an action that would be considered dance by Hanna’s definition but does not seem to be dance by medieval standards, the terminology becomes more difficult. Clearly, if an action would be considered dance by today’s scholars it is worthy of study by a dance historian. I wish to honor the language of those whose words I am studying while also situating my research within a modern field of inquiry, that of dance scholarship. For this reason I am borrowing the term “sacred performance” from Mary Suydam, who has written extensively about the performances of the beguines, the women whose texts form the core of this research. Suydam defines sacred performance as “any action, done in public before an audience, that in some way is transformative for both actor and audience.”<sup>3</sup> Sacred performance, therefore, can encompass all manner of physical movements, songs, dances, prayers, processions, and so on. As I demonstrate in chapter five, the actions medieval Christians performed that were like dance, but not quite dance, fit easily into the category of sacred performance.

The concept of the sacred was fluid and contested in medieval Europe, and this fluidity is reflected in my research. The categories that modern people call sacred and secular were less clear-cut eight hundred years ago, as the holy and the everyday intertwined in many aspects of medieval life. Determining whether a specific dance or performance counted as sacred was not easy for medieval writers—a dance the performer meant as holy might have been considered

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<sup>3</sup> Mary A. Suydam, “Beguine Textuality: Sacred Performances,” in *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality*, ed. Mary A. Suydam and Joanna E. Ziegler (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 173.

heretical or blasphemous by church authorities—and it is no simpler for scholars today. Because of the contested nature of medieval sacred dance and performance, I am purposely broad in what I place in the category of the sacred. Any dance or performance that expressed some variety of Christian belief fits within the scope of this research.

### Selection of Texts

The sources in which I search for evidence of dance and sacred dance-like performance are textual sources. I realize that there is an inherent contradiction in seeking for dance, a physical and transient action, in written texts that are distant in both time and space from the people who created them. However, texts are the materials with which an inquiry into medieval dance must contend, because the living, moving bodies of medieval dancers are gone. It is not possible to recover the specific dances, the exact events, or what might once have been called the truth of the past. This is not necessarily a handicap; in the case of this study, whose purpose is not reconstruction but which instead delves into attitudes about dance and the body, the contradictions and partiality of the texts aid me in gaining a broader picture of the range of attitudes and ideas that were adopted by people of the time.

Four specific primary texts are at the core of this research. These are Mechthild of Magdeburg's *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, Hadewijch's *Complete Works*, Agnes Blannbekin's *Life and Revelations*, and the *vita* of Elisabeth of Spalbeek.<sup>4</sup> Since this research is

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<sup>4</sup> The English translation of Hadewijch that I use is *Hadewijch: the Complete Works*, trans. Mother Columba Hart (New York: Paulist Press, 1980). In the original language, Middle Dutch, Hadewijch's visions are published as *Het Visioenenboek van Hadewijch: uitg. naar Handschrift 941 van de Bibliotheek der Rijksuniversiteit te Gent*, ed. H. W. J. Vekeman (Nijmegen: Dekker & Van de Vegt, 1980); her poetry as *Van Liefde en Minne*, trans. M. Ortmanns (Tielt, Belgium: Lannoo, 1982); and her letters as *De Brieven van Hadewijch*, trans.

heavily text-based it is important that I explain my criteria for selecting which texts I study.

There are any number of written works that could address questions of medieval sacred dance and performance. However, I have narrowed the possible sources into a manageable number by developing a specific focus.

First, each core text is written by or about a woman. One of Caroline Walker Bynum's premises in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* is that medieval women's spiritual metaphors were fundamentally different from men's and that women were more likely than men to express their faith physically. While I do not accept this premise without reservation, it is eminently clear that medieval Christian women did not have the same options that men did in pursuing their faith; specifically, women could not become priests, administer mass or any of the other sacraments, hear confessions, or preach in public. Within their restricted range of options, however, women exercised great creativity. They gave prophecies, experienced revelations from God, prayed for the living and the dead, acted as spiritual counselors to both men and women, and created an astounding variety of physical performances, some of which were certainly dances. They also used dance as a metaphor in their writings, often as a highly positive metaphor. While some of these women's male contemporaries created physical performances, like Francis of Assisi, or

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Paul Mommaers (Averbode: Altiora, 1990). Mechthild of Magdeburg's book is published in English translation as *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist Press, 1998) and in the original Middle High German as *Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit: nach der Einsiedler Handschrift in kritischem Vergleich mit der gesamten Überlieferung*, eds. Hans Neumann and Gisela Vollman-Profe (München: Artemis Verlag, 1990). Agnes Blannbekin's life and visions, written down not by her but by her scribe, are available in English translation as *Agnes Blannbekin, Viennese Beguine: Life and Revelations*, ed. Ulrike Wiethaus (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002) and in the original Latin, side by side with a modern German translation, in *Leben und Offenbarungen der Wiener Begine Agnes Blannbekin (1315)*, eds. Peter Dinzelsbacher and Renate Vogeler (Göppingen: Künnerle, 1994). There has not yet been a published English translation of Elisabeth of Spalbeek's *vita*, which is available in the original Latin in *Catalogus codicum hagiographicorum bibliothecae Regiae Bruxellensis*, vol. 1 (Brussels: 1886).

wrote about dance as a positive image of the soul's journey through life, like Henry Suso, there seems to be a significant concentration of references to dance and instances of physical performance in texts by and about women. Because medieval sacred dance is an under-researched area, it was necessary to begin with sources that had just such a concentration of textual references. For this reason, though I do consider men's texts as contextual sources in chapter six, they are not the focus of this research. A thorough investigation of references to dance and physical performance in medieval texts by and about men would be an excellent direction for further research.

The second criterion for my choice of texts is that the woman central to the text was a beguine or had some other form of religious lifestyle that, while not fully monastic, was not fully secular either.<sup>5</sup> Herbert Grundmann calls beguines part of the "religious movement" of women that began in the late twelfth and flowered in the thirteenth century.<sup>6</sup> While many women became nuns during these centuries, other women experimented with new, non-monastic forms

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<sup>5</sup> In everyday modern usage, to be "religious" can mean simply that a person follows a specific religion. In medieval Europe, however, to be "religious" meant to be a member of an organized Christian group, to follow particular rules of conduct, or to live apart from the rest of the world. Monks and nuns were religious, and they took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The opposite of religious was secular; secular people lived in the world, not apart from it. A secular person could be a devoted Christian and yet not considered religious. When I speak of religious Christian women, then, I am discussing nuns, beguines, and other women who left ordinary secular life to pursue variously regimented forms of Christianity. A woman's choice of religious lifestyle might be as severe as closing herself up in a cell beneath a church, or as simple as staying in her own home while following a set series of prayers and devotions throughout the liturgical hours of the day. Particularly in the case of beguines, the line between a religious lifestyle and a secular one could be unclear, as these women might move back and forth between the religious and the secular worlds. However, even in such in-between cases I still use the term "religious" as the simplest and most understandable word.

<sup>6</sup> Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, translation of *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter*, trans. Steven Rowan, (1935; reprint Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

of religious life. Beguines were women who gathered together in special communities to try to live holy lives, and also to support themselves economically through trades such as weaving, teaching children, or caring for the sick. Unlike nuns, who took religious vows for life, beguines had freer and more varied religious lifestyles. Each community of beguines made its own rules, and a woman could live as a beguine for a time and then return to secular life if she chose. The greatest number of beguines were found in the areas that later became Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands.

Texts by women pursuing religious lifestyles are naturally the most valuable texts for researching women's sacred dances and performances. I specifically focus on beguine texts rather than texts by cloistered nuns because beguines, with their freer lifestyles, seem to have created forms of dance and sacred performance that were not open to nuns. For example, Agnes Blannbekin once bowed repeatedly in the public street, a place a nun would not have been permitted to go. While there were nuns like Beatrice of Nazareth who performed sacred dance, there is a greater concentration of accounts of dance and sacred performance in beguine texts. Additionally, the spirituality of the beguines has been a popular topic in medieval studies in recent years, offering a solid context for this research.

Many texts written by medieval laypeople mention dance. These accounts tend to be about dance as social interaction or courtship rather than dance as worship, but the sacred in medieval life was certainly not confined to the religious, and sometimes the more secular sources also mention sacred dance. As with religious texts by men and by nuns, I include texts by laypeople as part of my contextualization rather than as the core of my research.

The third criterion for inclusion is that the author of the text lived in the high medieval period, between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries. I have chosen these centuries not only

because the sources I initially found fall within this time frame, or because it is a convenient span of time often considered as a unit by historians, but also because several factors combine to make this a fruitful era in which to study women, dance, and the body.

The high medieval period was a time in which courtly poets wrote songs in praise of both secular ladies and the Virgin Mary. This adoration of women may have been more of a literary ideal than an actual statement of the status of women, but it did bring about a whole genre of songs composed for and about women. Many of these songs were meant to be danced to and there are numerous intriguing references to dance especially in the courtly poetry of the minnesingers. This concept of courtly love and its accompanying songs and dances influenced beguines like Hadewijch and Mechthild, who wrote about God and the soul as courtly lovers. Such connections between a secular performance genre and sacred, mystical writings are fascinating and unique to this period.

Another reason why the high medieval period is appropriate for this research is that it was a time when Christian devotion increasingly centered around the eucharist (the Christian sacrament of bread and wine, reminiscent of Christ's Last Supper). By the thirteenth century, Christians had come to believe that the host (the wafer of bread) was literally transformed into Christ's body during the celebration of the eucharist.<sup>7</sup> Christianity had always been a religion that centered—albeit somewhat nervously at times—around the existence, death, and resurrection of the physical body of Jesus Christ. As devotion to the eucharist increased,

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<sup>7</sup> Bynum elaborates the various changes the eucharist went through, along with the ways people's attitudes toward the meaning of the bread and wine shifted, in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 48-69.

questions about Christ's body, human bodies, and how the two might be related became of particular interest to religious Christians, and such questions appear often in the texts I examine.

The fourth criterion for inclusion is that the text is available in a language I understand. I read each text first in English translation, which allowed me to peruse the entire text quickly, gain a sense of the whole, and select particular passages for deeper analysis. Once I selected the pertinent passages (usually related to dance or sacred performance), I turned to the original language of the text and read it side-by-side with the English translation. This form of reading had two advantages. First, I was able to discover which words in the original languages have been translated into the English word "dance." Dance terms, especially when those terms appear in poetic stanzas, tend to be very loosely translated. A term that means "general merrymaking" is quite different from a term that specifically means "circle dance" even though both may be glossed as "dance." Second, reading (and quoting from) the texts in both English and the original language not only honors the precise words of the women whose texts I examine, but also helps my interpretations to be transparent, allowing scholars who read the original languages of the texts to consider not just what I claim the text says, but what they can see for themselves.

I acknowledge that reading texts in multiple languages presents certain challenges. The four core beguine texts are written in three original languages: Middle High German (Mechthild of Magdeburg), Middle Dutch (Hadewijch), and medieval Latin (Agnes Blannbekin and Elisabeth of Spalbeek). While I read both Middle High German and Latin, my Middle Dutch is limited to what I can extrapolate from its similarity to Middle German. However, since the goal of this side-by-side reading was not to perform my own translations, but instead to better understand the English translations and to gain a physical sense of the sound of the words, as

well as to provide original language quotations for readers proficient in those languages, this linguistic challenge was not insurmountable.

The *vita* of Elisabeth of Spalbeek presented a slightly different challenge. The full text is not currently available in published English translation, though an abbreviated form of Elisabeth's *vita* was translated from the original Latin into Middle English and has been rendered in modern English by Margot King.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, two of the recent scholarly articles about Elisabeth of Spalbeek give the authors' English translations for specific passages.<sup>9</sup> Using these existing, though fragmentary, translations as a guide, I have created my own English translations of the pertinent passages from the original Latin text.

Although I read the core texts in their original languages, I did not take the next step and view the original manuscripts. For a research study with a broad focus, like mine, I believe manuscript work is not necessary. I can address my research question by reading the texts in published translations and original languages, rather than by examining the original manuscripts. It remains for other dance scholars to build on this research with in-depth examinations of particular manuscripts.

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<sup>8</sup> Margot H. King, "The Life of Elisabeth of Spalbeek: translated from the Middle English," in *A Leaf from the Great Tree of God*, ed. Margot H. King (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing, 1994), 244-75.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Simons, "Reading a Saint's Body: Rapture and Bodily Movement in the Vitae of Thirteenth-Century Beguines," in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), 10-23; Susan Rodgers and Joanna E. Ziegler, "Elisabeth 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 Joanna E. Ziegler (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 299-355.

### The Influence of Theory

In order to analyze the four core beguine texts, I turned to theoretical approaches drawn from the field of history, since my approach to research is clearly historical. As a dance scholar, I find myself not fully at rest within traditional history; my experience has been with movement as much as it has been with words, while in the various theories of historians (particularly those about texts) movement does not have a clear place and the written word reigns supreme. However, even though my dancer's eyes probably do not view theory in the same way a historian's might, I have still found much that is of value to me.

Those who write history have been influenced, over the past decades, by what Robert Berkhofer calls the "postmodernist challenge" and Elizabeth Clark calls the "linguistic turn."<sup>10</sup> This shift has called into question much of what historians might once have taken for granted, such as the truth of the past, the connection between actual things and their representations, and the desirability (or even the possibility) of the historian remaining objective. New ways of considering history have come to the forefront. Unified stories told from a single viewpoint have shifted toward polyvocality, consensus toward dissonance, great deeds of great men toward

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<sup>10</sup> These two authors have been invaluable to me in developing a basic understanding of various theories. Elizabeth A. Clark's *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004) is a wonderfully readable look at theorists and theories, including structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, contextualism, and more. Clark, a historian of late ancient Christian studies, breaks down the sometimes difficult divide between theory and practice when, in her last chapter, she offers concrete examples of ways that various theories can be useful to historians. Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr.'s *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995) also discusses the challenges that recent shifts in literary theory have posed to traditional methods of researching and writing history. Berkhofer's book reads as something of a dialogue between modernists and postmodernists, between textualism and contextualism. He often takes both sides of an issue in turn, explaining, for example, why historians might either be troubled by or embrace the concept of history as created.

ordinary lives of everyday people, and an even flow of time toward a focus on the pauses and gaps in history.

Not only history, but many other disciplines as well have been influenced by this shift in theory. The field of dance has not been exempt; dance scholars have moved from a narrow modernist disciplinary outlook toward a wider view that embraces postmodernist thought and interdisciplinary research.<sup>11</sup> Dance scholars have experimented with methods drawn from feminism and poststructuralism,<sup>12</sup> semiotics and intertextuality,<sup>13</sup> and various forms of postpositivist research.<sup>14</sup>

These new ways of considering both history and dance do not mean that all historians or dance scholars have altered how they research and write. Instead, individual researchers choose which aspects of theory they will engage and which they will refrain from engaging. This means

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of changes in the discipline of dance, with a specific focus on modernism, postmodernism, and the arguments both in favor of and against opening dance up to more interdisciplinary research, see Gay Morris, "Introduction," in *Moving Words: Re-Writing Dance*, ed. Gay Morris (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 1-12.

<sup>12</sup> Helen Thomas, "Do You Want to Join the Dance?: Postmodernism/ Poststructuralism, the Body, and Dance," in *Moving Words: Re-Writing Dance*, ed. Gay Morris (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 63-87. Thomas expresses concern about some dance scholars' uncritical borrowing of postmodernist, feminist, and poststructuralist concepts.

<sup>13</sup> Janet Adshead-Lansdale, "Creative Ambiguity: Dancing Intertexts," in *Dancing Texts: Intertextuality in Interpretation*, ed. Janet Adshead-Lansdale (London: Dance Books, 1999), 1-25. Adshead-Lansdale discusses how structuralism, semiotics, and poststructuralism have affected dance studies, and how dances can be read as texts.

<sup>14</sup> Jill Green and Susan W. Stinson, "Postpositivist Research in Dance," in *Researching Dance: Evolving Modes of Inquiry*, eds. Sondra Horton Fraleigh and Penelope Hanstein (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1999), 91-123. Green and Stinson examine a number of postpositivist research methods used by dance researchers. They categorize these methods as either interpretive, emancipatory, or deconstructivist, and contrast them both to each other and to traditional positivist scientific inquiry.

that, for a prospective researcher, the theoretical possibilities are quite literally endless. Picking through the different conceptual threads upon which I might weave my dissertation has been daunting at times.

Thankfully, I encountered a theorist whose concerns and approach to his work resonate with mine. Michel de Certeau (1925-1986) was a French Jesuit historian and theorist who wrote about early modern mysticism.<sup>15</sup> I realized his work would be useful to me when I read a section of *The Mystic Fable* in which he points out that one of the foundations of Christianity is the loss of a body, Christ's body. The questioning of where this body has gone and the fact of its absence is something that de Certeau places at the heart of mysticism. In this absence of a body, he says, Christians “‘invent’ a mystic body—missing and sought after—that would also be their own.”<sup>16</sup> This idea of absence (in both Christianity and history itself) which appears again and again throughout de Certeau's work made me wonder if the medieval dance I am looking for might also be, at the same time, an absence of dance and an invention of something to fill that absence.

I have not borrowed any of de Certeau's theories wholesale, but instead I find myself influenced in particular ways by reading his work and by connecting this to other theorists I have read, both from the perspective of dance and that of history. There are four ideas that I gathered through my reading of theory that helped guide me through this research process. Two of these concepts relate to the researcher's attitude and approach and two are about specific ways to

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<sup>15</sup> I have become familiar with two of Michel de Certeau's books, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); and *The Mystic Fable: Volume One, The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>16</sup> de Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, 82.

examine texts. These ideas have not sprung from nowhere; they have been growing in me throughout my doctoral coursework, and it is only now that I am able to articulate them not merely as theoretical concepts written by someone else but as premises for my own work, fully integrated with my personal understanding. Because this personal connection to theory is so important to me, I state each premise twice, first in my words, and then citing the words of other scholars and theorists in the fields of history and dance.

First, the situation of the researcher affects her research. Her ideology, her experiences, and her social place in the present all affect the questions she asks and the way she structures her research. She cannot see the past through any eyes but her own. In other words, every written history has an agenda, even those that attempt to be fully objective. The historian needs to know what her own perspective is and how this influences her, and acknowledge this in her writing.

Green and Stinson, in their discussion of postpositivist dance research, point out that all writing reflects the values of the researcher. Because postpositivist researchers seek to be reflexive, to recognize their own voices as researchers and to distinguish their voices from other voices in the texts they create, Green and Stinson find that it is not only ethically necessary but also methodologically effective “to make one’s subjectivity visible and display how one’s voice as researcher enters the text.”<sup>17</sup>

De Certeau also finds that the situation of the author determines what is important in that person’s work. Instead of an individual’s voice and values, however, he emphasizes the historian’s place as a member of a profession and of society. De Certeau states that “history is

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<sup>17</sup> Green and Stinson, 96.

entirely shaped by the system within which it is developed.”<sup>18</sup> Histories have been written differently throughout time because of the changes in societies. Realizing that one’s place in society shapes the way one writes history, de Certeau says, allows historians to address current social issues in their works.<sup>19</sup>

A second premise for my research is that the written evidence of a thing is not the thing itself. There was a real past in which real events happened, but the historian in the present cannot know the truth of these events. A text is not a transparent record of what happened in the past; rather, texts are written, copied and circulated for particular purposes, and display particular biases both in what is stated and what is left out. Just as there may be more than one voice or point of view speaking within a single text, due to multiple authors, translators, and commentators, a text may also have multiple possible interpretations, because of the multiplicity of people who read and discover meaning in it.

Green and Stinson discuss postpositivist dance research as a telling of stories rather than as a search for a single truth. If researchers accept that reality is socially constructed, their research will seek “coherence of a statement more than correspondence to an external reality.”<sup>20</sup> Green and Stinson find this telling of stories to be rather like making art. Adshead-Lansdale also sees the artistic aspect of textual research. She says that dance researchers are particularly well

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<sup>18</sup> de Certeau, *Writing of History*, 69.

<sup>19</sup> de Certeau, *Writing of History*, 2-6, 64-69.

<sup>20</sup> Green and Stinson, 94.

suited to dealing with a multiplicity of meanings in texts, because historically the arts have tended toward “tolerance of ambiguity and acceptance of diversity in interpretation.”<sup>21</sup>

Berkhofer points out the conflict between the practice of traditional historians, which assumes that the writing of history has a direct correlation to what happened in an actual past, and what he terms “dereferentialism” in literary theory, which questions the reality of anything outside language. The influence of literary theory and of other postmodern theories on traditional history has brought into question “the very dichotomies that grounded the paradigm of traditional history: the supposedly inherent differences between literature and science, reality and its representation.”<sup>22</sup> De Certeau certainly questions such dichotomies, though in a way that does not deny the existence of the past. While he says that “the past is the fiction of the present,”<sup>23</sup> that the writing of history is a performance, and that all histories are creations, he also believes in the “real,” saying that histories do reference real things, even if they do not try to tell the singular truth of past events.<sup>24</sup>

Keeping these two premises close to me—the situated-ness of the historian and the opacity of texts—I began this research by writing the story of my own journey and of the influences that led me to research medieval sacred dance. In this way, I acknowledged my own place in present-day society and my individual biases. As I worked with historical texts, I often reminded myself that they cannot be taken at face value as reflections of what actually happened,

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<sup>21</sup> Adshead-Lansdale, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Berkhofer, 2.

<sup>23</sup> de Certeau, *Writing of History*, 10.

<sup>24</sup> A clear analysis of de Certeau’s attitude toward the past is found in Clark, 123.

but instead are useful for delving into the ideas and the attitudes of the people who produced them. When I found myself too focused on questions about what specifically a dance looked like or whether it was really a dance (valid and interesting questions, but not the sole point of this research) I turned instead to questions of meaning, of multiple meanings, and reminded myself that I did not need to discover the truth of the texts, but instead create a workable interpretation that would be of value to historians and dance scholars.

These two premises interacted as I pursued this research, creating an interesting relationship between past and present. I began with questions about present-day sacred dance and a dissatisfaction with the way sacred dance has been historicized—agendas of the researcher in the present. While I hoped to find something that I could name as medieval sacred dance I was concerned that I might be imposing my notion of the truth of dance onto the texts, so I actively tried not to project my present concerns into the past. As I immersed myself in these women's words, however, I found my agenda slipping away. The beguines whose texts I read wrote about love, revelation, suffering, and unity with God. Sometimes they wrote about sacred dance, but they seemed to care far less than I did whether it was genuinely dance or not. They seemed to care primarily about what sacred purpose any given action served. I tried to put myself inside the words and actions these women described by physically performing my approximations of their movements. My research shifted as I identified more and more with the women I was studying, admired the difficulty of their movements and the courage it must have sometimes taken to perform them. I found myself using the present tense when writing about the beguines even when I should have, grammatically, been using the historical past. I began to be concerned, then, that I might be eliding past and present and trying to pull the unknowable past into my present subjectivity. To counter this tendency to lose myself in an imagination of the

past, I reminded myself of my place in the present as a researcher and a member of a community of scholars whose questions about medieval dance I hoped my research might address. Because I have felt my research swinging too far, at various moments, into either present or past, I hope that the two tendencies have corrected each other. Through the process of this research, however, I have come to a belief not unlike de Certeau's in the simultaneous performativity and reality of history: despite its fragmentary and unknown state, the past does influence and sometimes merge with the present as the historian writes it.

The first two premises had to do with the place of the researcher. The other two premises I have gathered from my reading of theory have to do with specific ways to approach the study of texts. One useful approach is to find dominant ideologies, the structures of power, and then search for ways in which people, especially those on the edges of the dominant groups, have altered and subverted those ideologies.

Such questions of power—who has it, who does not, and who subverts it—are often found in feminist theory. Grace Jantzen points out that “it is a commonplace of feminist thinking that any investigation of power relations soon reveals issues of gender.”<sup>25</sup> It is not only feminist researchers who are interested in questions of power. Historians who draw on Foucault's concept of the linkage between power and knowledge tend to pay particular attention to ideologies and structures of power, and “challenge the ‘common sense’ of our own time by pointing out the complicity between power and prevailing verities.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 2.

<sup>26</sup> Berkhofer, 205; Jantzen uses Foucault's concept of the linkage between power and knowledge in her research on women and mysticism, although, with other feminists, she faults Foucault for giving too little attention to the connection between gender and power (13-17).

Another useful approach for the study of texts is to look for discontinuities and gaps. This is one of the basic methods of deconstructionists who look not at continuity within texts, but at the texts' internal contradictions. Such contradictions can show places and times where people's use of terminology or conceptions of the world were in flux. Contradictions and discontinuities within a text can also demonstrate the different uses to which a word or idea can be put, in order to serve particular purposes.

Theorists whose works pushed scholars to discover a text's contradictions rather than its unity have included Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Julia Kristeva. Elizabeth Clark, explaining the influence of these theorists, says that they "explore the ways in which texts incorporate within themselves seemingly contradictory and heterogeneous elements, aporias, and 'splicings' that trip readers up so as to invite a more complex reading."<sup>27</sup> Following in the footsteps of these theorists, some dance scholars have also become interested in dances as texts and the multiple meanings and internal contradictions such dance texts can carry. Adshead-Lansdale says that "probing a text reveals a scattering of meanings, the existence of gaps, and of unformulated propositions which may subvert the intentions of the author or the stance of the reader."<sup>28</sup> In speaking of texts, Adshead-Lansdale refers here to both written texts and dance texts.

De Certeau also examines gaps and silences in his work on mysticism. He connects the mystic with "the child, the woman, the illiterate, madness, angels, or the body."<sup>29</sup> None of these

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<sup>27</sup> Clark, 132.

<sup>28</sup> Adshead-Lansdale, 16.

<sup>29</sup> de Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, 13.

groups or concepts are well represented in historical records; all of them fall into the gaps, being associated with the spoken word, which de Certeau terms the “fable,” rather than the written word, which has been dominant at least since the sixteenth century. However, despite these gaps, de Certeau still looks for this “fable” of mysticism within the written record, for ways that even the silences in texts can speak about mysticism and madness.<sup>30</sup>

Both these techniques for looking at texts—examining power and its subversions, and seeking gaps and discontinuities—are useful to me in this research. The most obvious power structure at work in the texts I examine is the dominant masculine hierarchy of the medieval Christian church. Women largely stood outside this structure, and their relationship with the church hierarchy was sometimes mutually beneficial but at other times troubled and contested. Female mystics and beguines who were not officially given power appropriated power in different ways, through speaking directly to God in visions; experiencing unity with God; physically moving into restricted, male-only places; and developing relationships with male clergy. While women could gain power through their physical performances of faith, the men of the church hierarchy could also gain power through women’s performances, using holy women as a tool for their own agendas.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> de Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, 12-13.

<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of men’s use of female spirituality versus heretics, see Dyan Elliott, *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004). See also Jo Ann McNamara, “The Rhetoric of Orthodoxy: Clerical Authority and Female Innovation in the Struggle with Heresy,” in *Maps of Flesh and Light: the Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*, ed. Ulrike Wiethaus (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 9-27.

The core beguine texts also contain many gaps, silences, and discontinuities for me to analyze. Even within a single text, dance or the body is sometimes presented as a positive force and sometimes as negative. There are also passages where the author says that a certain action or concept is like a dance, but purposefully does not call it “dance.” These discontinuities point toward a larger confusion and contestation about the meaning of dance within medieval society and the terminology used for dance. The texts written by Hadewijch and Mechthild, while rich in imagery and inner experience, are often silent about the details of these women’s physical performances, while Elisabeth’s *vita*, written by a male clergy member, tells a great deal about her physical performance but is silent about Elisabeth’s inner experience. These silences reveal the purposes of the authors, what they valued and what they did not.

### Specific Structure of the Research

The structure of this research is twofold—first, a textual analysis of the four core beguine texts and second, a contextual analysis that places the core texts within the larger tapestry of medieval European dance and sacred performance. I created this research structure because I realized that this study required both depth and breadth, a difficult goal to achieve within the confines of a doctoral dissertation. In other fields where a broad groundwork of knowledge has already been laid, it is possible for a research study to delve deeply into several key sources, but medieval dance has not yet been sufficiently researched to warrant such an approach. On the other hand, in a study that is too broad, generalization can overshadow specificity and it is far too easy to lose focus. Because I am breaking new ground in a young and widely varied field, I feel that it is necessary to both lay a groundwork for future dance scholars and to analyze specific sources with depth and precision.

A textual/contextual research structure was my answer to this conundrum. By focusing deeply on four texts that have many similarities and were created within a narrowly specified time and place, I was able to find themes and draw conclusions about what dance and sacred performance meant in these writings, to these women, in their specific niche in history. Then, armed with a deep knowledge of these particular women's texts and with clearly defined themes that reoccurred across multiple texts, I was able to broaden the research with contextual sources that addressed those same themes from other medieval perspectives. Those other perspectives included not just beguines but also nuns, male clergy, and laypeople. In this way, I moved from four specific points of view on dance and sacred performance to a multiplicity of viewpoints.

While both forms of analysis are historical, the textual chapters are closer to a literary or linguistic study and the contextual chapter is closer to a traditional historical study. I have no desire to overburden this distinction, however, and in practice I have found that a certain amount of context is necessary even in the most text-based sections.

The textual component preceded the contextual component both in the order the research was performed and in the order it is presented here. I began by reading each core beguine text through completely in English translation, marking passages that referred to dance, to an action that seemed dance-like, or to specific attitudes or ideas about movement and the body. Once I had identified the pertinent passages, I read them in their original languages to gain linguistic insight about dance terminology. I then categorized the passages both by subject (group dance, solo dance, trembling, bowing, etc.) and by theme (joy, frivolity, order and disorder, praise of God, etc.). I looked in particular for similar subjects or themes that recurred across multiple texts, hoping that repeating patterns in the words of different authors would reveal common threads, concepts that were important to more than just a single beguine. I also looked for

passages within the same text that seemed to contradict each other, because such paradoxes might reveal points of contestation and conflict, issues about which the authors of these texts were uncertain or about which multiple perspectives existed in thirteenth-century Europe.

As I pondered the passages from the core beguine texts, I was led by the following questions: What attitudes do these women express toward their own bodies and toward bodies in general? What do they name as dance and what, though dance-like, is not so named? Which sorts of dances and sacred performances do these women evaluate positively, and which do they evaluate negatively? Is there sexuality in dance, and if so, is it holy or not holy, and under what circumstances? Which dances or sacred performances are described as being in the body, out of the body, or some place in between?

In addressing these questions, I did not merely compile lists of dances or sacred performances that were, for example, evaluated positively or negatively. Making such lists was the first step, but in many cases the textual passages were complicated and did not fit neatly into any one category. It became readily apparent that the creators of these texts had complex and fluid categories of the physical and the spiritual, of virtue and sin, and of sensuality and suffering. These categories were by no means static or mutually exclusive, and connections flowed back and forth between them. As I delved deeper into the core beguine texts I became less interested in questions of kind and quantity and more interested in questions of purpose: Why does the author of the text name a certain action dance, sin, spiritual, etc.? Why are other, similar actions named something different? What were the purposes behind the naming and categorization schemes these authors used for dance and sacred performance? Were certain ideologies or worldviews being served? Were certain literary or religious conventions being

upheld? These sorts of questions led me from describing passages of dance into interpreting them.

Once I had completed the textual analysis I had established a number of themes relating to dance and sacred performance in the core beguine texts. As I moved into contextual analysis I used those themes as a starting point. Having analyzed the many meanings that dance and sacred performance could have in the texts of certain beguines, I wanted to find out if those meanings held true across a larger swath of medieval Europeans, male and female, clergy and laypeople. Because I knew that some medieval authors had disapproved of dance, I suspected that the primarily positive attitudes toward dance that I had found in the beguine texts would not be echoed everywhere. I wondered whether medieval writers' concepts of dance and sacred performance would fall into patterns along lines of gender or place in the church hierarchy.

I selected the sources for contextualization in an emergent fashion. Although I read a great many primary and secondary sources throughout the process of this research, I waited until the textual analysis was complete to choose precisely which sources I would use. The themes that had emerged from the textual analysis then determined which contextual sources would be most relevant.

A number of the contextual sources I chose were about religious women, both nuns and beguines. I had not used these sources as core texts because they were either written by someone other than the woman herself or they did not contain sufficient references to dance or sacred performance. In the contextual section of this research, however, such sources fit very well, as they contained concepts about movement or stories of sacred performance that resonated with those in the core beguine texts. These sources included the *vitae* of Christina the Astonishing,

Ida of Louvain, Beatrice of Nazareth, and Marie d'Oignies, as well as the revelations of Mechtild of Hackeborn.

Sources written by religious men formed a large part of this contextualization. I felt that sources by men were an important companion and perhaps counterpoint to the core texts by or about religious women. A number of recent scholarly studies have examined medieval masculinities, looking at the many ways that manhood could be constructed in the Middle Ages.<sup>32</sup> The authors of these works emphasize that it is important not to essentialize male experiences but instead to “understand the multifaceted dynamic of male experience without succumbing to the temptation to see all men as the Same against which all women, as “Other,” are defined.”<sup>33</sup> This emphasis on a multiplicity of male viewpoints resonated with me; I did not want to find *the* male viewpoint on dance any more than I wanted to find *the* female viewpoint on dance. The specificity and uniqueness of each core beguine text had delighted me and I needed similarly specific and unique sources by men.

Since the bulk of medieval manuscripts were written by male clergy, however, it was necessary to narrow the field somewhat. I looked for sources written near in time and place to the core beguine texts and for sources that mentioned dance and sacred performance. In particular, I investigated sources by religious men who wrote about their own mystical experiences, because the core beguine texts were largely accounts of mystical experience

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<sup>32</sup> Among these studies are Clare A., Lees, ed., *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler, eds., *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1997).

<sup>33</sup> Lees, xx.

containing numerous passages about dance or sacred performance, and I hoped that male mystical sources would be similarly rich in performance. I was also intrigued by the notion that male mystics sometimes took on a feminine role in relation to a male God.<sup>34</sup> For these two reasons, I began my search for dance and sacred performance in male mystical texts. The writings of Henry Suso were a particularly fruitful source, and I also found references to sacred performance, though not to dance, in the works of John Tauler and Richard Rolle. I read some of the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux and Meister Eckhart, noted male mystics of the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, respectively, but I did not find any passages specifically relating to dance or sacred performance. Of course, both of these men were very prolific (especially Bernard of Clairvaux) and scouring their full writings for references to dance or performance would be a dissertation in itself.

After looking in mystical writings I broadened my search to other writings by religious men and found several sources that have often been referenced by other scholars, though not regarding dance. Abbot Suger's account of the art treasures of his church of St.-Denis, a source well-known to art historians, also mentions processions and dance. The register of Eudes of Rouen, a bishop who visited religious houses and kept a long, dry list of their infractions and the money they owed, was a surprisingly useful source, as Eudes wrote about a number of dances and performances of which he did not approve.

To bring more secular viewpoints into my contextualization, I included lyrics by the German minnesingers (singers of love), particularly Tannhäuser and Neidhart, two poets who

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<sup>34</sup> Ulrike Wiethaus, "Christian Piety and the Legacy of the Medieval Masculine," in *Redeeming Men: Religion and Masculinities*, eds. Stephen B. Boyd, W. Merle Longwood, and Mark W. Muesse (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 49.

wrote many songs that were both meant to be danced to and that mentioned dance in their lyrics. I had translated these songs in previous research, so they were readily available to me. The songs of the Occitan troubadours and the French trouveres would also have made fine contextual sources for a study on dance, but since they are in languages I do not read I leave them to the use of future scholars.

Because I was examining the broader subject of sacred performance as well as the more narrowly delimited subject of dance, I needed to look at sources about medieval church music, processions, and dramatic performances. For these areas, I turned to secondary sources written by scholars in the fields of musicology and theater history. I also found valuable secondary sources about dance epidemics, prohibitions of dance, and *exempla* (brief moral stories for use in sermons) that mentioned dance.

Another source of knowledge I have used in my research is my own embodied experience as a sacred dancer. As I wrote both the textual and the contextual sections I occasionally included insights that sprang from my own performance experiences. I also created a dance as a movement response to the texts of the beguines and performed this dance in tandem with my written research. While creating sacred performance with my own body could not help me recover the sacred performances of the beguines, it did open my eyes to a number of possible congruences between sacred performance today and medieval sacred performance.

### Specific Structure of the Dissertation

In the first chapter I give a personal introduction to my life as a sacred dancer and a researcher. I lay out the questions that set me upon the path of this research and hint at the gaps in the existing scholarly record that I hope to fill. The second chapter is primarily taken up with

theoretical concerns and with detailing the structure of the research and the specific steps I took in finding and analyzing sources.

Chapter three, the review of literature, is an examination of scholarly texts about medieval dance and the more numerous texts about related forms of medieval performance. I also discuss the current discourse on medieval religious women, particularly as relates to issues of bodies and performance. This review of literature covers the important sources that informed this research and also critiques the state of research on medieval dance both within and outside the field of dance studies.

Chapter four begins with an introduction to the four core beguine texts and the women who were either the authors or subjects of the texts. I then analyze the thirteen passages in these texts that specifically reference dance. In this chapter, I make no distinction between actual physical dances and spiritual or metaphorical dances. My purpose is to discover what the concept of dance meant in these texts: specifically, who danced, what the purpose of a dance was, and what emotions were associated with dance. I examine the words in the original languages that mean “dance” and discuss some difficulties of translation. The passages about dance covered in this chapter include both positive and negative references to dance. I categorize the dances in these texts as group dances, couple dances within a group, solo dances, and allegorical dances. In my thematic analysis, I draw out ideas, concepts of dance, and emotions that appear in multiple passages. The most predominant theme is the emotion of joy, but themes of festivity, sensuality, love, pride, orderliness, and virtue also appear.

Chapter five is a textual analysis of the passages in the core beguine texts that mention dance-like sacred performances. Because these sacred performances were physical, embodied performances, I begin with a brief background on concepts of the body in Christianity in general

and in the writings of the beguines in particular. I then consider the beguines' physical performances of divine revelation in two ways—from the performer's (inner) and from the audience's (outer) perspective. The first perspective is the beguines' personal accounts of their own inner sensations while physically experiencing revelation. These were multi-sensory experiences that often seem to have blurred the boundaries between beguines' bodies and their souls and even between the human self and God. The second perspective is eyewitness accounts of the beguines' exterior actions as they performed revelation. The beguines' revelations were physical performances that they created in public, often in church, with audiences looking on. I discuss the various forms of dance-like performances that the beguines engaged in, including kneeling, bowing, and falling to the ground; weeping and sighing; making the sign of the cross; posing in stillness; shaking or trembling; kissing a sacred object; and striking one's own body. I end this chapter by drawing conclusions about the qualities that made a performance sacred in these beguine texts.

In chapter six I place dance and sacred performance in the wider context of medieval Europe as a whole. I bring in contextual sources not just by beguines but by nuns, monks, priests, various other clergy, and laypeople. Using these sources, I revisit the themes I developed through thematic textual analysis in the previous two chapters. Regarding dance, I examine themes of festivity, joy, and sensuality, emotions that seem inextricably mingled with the concept of dance in most medieval accounts. In my contextualization of sacred performance, I discuss how such performances displayed themes of order and ecstasy, went beyond the ordinary, engaged the inner self, and brought about the edification of Christians. Through multiple sources both primary and secondary, I demonstrate that sacred performance in medieval Europe was common, contested, and powerful.

Chapter seven discusses my own personal experience creating sacred dance as part of this research. I describe the process of creating and performing a danced response to the beguine texts and offer some insights about sacred performance that I arrived at through my own embodied experience. I close with some thoughts for the various populations to whom this dissertation is addressed: practitioners of sacred dance, dance scholars, and medieval historians.

#### Brief Statement of the Research Question and Significance of the Study

In this dissertation, I examine dance and dance-like sacred performance in four texts by or about the thirteenth-century beguines Elisabeth of Spalbeek, Hadewijch, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Agnes Blannbekin. These women wrote about dance as a visionary experience of the joys of heaven or the relationship between God and the soul, and they also created physical performances of faith that, while not called dance by medieval authors, seem remarkably dance-like to a modern eye. The existence of these dance-like sacred performances calls into question the commonly-held belief that most medieval Christians denied their bodies in favor of their souls and considered dancing sinful. In contrast to official church prohibitions of dance I present an alternative viewpoint, that of religious Christian women who physically performed their faith.

The research questions this study addresses include the following: what meanings did the concept of dance have for medieval Christians; how did both actual physical dances and the concept of dance relate to sacred performance; and which aspects of certain medieval dances and performances made them sacred to those who performed and those who observed?

In a historical interplay of text and context, I thematically analyze four beguine texts and situates them within the larger tapestry of medieval dance and sacred performance. This study

suggests that medieval Christian concepts of dance, sacred performance, the soul, and the body were complex and fluid; that medieval sacred performance was as much a matter of a correct inner, emotional and spiritual state as it was of appropriate outward, physical actions; and that sacred performance was a powerful, important force in medieval Europe that various Christians used to support their own beliefs or to contest the beliefs and practices of others.

Besides offering a new perspective on medieval European sacred dance to dance scholars, this research may also be of interest to medieval scholars who study the body. A dancer's perspective, not just on bodies in the abstract but on bodies engaged in the physical act of dance, may open up new avenues of thought and provide dance-specific tools and terminology for medievalists to use in discussing sacred performance and dance.

In connection with my own experiential knowledge of sacred Christian dance today, perhaps this research will also give insight into the larger question of what dance has meant and can mean within Christianity. While sacred dance is accepted within many Christian denominations and churches today, there is still a significant current of opposition to the use of dance in worship. If this study can help today's sacred Christian dancers to gain a sense of the historical grounding of their practices, they may be better situated to counter such opposition, and to appreciate the richness of Christian traditions of sacred performance upon which they can draw to deepen their own danced worship.

## CHAPTER 3

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### Sources on Medieval Dance by Dancers

Medieval dance is not an easy subject to approach. During the process of this research I collected information about medieval dance through database searches, recommendations from other scholars, bibliographic trails of references, and sometimes pure serendipity. Through this search, I have come to realize that sources about medieval dance, especially those written by dancers, are not only scarce but are often outdated or contain over-generalizations. There are exceptions, but on the whole, medieval dance is not a topic that has garnered much serious scholarly attention within dance studies. A vivid example of this can be seen in Mary Edsell's *A Core Collection in Dance*, an annotated bibliography of dance sources, intended for the use of librarians wanting to develop their dance collections.<sup>1</sup> This recent and thorough list has sections for European folk dance, and for Renaissance and Baroque dance (beginning in the fifteenth century), but no section for medieval dance.

The lack of sources is also evident in the Dance Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. The largest collection of dance documentation in the world, the Dance Division is an invaluable resource for dance scholars, containing not only books and articles but many video and audio tapes, posters, programs, newspaper clippings, lithographs, and other forms of media. During one of my trips to the Dance Division, I ran a database search for "medieval dance." My search turned up over 100 sources, but my initial anticipation faded as I

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<sup>1</sup> Mary E. Edsell, ed., *A Core Collection in Dance* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2001).

began to examine these sources. While some were useful, many were not. I found poor black and white reproductions of images from illuminated manuscripts that I had already seen elsewhere in full color, and some of these reproductions did not even credit the manuscripts from which they were taken, making it difficult to seek them out within their original context. One image catalogued under “medieval dance” was actually a nineteenth-century re-imagination of a supposed medieval festivity. This is an indication of a lack of knowledge in the dance world about medieval dance.

Many books on dance begin their account of dance history with the Renaissance. This is probably due, as mentioned in chapter one, to the advent of dancing masters and written dance manuals in fifteenth-century Italy. If the prior centuries are mentioned at all, it is often in a few pages that swiftly summarize the Greeks, the Romans, and the entire medieval period in Europe.<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, information stated so briefly tends toward generalizations.

One such generalization is the use of a model derived from nineteenth-century social evolution to explain the history of dance. This model is seen in the influential and often-referenced dance history book by Curt Sachs, *World History of the Dance*.<sup>3</sup> Sachs’ book, like others from its time, has useful information about specific dances but must be seriously questioned when it comes to theory, or to the reliability of sources such as missionary accounts

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<sup>2</sup> Examples of general dance books that do so include Selma Jeanne Cohen, ed., *Dance as a Theatre Art: Source Readings in Dance History from 1581 to the Present*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Book Company, 1992); Jack Anderson, *Dance* (New York: Newsweek Books, 1974); Joan Cass, *Dancing through History* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993); and Lois Ellfeldt, *Dance: From Magic to Art* (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Company Publishers, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> Curt Sachs and Bessie Schönberg, *World History of the Dance* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1937).

of “savage” dances. Andrée Grau, in the article “Myths of Origin,” points out that “until fairly recently most dance history books started with a chapter on ‘primitive’ dancing, moved up the evolutionary ladder to ‘folk’ dancing, then on to non-European ‘classical’ forms, finally reaching the ultimate: Western theatrical dance!”<sup>4</sup> Grau laments that this model, which has been defunct in other fields for decades, has appeared in dance history books as recently as the 1980s.

The evolutionary model prioritizes classical ballet—and by association, the modern dance that rebelled against ballet—as the most complex and highest form of dance. In such a model, medieval dance is of interest only because it evolved into the court dance spectacles of the Renaissance, out of which classical ballet developed. Therefore, in books that tell the story of the triumph of Western theatrical dance, it is not surprising to read that in medieval Italy and France “the lusty folk dances of the peasants were transformed into the mannered and precise dances of the courts of kings,”<sup>5</sup> or that “it is ironic that this most elegant of courtly forms evolved in part from the wildest, most bawdy behavior of the lower classes.”<sup>6</sup> The elegant courtly form referred to is, of course, ballet, and the peasant dances are not valuable for their own sake, but only because of what grew out of them.

A similar concept of the evolution of dances is at work in a series of videos in which Mikhail Berkut demonstrates historical dances from the early medieval through late Baroque

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<sup>4</sup> Andrée Grau, “Myths of Origin,” in *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, ed. Alexandra Carter (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 197-202.

<sup>5</sup> Ellfeldt, 104.

<sup>6</sup> Cass, 42-43.

periods.<sup>7</sup> Berkut reconstructed the medieval dances, for which no notation exists, by performing later notated dances such as the Galliard to medieval music and wearing medieval costumes. In this way, he hoped to extrapolate the earlier dances by determining how later dances were derived from them. However, this method relies heavily on the belief that later, notated forms of dance evolve from earlier, undocumented forms.

Such evolutionary theories no longer have currency in related fields such as theater, where a “simple, evolutionary view of the birth, growth and demise of medieval drama” leading from liturgical Latin dramas to the secular, vernacular plays of the Renaissance was already being challenged by the 1950s.<sup>8</sup> In fact, such concepts have fallen out of favor in dance studies as well, as forms of dance other than Western and other than theatrical are now receiving serious scholarly treatment and being included in dance textbooks.<sup>9</sup> However, despite such correctives, the bias toward the primacy of ballet and modern dance—and the simultaneous viewing of other dance forms through a lens designed for Western theatrical dance—has been slow to fade.

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<sup>7</sup> Mikhail Berkut, *Historical Dance Video Course, Part 1, Early Medieval, 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> Century* (1995), videocassette, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. The accompanying pamphlets are found in the Berkut Clippings File, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>8</sup> Glynne Wickham, “Introduction: Trends in International Drama Research,” in *The Theatre of Medieval Europe: New Research in Early Drama*, ed. Simon Ekehard (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1-18. Wickham’s introduction gives an excellent and succinct history of shifting attitudes in the field of theater research, as drama moved from a purely literary area of study into an experiential one that encompassed music, staging, and gesture as well as written text.

<sup>9</sup> The recent publications of Pegge Vissicaro’s *Studying Dance Cultures Around the World: An Introduction to Multicultural Dance Education* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 2004) and Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright’s *Moving History/Dancing Cultures: a Dance History Reader*, (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), seem to be a positive indicator of non-Western, non-theatrical dance making its way into undergraduate dance history courses.

Because of this tradition of focusing on ballet in accounts of European dance, dance scholars have maintained a limited view of medieval dance. In the story that has been told and retold, there is little place for sacred forms of dance or dance-like performance because such forms do not evolve into the concert dance that is seen today. As I stated in chapter one, dance scholars have tended to look at dance in medieval Christianity from a single point of view, that of church authorities who often banned dance. A reference to the apocryphal (outside the accepted Biblical canon) book, the Acts of John, in which Jesus leads the disciples in a ring dance, does appear in a few sources.<sup>10</sup> However, instances of Christian dancing are portrayed as the exception rather than the rule, and the story about “the sternly repressive decades of the Middle Ages, when clergymen associated the soul with goodness and the body with sin”<sup>11</sup> seems to be the one that dominates accounts of medieval sacred dance.

The lack of existing scholarship on medieval dance has been both an aid and a detriment to my research. Because so little has been written about medieval sacred dance, it has been difficult for me to find sources, and when I have explained my research goals to my colleagues I have sometimes been met with incomprehension and questions about the feasibility of my project. However, this very lack of knowledge also means that I am working in a fertile area of research. I have the honor, which few young scholars in more established fields can claim, of turning over new soil.

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<sup>10</sup> Lincoln Kirstein, *Dance: A Short History of Classic Theatrical Dancing* (1935; reprint Brooklyn, New York: Dance Horizons, 1969), 61-63; E. Louis Backman, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1952), 14-16.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson, *Dance*, 12.

Two sources on medieval dance written by members of the dance community have proved particularly helpful to me. The first, rather surprisingly, is Lincoln Kirstein's *Dance: A Short History of Classical Theatrical Dancing*. This book was published over seventy years ago and the author was not a dance scholar, but instead a patron of the arts and co-founder of the American Ballet. He devotes more space to medieval dance than any other dance author I have read, writing one chapter each on the Roman Christian Church, medieval dance, and feudal pageantry. Lengthy quotes from a wide variety of sources provide a good starting point for research into medieval dance. Kirstein tends to offer interpretations not warranted by his sources—based on a single prohibition of paired dancing he assumes that all of Europe was shocked at the scandal of couple dancing—and he accepts most of his sources at face value, a practice frowned upon in serious scholarship.<sup>12</sup> He also mixes references to nineteenth and twentieth-century folk dance forms in with descriptions of medieval dance, evidently assuming that the dances have not changed much over the centuries. Despite these flaws, however, Kirstein uses original sources that I have found nowhere else. He even references a dance scene in one of Mechthild of Magdeburg's visionary accounts, though he seems—understandably!—confused about whether the dance thus described is mystical, symbolic, or physical.<sup>13</sup>

Another source on medieval dance that has often been referenced in other works is Suzanne Aker's article "To Carol is to Dance," published in *Dance Magazine*.<sup>14</sup> Because *Dance Magazine* is a popular rather than a scholarly publication, finding an article from this periodical

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<sup>12</sup> Kirstein, 107.

<sup>13</sup> Kirstein, 108.

<sup>14</sup> Suzanne Aker, "To Carol is to Dance," *Dance Magazine* (December 1964): 40-41.

quoted by other scholars is both interesting and yet another indication of the dearth of sources about medieval dance. Aker argues that medieval carols were not just songs, but dances as well. She references artists such as Botticelli and writers such as Chaucer for evidence of song-and-dance carols, as well as the often-cited sixteenth-century dance source *Orchesography* by Thoinot Arbeau.<sup>15</sup>

Aker makes several important points in this article. She acknowledges the complications of studying carols when the available sources contradict each other and points out the difficulty of understanding medieval terminology. Aker also tries to draw a connection between the sacred dance of the past and the resurgence of sacred dance today, and for that I applaud her. Since this article has no footnotes or bibliography, though, when the author lists the kinds of carols that existed—processional, farandole, and branle—it is impossible to judge such claims. The connection Aker draws between medieval music and dance, however, is valid and important. The same connection has often been drawn from the other direction by musicologists writing primarily about medieval music and mentioning in passing that many of the songs were also dances.

#### Sources on Medieval Dance by Scholars Outside the Field of Dance

Many sources that are useful to a study of medieval dance come from scholars in fields such as theater, music, history, literature, women's studies, and art history. Such scholars, taking an interest in dance from the perspective of their own fields of study, tend to use whatever

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<sup>15</sup> Thoinot Arbeau, *Orchesography*, trans. Mary Stewart Evans (New York: Dover Publications, 1967).

primary sources are well-known in their disciplines, which are not necessarily the same sources with which dancers are acquainted. This brings a welcome variety of perspective.

*Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine* was written by E. Louis Backman, a Swedish professor of pharmacology. The stated goal of this work is “to discover an explanation of the role which religious dances have played in the history of medicine and in the popular treatment of disease.”<sup>16</sup> Not surprisingly, the largest sections of this book are devoted to dance epidemics. The dances surveyed begin with pre-Christian religious dances of the Mediterranean and European area and continue through the twentieth century.

Backman seeks to demonstrate that, despite the commonly-held notion of Christianity as opposed to dance, some forms of dancing were in fact permitted by Christian authorities and had a useful function within society. He describes many specific dances and quotes extensively from textual references. This extensive consultation of primary source material is one of the strengths of Backman’s work. He does not, however, critique the sources from which he draws his material. Some of the quotes that he believes describe physical dances seem instead to be descriptions of souls dancing in heaven.

Backman quotes Christian writers who argued for or against dancing, pointing out that dancing was sometimes condemned not because dance itself was thought to be un-Christian but because certain forms of dance were believed to retain magical properties from pre-Christian religions, and church authorities wanted to stamp out these “pagan” dances. Even official decrees against dancing support the existence of dance within Christianity, Backman argues.

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<sup>16</sup> Backman, v.

The frequent repetition of such decrees suggests that dancing persisted despite official condemnation.

This converse argument for the existence of medieval dance, based on its repeated condemnation by church councils, is probably Backman's greatest legacy to dance writers. Later authors such as Jonas use this same theory as evidence for the existence of medieval dance.<sup>17</sup> I agree that such prohibitions suggest the existence of real dances, and while this theory will be useful in my research, I borrow it only with certain reservations. For one thing, prohibitions against indecent dances could suggest that church officials had heard rumors of such dances or read about indecent dances in previous prohibitions rather than actually witnessed the dances. This is one weakness of the argument. On another level, this argument sets up a binary between the Christian church which condemns dance and ordinary laypeople who proceed to dance anyway. This is precisely the sort of binary I am attempting to complicate with evidence of religious Christians who did not condemn dance.

Despite these few critiques, I find Backman's work to be an invaluable source. More recent scholars who have written about medieval dance, particularly medieval sacred dance, frequently include Backman's *Religious Dances* among their lists of references, and for good reason. I do so as well. When I discuss dance epidemics and the flagellants in chapter six I draw heavily on the information Backman presents.

Two other sources from the earlier part of the twentieth century that are often used as references by current scholars are Rosketh's "Dances clericales du XIIIe siecle" (Clerical Dances of the Thirteenth Century) and Spanke's "Tanzmusik in der Kirche" (Dance Music in the

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<sup>17</sup> Gerald Jonas, *Dancing: the Pleasure, Power, and Art of Movement* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992), 44.

Church).<sup>18</sup> I do not read French, so I was unable to consult Rosketh's work, but Spanke's article is a meticulously referenced examination of the thirteenth-century *rondeau* as a musical and danced form. Like many scholars of his era, Spanke is concerned with origins. He suggests that the thirteenth-century secular *rondeau* derived from the twelfth-century religious *rondeau* rather than from any previous secular musical source. Spanke believes that these religious *rondeau* were not danced for holy purposes like the sacred dances of early Christianity but were instead an expression of heightened festive joy ("Ausdruck erhöhter Festesfreude") that laypeople copied for their own festivals.<sup>19</sup>

While Spanke's theories of origin have been superseded by later scholars, his article opened my eyes to a number of primary sources of which I had not previously been aware. The concept of mutual influence between religious and secular forms of music and dance was also a valuable one, regardless of the direction in which that influence flowed.

Peter Dronke's book on lyrical poetry of the Middle Ages, *The Medieval Lyric*, contains a chapter about dance-songs.<sup>20</sup> Although Dronke admits that it is impossible to know precisely what sorts of dances the general medieval populace danced and sang, because the lyrics that were recorded were by and for an upper-class elite, he is not afraid to speculate that the simpler sort of medieval songs, particularly the carol and the *rondeau*, were "essentially popular forms" by which he means that "their melodic and poetic simplicity made them intrinsically suitable for

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<sup>18</sup> Y. Rosketh, "Danses clericales du XIIIe siecle," in *Publications de la Faculte des Lettres de l'Universite de Strasbourg* (n. p.: Paris, 1947), 93-126; Hans Spanke, "Tanzmusik in der Kirche," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 31 (1930): 143-70.

<sup>19</sup> Spanke, 167-68.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Dronke, *The Medieval Lyric* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

dancing and festivities irrespective of class.”<sup>21</sup> Dronke analyzes the lyrics of various songs, speculating on how they might have been danced.

John Stevens also dedicates a chapter to dance-songs, though from the perspective of music rather than literature.<sup>22</sup> The era about which he writes, the eleventh through fourteen centuries, overlaps with my research, though Stevens focuses on the French-speaking lands of northern Europe. Stevens discusses the vocal music that accompanied medieval dances and analyzes both the lyrics and the melodic structures. He draws a distinction between courtly dance-songs (the *carole*, *rondeau*, and *refrain*) and clerical dance-songs (the *rondellus*). While Stevens admits that it is impossible to know the movements of medieval dances, he suggests that careful attention to the lyrics and the rhythm of the dance-songs can give important clues. He assumes that dances meant to be performed by more than one person must have “a strictly measured regular rhythm” for the dancers to move to—an assumption upheld by my own dance experience—and therefore when he sees songs that have such rhythms either in their words or music he can categorize them as dance-songs.<sup>23</sup> Stevens is not the first or the only music scholar to make inferences about dance movement through musical structure, but his explanation of the reasoning behind such inferences was the most accessible to me, a scholar from outside the field of music. He also references a wide variety of medieval texts that mention the performance of dance, including clerical prohibitions.

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<sup>21</sup> Dronke, *Medieval Lyric*, 188-89.

<sup>22</sup> John Stevens, *Words and Music in the Middle Ages: Song, Narrative, Dance and Drama, 1050-1350* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1986). I focus here on chapter five, “The Dance-Song,” (159-98).

<sup>23</sup> Stevens, 196-97.

Alessandro Arcangeli also discusses clerical opposition to dance in two articles published in the scholarly journal *Dance Research*.<sup>24</sup> He gives examples of stories used to illustrate the evils of dance from a number of centuries. Arcangeli points out that in these stories it is not always dance itself that is condemned. More often the preachers urged their congregations to avoid the wrong sort of dance: dancing on holy days, during sermons, or in churchyards.<sup>25</sup> This notion of a right and a wrong sort of dance appears again and again in scholarly books and articles about medieval dance. Both Jonathan Alexander and Robert McGrath discuss the positive and negative connotations of dance in medieval visual art.<sup>26</sup> The right sort of dance could include orderly communal dances, especially ring dances, and the wrong sort of dance might be solo performances or couple dances of an ecstatic or sexual nature.

One of the foremost examples of the wrong sort of dance in medieval writing and imagery was the dance of Salome, the legendary seductress who asked Herod for the head of John the Baptist. Torsten Hausamann's *Die tanzende Salome in der Kunst von der christlichen Frühzeit bis um 1500* (Images of Salome's Dance from Early Christianity until 1500) contains an exhaustive study of artistic depictions of Salome's dance.<sup>27</sup> Hausamann discusses the transformation of the medieval image of Salome, a tumbler in the process of doing a handstand

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<sup>24</sup> Alessandro Arcangeli, "Dance and Punishment," in *Dance Research* 10, no. 2 (Autumn 1992): 30-42; Alessandro Arcangeli, "Dance under Trial," in *Dance Research* 12, no. 2 (Autumn 1994): 127-55.

<sup>25</sup> Arcangeli, "Dance and Punishment," 32.

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan J. G. Alexander, "Dancing in the Streets," *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 54 (1996): 147-62; Robert L. McGrath, "The Dance as Pictorial Metaphor," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (Mar 1977): 81-92.

<sup>27</sup> Torsten Hausamann, *Die tanzende Salome in der Kunst von der christlichen Frühzeit bis um 1500* (Zürich: Juris, 1980).

or a backbend, into a Renaissance Salome who danced upright and looked like a courtly young lady. While the visual sources Hausamann presents are numerous and meticulously referenced, when he tries to analyze Salome as part of the larger history of dance and religion he slips into generalizations about the meaning of dance, drawn more from writings by modern concert dancers than from anything related to medieval Europe. However, Hausamann's sources are invaluable, especially his descriptions of carvings and stained glass windows. I have not seen such images referenced in any other works about medieval dance. Perhaps this is because images in stone or stained glass cannot be moved and are therefore more difficult to access than images from illuminated manuscripts.

Another scholar who uses visual images, as well as other forms of evidence, is Susan Watkins Maynard. In her dissertation, "Dance in the Arts of the Middle Ages,"<sup>28</sup> she examines references to dance in European literature, music, visual art, theater and religious writings between the years 1250 and 1530. She states that she is more interested in the "cultural function" of a dance than the dance for its own sake; this function of dance may be as a symbol or allegory, not a physical dance at all. Maynard concludes that dance had a metaphorical function within both sacred and secular medieval contexts. Dance was seen as an invitation to sexual sin as well as a picture of heaven where souls and angels danced. However, she believes the connection between dance and sex to be the strongest and most prevalent, both in medieval times and today.

These conclusions about "good" and "bad" sorts of dance, drawn by so many scholars from different fields, made me pause and consider. Because some medieval texts speak

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<sup>28</sup> Susan Watkins Maynard, "Dance in the Arts of the Middle Ages," Ph. D. dissertation, Florida State University, 1992.

positively about dance and others speak negatively, it seems inevitable that scholars would adopt such categorizations as well. Even so, splitting medieval dance into right and wrong seems a universalizing generalization. Right and wrong were determined by each individual medieval writer, within a specific context. To me, the more important question is for whom, specifically, and at what times and in which places, specifically, has dance been positive or negative? Also, what purposes were served when medieval authors made such categorizations? There was a great deal of conflict and contestation in medieval writings about dance, and the multiplicity of viewpoints does not lend itself to simple interpretations. Uncomplicated binaries do not work here. Good/bad does not necessarily equate to group/solo, orderly/ecstatic, or even chaste/sexual. I delve into these various medieval viewpoints on dance in greater depth in chapter six.

A final source about medieval dance that I found extremely helpful in my research is Ann Harding's *An Investigation into the Use and Meaning of Medieval German Dancing Terms*.<sup>29</sup> The bulk of this text is taken up with a comprehensive dictionary of dance terms from Middle High German textual sources, with references and examples for each word.<sup>30</sup> This dictionary is invaluable to anyone seeking to translate Middle High German texts that refer to dance, such as the songs of the minnesingers.

Harding's book also contains several introductory chapters in which she discusses problems with translating dance terms and theorizes on the place of dance in medieval German

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<sup>29</sup> Ann Harding, *An Investigation into the Use and Meaning of Medieval German Dancing Terms* (Göppingen: Verlag Alfred Kümmerle, 1973).

<sup>30</sup> Middle High German was the language spoken in southern Germany between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries. It corresponds to modern German in roughly the way Chaucer's Middle English corresponds to modern English.

society. Many of Harding's arguments relate to specific words and their usage, such as the debate over the terms *reien* and *tanzen*. Many linguists have defined *reien* as "a lively round dance" done in the summer, with possible peasant origins, and *tanzen* as "a courtly dance," more refined and done indoors. However, Harding compares the two words and finds little difference in their usage. Both seem to take place at various times of year and in various settings.<sup>31</sup>

Such a linguistic debate might seem esoteric, but in fact it is at the heart of an important issue in the study of medieval dance, that of terminology and its meaning. Harding finds fault with previous scholars who have named and described specific dances from evidence in a single source. By examining the same words across many sources, Harding is able to conclude that most Middle High German terms for dance did not name specific dance styles, but instead referred to merrymaking or dancing in general. Terms that referred to specific dances did not appear until the fifteenth century. Because medieval German dance terms were so vague, Harding laments that modern scholars can learn very little about medieval German dance from written sources.

This vagueness in dance terms does not disappoint me, because I am not as concerned with specific dance styles as with attitudes toward dance. For the purposes of my research, knowing that a word translated as "dance" might also mean "generalized merriment" is valuable. Also, because I read German, Harding's work allows me to look at medieval German sources in their original language and know precisely which Middle High German word has been translated into the English "dance."

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<sup>31</sup> Harding, 3-4, 6-9, 13-14.

### Sources on Medieval Performance in Related Fields

Because this research is not only about dance, but also delves into other sorts of embodied sacred performances, I have reached out to related art forms to discover how other scholars have approached medieval performance. The fields of theater and of music are particularly helpful in this regard, because those who wish to perform medieval music or drama, not just write about it, must wrestle both with larger theories of embodiment and with the practical details of how to stage performances from the past about which so little can truly be known. This is not by any means a comprehensive review of literature on medieval music or drama, but instead a look at the sources that have been helpful to me in my research and that particularly relate to how music and drama were embodied through performance.

In theater, one of the foundational sources about liturgical drama is Karl Young's *The Drama of the Medieval Church*.<sup>32</sup> Young's organizational scheme drew a strict demarcation between the dramas that surrounded the liturgy and the liturgical ritual of the mass, which he insisted was not a drama. Current scholars no longer accept this notion, or Young's idea that later dramas in vernacular languages derived from earlier Latin dramas. However, Young's work remains an important foundation and he gives the full texts for a great number of liturgical plays.

For a look at more current aspects of medieval drama studies, *The Theatre of Medieval Europe* edited by Eckehard Simon is a fine, comprehensive anthology.<sup>33</sup> The various authors

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<sup>32</sup> Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, 2 vols. (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1933).

<sup>33</sup> Eckehard Simon, ed., *The Theatre of Medieval Europe: New Research in Early Drama* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

explain how medieval drama research has changed from a purely literary endeavor to the creation of actual performances. Once, drama scholars merely examined the texts of plays. Now they look at all aspects of theatrical production including music, costume, staging, and movement. One useful source that discusses such details of staging and performance is Dunbar Ogden's *The Staging of Drama in the Medieval Church*.<sup>34</sup> Ogden gives the specific gestures, postures, and movement patterns that the original manuscripts indicate were used by the performers in these plays. While not precisely dances, these patterned movements were certainly sacred performances and are relevant to my research.

Michal Kobialka, in his book *This Is My Body: Representational Practices in the Early Middle Ages*,<sup>35</sup> negotiates his way around the terms "drama" and "theater" in much the same way I do with the term "dance." Kobialka avoids such words because they have specific meanings to modern audiences that are alien to the way medieval people understood and used representational practices. Scholars may once have thought that ideas like representation were static and unchanging throughout time, but with the influence of postmodernist thought, they now examine the ways in which such concepts are constantly in flux. Kobialka points out that understandings of what representation meant did not remain the same throughout the medieval era, but instead varied widely across time and place, constantly shifting and altering. Kobialka's work is full of dynamism, multiplicity, and the appearance and disappearance of ideas and

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<sup>34</sup> Dunbar H. Ogden, *The Staging of Drama in the Medieval Church* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002).

<sup>35</sup> Michal Kobialka, *This Is My Body: Representational Practices in the Early Middle Ages* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999).

practices. This has inspired me to show the multiplicity and variety of medieval understandings of dance.

In his approach to the relationship between the historian and the past, Kobialka acknowledges the existence in the past of real events, but does not see it as the historian's task to explain the truth or falsehood of what really happened, but instead to question how the events are portrayed in the evidence that remains. In his research, Kobialka wants to emphasize "how these events are described, how they are made meaningful, and how they become worthy of record or notice by the past and the present."<sup>36</sup> This view of the relationship of past to present is similar to that of de Certeau, whom Kobialka often quotes, and also similar to my own view.

In the field of music, scholars are also concerned with details of how medieval music was actually performed. Audrey Ekdahl Davidson, in *Aspects of Early Music and Performance*, discusses staging, gesture, and vocal production in a number of medieval music-dramas.<sup>37</sup> One of the dramas Davidson writes about is the *Planctus Mariae* (Lament of Mary) which I was privileged to witness at the International Congress on Medieval Studies in 2006. Another discussion of performance practices, this one particularly interesting to me because of its reference to dance, is Ruth Lightbourne's "The Question of Instruments and Dance in Hildegard of Bingen's Twelfth-Century Music Drama *Ordo Virtutum*."<sup>38</sup> Hildegard of Bingen was a German abbess and a prolific writer. Lightbourne uses references to dance in Hildegard's other

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<sup>36</sup> Kobialka, 26.

<sup>37</sup> Audrey Ekdahl Davidson, *Aspects of Early Music and Performance* (New York: AMS Press, 2008).

<sup>38</sup> Ruth Lightbourne, "The Question of Instruments and Dance in Hildegard of Bingen's Twelfth-Century Music Drama *Ordo Virtutum*," in *Parergon: Bulletin of the Australian and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 9, no. 2 (1991): 45-65.

writings to suggest that she and her nuns may have included a dance of the virtues in her famous drama, *Ordo Virtutum*. The question of what precisely nuns sang and how they sang it is at the core of Anne Bagnall Yardley's study, *Performing Piety: Musical Culture in Medieval English Nunneries*.<sup>39</sup> Yardley's chapter about processions held in and around nunneries was particularly helpful for my research as it gave me a clear image of how well-organized such processions needed to be in order to function.

Although not a scholar of music herself but rather of literature, Maria Dobozy discusses the production, performance, and dissemination of music in her book *Re-Membering the Past: the Medieval German Poet-Minstrel in Cultural Context*.<sup>40</sup> Dobozy looks both at how medieval authorities viewed minstrels and how minstrels presented themselves to their audiences. In a particularly relevant chapter entitled "Performance and Morality," Dobozy draws on Richard Schechner's performance theory to extrapolate the sorts of movements and movement styles that would have enabled medieval minstrels to connect with their audiences. Because the dramatic, larger-than-life qualities of performative movement would have flown in the face of medieval Christian beliefs about moderation and harmony, Dobozy speculates, minstrels were cut off from ordinary morality by the very act of creating performances.<sup>41</sup> This innate disorderliness of performance is an intriguing idea that I delve into further in chapter six.

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<sup>39</sup> Anne Bagnall Yardley, *Performing Piety: Musical Culture in Medieval English Nunneries* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>40</sup> Maria Dobozy, *Re-Membering the Past: the Medieval German Poet-Minstrel in Cultural Context* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2005).

<sup>41</sup> Dobozy, 85-142.

One final source from the field of music offers theoretical constructs that were useful to me in my research. Bruce Holsinger, in *Music, Body and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer*,<sup>42</sup> questions the accepted knowledge in his discipline about the relationship of embodiment and performance to medieval music. Holsinger criticizes much previous music scholarship for ignoring the medieval era in the history of music and leaping directly to the Renaissance, when the expressive and aesthetic qualities of music were supposedly discovered. This gap in music scholarship is very like the lack of writings on medieval dance, and seems to exist for similar reasons. Holsinger thinks that medieval embodied music (his term for the physical performance of music) has been neglected and misunderstood because many medievalists make generalizations about the hatred of the body in early Christian philosophy. He critiques “the unproblematic dualism that has often been projected onto early Christian sources,” and makes the important point that “flesh” and “body” are not synonymous in Christian writing.<sup>43</sup> In early Christian theology “flesh” was often used as a term for the human tendency toward sin, so when a writer condemned the flesh it did not necessarily mean condemnation of the body.

One of the debates in musicology that Holsinger describes seems to have particular relevance to dance and to my research. Some medieval music theorists wrote that true music was about numbers, not about voices or bodies. Because of this, musicologists have often thought that medieval people were hostile to embodied music. Holsinger, however, theorizes a more complex relationship between the music of pure numbers (or of the spheres) and embodied

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<sup>42</sup> Bruce W. Holsinger, *Music, Body and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001).

<sup>43</sup> Holsinger, 30.

music than a simple hierarchy. He calls this relationship between the different musics “a kind of intellectual and theological plate tectonics” in which two fundamental but opposed concepts in Christian thought collided—a suspicion of the body that was based on dualism, and a celebration of the body based on the incarnation of Christ.<sup>44</sup> I have seen a similarly complex relationship between the dances of the soul the dances of the body in my own research.

### Sources on Religious Women in Medieval Europe

Not all the sources I used in this research directly related to dance and sacred performance. In order to gain a foundation in the historical era I was studying, I consulted a number of sources about medieval Christianity, particularly those that addressed the role of women. In the last several decades there has been a flowering of research from a variety of perspectives about medieval beguines, nuns, female mystics, and female religious experience in general. This review of literature reflects that variety and includes several seminal works as well as lesser-known sources that were influential in my research.

Herbert Grundmann’s *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages* is an older work that is still considered an important text about medieval religious Christian women, especially beguines.<sup>45</sup> Grundmann, a German historian, wrote this book in part as a response to scholars of his time who imputed women’s involvement in medieval Christian religious groups to purely economic motives. The question of why there were more women than men in late medieval

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<sup>44</sup> Holsinger, 7.

<sup>45</sup> Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages: the Historical Links between Heresy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Women's Religious Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century, with the Historical Foundations of German Mysticism*, trans. Steven Rowan, (1935; reprint and trans. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

German cities led some of Grundmann's contemporaries to suggest that these surplus women joined religious groups because they could not find husbands or otherwise support themselves.<sup>46</sup> Grundmann, on the other hand, argues that women joined religious groups for purely spiritual reasons.

The story Grundmann tells about the beguines is one of origins, rise, and decline, cast in a modernist tone, as befits the era in which it was written. It is a scrupulously documented story, full of interesting characters. I draw two important concepts from Grundmann. First, beguines had no overarching organization, but instead adopted various rules to govern their lives as they saw fit, and often elected one of their own to be a leader of their community. Second, there was debate and ambivalence in medieval writings about beguines, as some male church authorities praised beguines for their piety, while others condemned them for loose living.

Grundmann's work on beguines has been a foundation for other scholarly studies, most recently Walter Simons' *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565*.<sup>47</sup> Simons examines the charters of beguine communities and various records such as business transactions, deeds, and wills. He also makes good use of material remains, such as buildings still standing today that once housed beguines. Through these sources, Simons concludes that beguines came from all social classes including the poor, not just from the nobility as Grundmann claimed. Simons particularly draws attention to the variety between different beguine communities and between different centuries.

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<sup>46</sup> This notion of a surplus of women was called the *Frauenfrage* (woman question) by German historians.

<sup>47</sup> Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

Simons' research is less concerned with individual beguines and more with their communities. He sees beguines "first, as a religious 'movement' of the laity; second, as a movement shaped and promoted by urban conditions; and third, and perhaps most important, as a movement characterized by the gender of its participants."<sup>48</sup> In keeping with the title of his book, Simons analyzes the urban context of beguine life. The high degree of urbanization in the Low Countries probably helped make the beguine movement possible. Other influencing factors were the growth of the textile industry, high literacy rates for both men and women, and the possibility for women to make a living in many different trades.

The sorts of work beguines undertook included teaching children, weaving textiles, caring for the sick (hospitals were sometimes attached to beguinages) and praying for the dead. One of Simons' most interesting points is that beguines often walked in processions for the dead. To me, this suggests not only performance but also a unique and ambiguous place these women might have occupied between the world of the living and the world of the spiritual, of heaven, purgatory, and hell.

In chapter one I referenced Caroline Walker Bynum's work and how it influenced me at the beginning of my research journey. Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* is considered a seminal study of late medieval women's spirituality.<sup>49</sup> Other scholars have often adopted Bynum's premise that physicality was particularly important in medieval women's expressions of faith. I, too, used the connection between medieval women and physical performance as a starting point for this research.

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<sup>48</sup> Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, xii.

<sup>49</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

In Bynum's study, physicality is equated with food. She argues that while medieval religious men's greatest sacrifices to God were giving up wealth and sexual relations, women gave up that which was an ordinary part of their lives and sometimes the only thing they could give up—food. Bynum suggests that physical acts such as eating, not eating, or hurting the body had different meanings to men and women. Self-torture or mutilation, far from being an act of hatred toward the body, actually affirmed women's bodies and physicalities by merging them with the suffering, saving body of Christ.

Bynum claims that it was a medieval truism that man was to woman as spirit was to body. This association of woman with flesh made it possible for misogynist writers to denigrate women for being sinful, but because of medieval devotion to the physical body of Christ (as experienced in the eucharist), the association of women with the body and with Christ's humanity made women particularly capable of claiming unity with Christ. Bynum explores this theme of women's connection with the body further in her book *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*.<sup>50</sup>

Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* was published in 1987. Since then, subsequent scholars have both added to and critiqued her conclusions, enriching the burgeoning study of female spirituality, mysticism, and women's embodiment. Amy Hollywood, in *The Soul as Virgin Wife* and later in *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History*, interrogates the notion that women identified with the suffering body.<sup>51</sup> She finds that

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<sup>50</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

<sup>51</sup> Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995); Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

the redemption of the body through suffering was not necessarily a female concern but one placed upon women by male hagiographers who wrote accounts of female saints' lives.

Hollywood does not study male accounts of female experience but reads women's own words to gain a sense of their self-understanding. Finding that women like Hadewijch, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Beatrice of Nazareth emphasized the spiritual rather than the bodily nature of their own suffering, Hollywood argues that "thirteenth-century religious women writers sought to forge a religious ideal in which suffering—like sin—is located firmly in the will and, hence, spiritualized."<sup>52</sup>

Hollywood also critiques the binary that some scholars have reified between affective mysticism (visionary, embodied, and experiential) and speculative mysticism (intellectual and theoretical). While she acknowledges that both types of mysticism did exist in the Middle Ages she does not identify the affective with women and the speculative with men as many previous authors have done. She finds, instead, that some women writers were intellectual and some male writers were experiential and, moreover, that both intellectual and experiential mysticism could easily appear in the same text. Further deconstructing this binary, Hollywood says that the two kinds of mysticism could even become blurred together in those moments where the mystic reached a place beyond emotion and reason and became indistinguishably mixed with God. In describing such moments, mystics used words in an unique way to express what could not be

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<sup>52</sup> Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, 96.

expressed, “unsaying” the attributes of God and even their own experiences of God in order to show that God was beyond understanding.<sup>53</sup>

Elizabeth Alvida Petroff, in *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism*, conducts a series of close readings on texts by and about various medieval women mystics.<sup>54</sup> Like Hollywood, she is particularly interested in female-authored texts. The theme of female authority appears in several of her essays, and she points out how many female-authored mystic texts threatened male authority. She notes two ways in which such texts display difference: “the radical difference between the way male biographers view saintly women and women’s view of themselves, and the radically nontraditional nature of the texts by mystics.”<sup>55</sup> This difference sets female mystic texts apart both from texts by medieval men and from today’s accepted notion of Western literature.

Barbara Newman is a scholar well known for her studies of Hildegard of Bingen.<sup>56</sup> She has also examined ways in which medieval religious women usurped traditionally male authority. In her book *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* she explores two different strategies by which medieval women could overcome the deeply ingrained notions of female inferiority within Christianity and make places for

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<sup>53</sup> Hollywood, *Soul as Virgin Wife*, 16, 20; Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, 6-9.

<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Alvida Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>55</sup> Petroff, ix.

<sup>56</sup> Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Barbara Newman, *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and her World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

themselves.<sup>57</sup> One way was for a woman to transcend her sex and become either manly or genderless, the “virile woman” of Newman’s title. This strategy was the one taken by monasticism, with its emphasis on virginity. The other way, which is more the focus of Newman’s book, was the development of a specifically feminine Christianity in which women could be holy because, not in spite of, their femaleness.

Newman takes an interesting theoretical stance, placing herself in opposition to what she calls the “currently fashionable constructivism” descended from Foucault, in which the object of study is not the experience of the individual, but the mechanisms of power that work on that individual. Newman examines people and their experiences, which she finds echoed in their writings. She shows interest in how societal structures like class and gender affect people, but she seems particularly interested in the diverse ways such structures have influenced people who might seem externally similar. Individuality and diversity appear to be important topics for her; she states that her goal is not writing a monolithic story but instead “highlighting one iridescent strand in a dense and intricate web.”<sup>58</sup>

Grace Jantzen, in *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*, takes issue with the way many philosophers and theologians have dealt with mysticism.<sup>59</sup> By framing mysticism only as a private, personal experience of an “intense psychological state,” such philosophers have cut it off from the public, politicized world of social justice that is of utmost importance to feminists

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<sup>57</sup> Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).

<sup>58</sup> Newman, *Virile Woman*, 17.

<sup>59</sup> Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

like Jantzen. She finds and explores political and social themes in the writings of the mystics, especially issues of power—the link between power and knowledge, and the link between power and gender. Building on the theories of Foucault—whom she, along with other feminists, faults for a lack of attention to gendered differences—Jantzen shows how the authority to determine who “counted” as a mystic was crucial to the powerful groups in medieval society. Mystics claimed direct revelation from God, a powerful claim, and one that had to be controlled.

Jantzen does not shy away from complexity and contradictions in the works of the mystics. She acknowledges that each mystic was an individual and that the goals and themes of different mystics cannot simply be lumped together; she also acknowledges “the tensions within a single individual, as strength and integrity struggles with deeply internalised misogyny and suspicion of the body and sexuality.”<sup>60</sup> I am particularly drawn to Jantzen’s questions about power, about who benefits and who loses in the way power is constructed, both in the medieval era and today. Her attention not just to individual personal experience, but to the social and political function of mysticism is a valuable concept I have also used in my study of dance and sacred performance.

Bynum, Hollywood, Petroff, Newman, and Jantzen all look at women’s agency and power, their abilities to create their own authority and spirituality in the midst of a male-dominated culture, whether that be through embodiment, suffering, visions, or unique uses of mystical language. Dyan Elliott’s *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* is a book in a slightly different vein.<sup>61</sup> Elliott discusses how

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<sup>60</sup> Jantzen, 23.

<sup>61</sup> Dyan Elliott, *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004).

female spirituality was constructed within specific boundaries set by male church authorities and served specific political functions. Although Elliott agrees that women did, to some extent, construct their own spiritual experiences, she also points out that most women did not write their own texts and instead were written about by male confessors and hagiographers. Rather than a look at empowered women, this study is an examination of how female spirituality was constructed, promoted, recorded, and eventually criminalized by male clergy. Elliott's research is a useful counterpoint to other sources that show women as powerful. Although I, as a twenty-first century woman, would like to see examples of medieval women's agency, it is important to remember the constraints under which such women lived and the ways in which their actions often supported rather than subverted the male-dominated system.

Some of the scholars I have cited here focus more strongly on the words medieval religious women wrote, while others focus on women's physical actions. Mary Suydam, however, looks at how both women's words and actions can be considered as performance in two chapters in anthologies, "Begaine Textuality: Sacred Performances" and the more recent "Visionaries in the Public Eye: Begaine Literature as Performance."<sup>62</sup> I credit Suydam's work for bringing to my attention that the beguines' dance-like actions such as kneeling, trembling, and falling to the ground usually took place in public, before the eyes of an audience, and can therefore be read as performance rather than merely as personal experience. The term "sacred

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<sup>62</sup> Mary A. Suydam, "Begaine Textuality: Sacred Performances," in *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality*, ed. Mary A. Suydam and Joanna E. Ziegler (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 169-210; Mary A. Suydam, "Visionaries in the Public Eye: Begaine Literature as Performance," in *The Texture of Society: Medieval Women in the Southern Low Countries*, ed. Ellen E. Kittell and Mary A. Suydam (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 131-52.

performance” comes from Suydam’s writings as well. She discusses not just the performative quality of the beguines’ public, ritual actions but also their transformative quality. Through their bodily motions they accomplished spiritual transformations for themselves and others, driving off demons, saving souls from purgatory, or performing healing or prophecy. One of Suydam’s important points is that performances were not a side effect of medieval women’s holiness. Rather, it was *through* performance that they created their holiness, inscribing themselves a place within the structures of Christianity.<sup>63</sup>

The anthology *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality*, of which Suydam was one of the co-editors, contains other studies whose authors read the actions of medieval religious women as performances. One such study is Susan Rodgers and Joanna Ziegler’s, “Elisabeth of Spalbeek’s Trance Dance of Faith: A Performance Theory Interpretation from Anthropological and Art Historical Perspectives.”<sup>64</sup> Elisabeth of Spalbeek was a beguine who physically performed Christ’s Passion and her *vita*, written by the abbot Philip of Clairvaux, is one of the core texts for my research. I had initially learned about Elisabeth through an article by Walter Simons entitled “Reading a saint’s body: rapture and bodily movement in the vitae of thirteenth-century beguines.”<sup>65</sup> Simons discusses Elisabeth’s bodily movements in the context of other religious women of her time, pointing out that while

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<sup>63</sup> Suydam, “Visionaries,” 136-37.

<sup>64</sup> Susan Rodgers and Joanna E. Ziegler, “Elisabeth 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 Joanna E. Ziegler (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 299-355.

<sup>65</sup> Walter Simons, “Reading a Saint’s Body: Rapture and Bodily Movement in the Vitae of Thirteenth-Century Beguines,” in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), 10-23.

female saints were normally expected to show order and serenity through their bodies, when they entered ecstasy they might display more ambiguous bodily changes such as total immobility or violent movement. These bodily signs could prove difficult for a medieval observer to interpret, because they were so far beyond the ordinary. Actions that some might interpret as divine grace might at other times, or by other viewers, be interpreted as demonic possession.

While Simons discusses Elisabeth's movements, he does not call them either performance or dance. Rodgers and Ziegler, in their article, take the next step and analyze Elisabeth's actions as performance. Combining theoretical strategies from anthropology, art history, and performance theory, Rodgers and Ziegler identify Elisabeth's performances as trance dances and compare them to shamanistic and possession dances from other cultures around the world. The connections they draw between Elisabeth and sacred trance dancers in other religious traditions are compelling, and their argument weakens the notion that Christianity has never had a tradition of sacred dance.

The scholarly dance community has recently become aware of Elisabeth of Spalbeek's dances through Karen Silen's article "Elisabeth of Spalbeek: Dancing the Passion," which appeared in a publication of the Society of Dance History Scholars.<sup>66</sup> Like Rodgers and Ziegler, Silen agrees that Elisabeth's performances were dance. She analyzes the movements and qualities of movement that Elisabeth performed. Silen also comments on certain elements that Philip's description of Elisabeth seems to be lacking, such as music, floor patterns, or named dance steps. Just because such elements do not appear in Philip's description, Silen says, does

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<sup>66</sup> Karen Silen, "Elisabeth of Spalbeek: Dancing the Passion," in *Women's Work: Making Dance in Europe before 1800*, ed. Lynn Matluck Brooks (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Madison Press, 2008), 207-27.

not mean that they were necessarily absent from Elisabeth's performance. They may either have been unnecessary to Philip's purpose in writing Elisabeth's *vita* or they may have been so self-evident to him that he did not feel the need to mention them.

Silen sets her study firmly with the field of dance studies by comparing the individual expression evident in Elisabeth's dance to modern-day concert dance, which is highly focused on the individual expressiveness of the artist. She suggests that "Elisabeth's dances more closely resemble examples of twenty-first-century art or concert dance than the court dance tradition at the heart of most early dance research."<sup>67</sup> I, too, noticed this similarity as I read Philip's account of Elisabeth's dances. The way Elisabeth is described as rolling on the floor seems utterly unlike any descriptions of medieval social dance and very close indeed to many concert dances I have witnessed or performed.

The purpose of Silen's article seems to be to open up early dance research to other forms besides courtly social dance—a laudable goal. The purpose of my research, as regards the scholarly dance community, has been similar to Silen's but from a slightly different angle. I hope to make dance historians aware of the many sorts of embodied sacred performance, including dance, that existed within medieval Christianity in order to call into question the commonly-held belief that most pious medieval Christians considered dancing sinful. As this review of literature has shown, there is a rich discourse of current research on medieval religious women and their performances. The difficulty, however, is that this discourse is not well known to the scholarly dance community, so that within dance studies medieval dance, and especially medieval sacred dance, is barely represented. Silen's study is a large step toward closing the gap

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<sup>67</sup> Silen, 221.

in knowledge between medievalists and dance historians. I hope that my research can be another such step.

It is not just dance historians who have something to learn, however. The discourse on medieval women's spirituality has been heavily text-based and could benefit from an influx of dance scholars who have first-hand experience in performance. Researchers in both the fields of music and of theater restage medieval performances, sometimes from minimal source material. Even if dancers do not have enough information on medieval steps and patterns to create reconstructions, surely we could create re-imaginings or responses to the sources we do have about medieval dance and offer medievalists something tangible and kinesthetic with which they could embody their textual knowledge.

## CHAPTER 4

## DANCE IN FOUR BEGUINE TEXTS

The four core beguine texts contain a number of passages that mention dance. These dances display a great variety in both purpose and participants: choirs of blessed souls perform heavenly dances of praise; the mystic's soul dances with Christ as with a lover; personified Faith claps her hands and dances proudly and festively around an altar; and the devil dances with wicked delight. The authors of these texts often state that they witnessed a dance in a vision or ecstasy, or that a dance was heavenly rather than earthly. The visionary nature of these dances, however, does not mean they were entirely unrelated to physical bodies or actual performances. The beguine texts establish complex relationships between the physical body, the soul, and the concept of dance. The question of what precisely this relationship may be is addressed in chapter five. This chapter takes up the simpler, but still foundational questions of what forms these dances take; who the dancers are; what words in the original languages the translators render as the English "dance;" and what meanings, emotions, or interpretations the authors of these texts attribute to the dances. This last question is the most weighty, bringing up themes that run through several of the beguine passages about dance, themes that suggest the various possible meanings that dance could have to medieval people. Before turning to the specific texts, however, it is necessary to present a brief history of who the beguines were and what is known about the lives of the particular women whose texts form the core of this research.

## The Beguines

Beginning in the twelfth century, major religious changes swept Christian Europe. Men and women, clergy and laypeople alike, demonstrated an increasing desire to embrace an apostolic lifestyle of poverty and itinerate preaching. People all throughout Europe felt this desire; Herbert Grundmann, in his comprehensive study of the subject, calls it a “religious movement.”<sup>1</sup> Two new religious orders, the Franciscans and the Dominicans, came out of this movement, as well as numerous groups that included laypeople, such as the penitents, flagellants, and beguines.<sup>2</sup> The beguines, a uniquely female phenomenon, show one way that women tried to fit themselves into the mold—or perhaps break the mold—of Christian religious life.

As wandering preachers spoke out against wealth, corruption, and complacency, many women were inspired to follow their teachings. The authorities of the Catholic Church, however, frowned on women wandering the countryside or begging. Joining a convent to live a cloistered life of prayer and meditation as a nun remained the only acceptable role for a religious woman. Many convents were founded in the thirteenth century, attached to the Cistercian, Dominican and Franciscan orders. The male leadership of these orders, however, wanted their members to focus on preaching and other duties, not pastoral care for groups of women. These orders, therefore, passed legislation to prevent any more convents from being formed.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements of the Middle Ages*, trans. Steven Rowan (1935; reprint and translation, Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 1-70.

<sup>2</sup> Ernest W. McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969), 3-7.

<sup>3</sup> Grundmann, 89-137.

Only wealthy women of high birth could enter most convents, so even if there had been a sufficient number of places, becoming a nun was not an option for middle or lower class women who wanted to live religious lives.<sup>4</sup> Becoming a beguine, however, was a new and evidently very popular option. The beguines existed primarily in Germany and the Low Countries, which would later become Belgium and the Netherlands. Beguines did not comprise an official religious order; that is, they did not take formal vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.<sup>5</sup> They lived together in communities called beguinages and supported themselves by manual labor, often in the growing textile industry. Many beguinages had hospitals attached to them and beguines were known for caring for the sick, teaching children, praying for the dead and walking in funeral processions.<sup>6</sup>

The beguines probably came from varying social classes. While Grundmann theorizes that most beguines came from noble families, arguing that the poor had no need to embrace voluntary poverty,<sup>7</sup> more recent scholars such as Walter Simons, while agreeing that at its beginning the beguine movement involved many wealthy women, point to documentary evidence to make the case that beguines came from all strata of society.<sup>8</sup>

Although beguines did not take permanent vows, they valued chastity and promised to abstain from sexual activity as long as they were members of a beguine community. Beguines

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<sup>4</sup> McDonnell, 85, 88-90; Grundmann, 139.

<sup>5</sup> Grundmann, 148-49; McDonnell, 128-31.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2001), 76-87, 112-13; McDonnell, 270-77.

<sup>7</sup> Grundmann, 149-50.

<sup>8</sup> Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 91-104.

often wore distinct clothing in drab colors, like nun's habits. They were not strictly enclosed in cloisters and since most lived in urban areas they mingled with townspeople in the course of daily life.<sup>9</sup> In these ways, they straddled the line between clergy and laity. Ernest McDonnell calls them "semireligious."<sup>10</sup> Their uncertain status could sometimes cause trouble for them since they were not officially under the powerful protection of the church. In the fourteenth century, many beguines were accused of heresy and some were executed.

Though most beguines were not learned in theology and did not read and write in Latin, a number of them wrote in the vernacular. At this time the Low Countries enjoyed a high rate of literacy, even for women.<sup>11</sup> Two of the women whose texts I examine wrote their own books: Hadewijch wrote in the Dutch language and Mechthild of Magdeburg wrote in the Low German language. Agnes Blannbekin's male confessor and scribe wrote her text in Latin; he often seems to be transcribing words explained to him, so he and Agnes may be considered co-authors. Philip of Clairvaux, the abbot who observed Elisabeth of Spalbeek's performances, wrote her *vita* in Latin. Although Elisabeth had no hand in writing this text, Philip describes her movements in great detail, allowing the reader to visualize her performances. Since Elisabeth undoubtedly authored her own movements, her embodied presence can be seen shining through Philip's words, inscribing his text with her physical performance.

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<sup>9</sup> Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 113-17; McDonnell, 123-29.

<sup>10</sup> McDonnell, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 6-7.

All four women whose texts I examine were considered beguines. Although I focus here primarily on their textual passages concerning dance, a brief explanation of what is known about each woman's life and about the general structure of her text may be useful.

#### Hadewijch, Mechthild, Agnes, and Elisabeth

Hadewijch lived in the first half of the thirteenth century, possibly near Antwerp or Brussels. Her surname is unknown and no biographical information exists but what can be gleaned from her writings. She was the head of a beguine community and was concerned about the spiritual development of her young beguines.<sup>12</sup> She probably came from a noble background, as she was familiar with French and courtly love poetry. She also read Latin and drew concepts from the works of Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux, among others.<sup>13</sup> Later in her life she encountered troubles and may have been exiled from her community.<sup>14</sup> Hadewijch's writings are in multiple genres; she wrote letters, recorded visions, and composed poems in stanzas and couplets. Many scholars consider her poetry to be some of the best in the Dutch language.<sup>15</sup> Hadewijch's works survive in four manuscripts written in medieval Dutch, dating from the

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<sup>12</sup> Mother Columba Hart, introduction to *Hadewijch: the Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 2-4; Saskia Murk-Jansen, *Brides in the Desert: the Spirituality of the Beguines* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis books, 1998), 69-70; Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350)* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 200.

<sup>13</sup> Murk-Jansen, 69-70; McGinn, 200; Hart, 5-7.

<sup>14</sup> Hart, 4-5; McGinn, 200.

<sup>15</sup> Murk-Jansen, 70; Hart, 19.

fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>16</sup> Her great theme of love, or *minne*, recurs incessantly throughout her writings. In her poems she both praises the joys and laments the sufferings of loving God. According to Paul Mommaers, Hadewijch presents love as sometimes delightful, sometimes empty and painful. She does not believe that the joys of love, such as mystical ecstasy and spiritual union with God, are enough to make a person “full-grown,” which is her term for the richest and best sort of spiritual life. Hadewijch does describe visions and moments of ecstasy, but her writings also have plenty of moments of humanness, being alone and separate from God.<sup>17</sup>

Mechthild of Magdeburg lived around the same time as Hadewijch and like Hadewijch came from an upper class family and knew the traditions of courtly love, which she drew on in her writing.<sup>18</sup> Born in 1207 or 1208, she moved to Magdeburg and entered a beguine community there sometime around 1230. Evidently she achieved a position of authority but also suffered troubles and increasing suspicion, which may have been part of the reason she eventually entered the Cistercian convent at Helfta, a community known for its high standards of learning.<sup>19</sup> Mechthild did not know Latin, but could read and write German. She wrote her book, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, in seven sections between 1250 and 1280 in Middle

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<sup>16</sup> Hart, 1-2.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Mommaers S.J., preface to *Hadewijch: the Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), xiii-xxiv. Mommaers gives a succinct look at the philosophical and spiritual issues in Hadewijch’s works.

<sup>18</sup> Frank Tobin, introduction to *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 4; Elizabeth A. Andersen, introduction to *Mechthild of Magdeburg: Selections from The Flowing Light of the Godhead* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003), 3-4.

<sup>19</sup> Andersen, 10-11; McGinn, 222-23.

Low German. The original language source has been lost, but Mechthild's writings survive in a partial Latin translation from the thirteenth century and a more complete and literal Middle High German version from the fourteenth century.<sup>20</sup> Mechthild had a good relationship with the Dominican order, and a Dominican named Heinrich of Halle helped her write down and compile her book.<sup>21</sup> Mechthild uses many different literary forms, from dialogues and poetry to forms drawing on folk tradition.<sup>22</sup> She often describes visions and ecstatic experiences in poetic and dramatic ways. The major themes of Mechthild's work include the loving bridal union between the soul and God, the sometimes uneasy relationship between the body and the soul, and the concept of "sinking humility" in which the soul is estranged from God but does not stop loving him.<sup>23</sup>

Agnes Blannbekin's birth date is unknown, but she died in 1315. The only extant biographical information is what is found in her *Life and Revelations*. A farmer's daughter who became a beguine in Vienna, she was part of a large religious culture involving nuns, monks, other clergy, and beguines.<sup>24</sup> An unnamed friar of the Franciscan order acted as her confessor and wrote down Agnes' visions and sayings in Latin, since she could read but not write. Therefore, the pen of this male confessor and scribe mediates the story of Agnes' life and doings.

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<sup>20</sup> Tobin, 6-9. It is the Middle High German version that forms the foundation for Tobin's English translation, though the Latin version is also consulted for certain difficult passages.

<sup>21</sup> Murk-Jansen, 66-67; Andersen, 8-10.

<sup>22</sup> Tobin, 10; Andersen, 3-4.

<sup>23</sup> Tobin, 12-20.

<sup>24</sup> Ulrike Wiethaus, introduction to *Agnes Blannbekin, Viennese Beguine: "Life and Revelations"* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), 4-6.

Ulrike Wiethaus, who has translated Agnes' *Life and Revelations* into English, sees this as a co-authorship and finds that "feminine" concerns survive in the text and that many conversations between Agnes and her confessor seem to be transcribed verbatim.<sup>25</sup> A complete medieval manuscript of Agnes' text no longer exists, though there are fragments; Wiethaus' translation draws on an eighteenth-century printed Latin edition.<sup>26</sup> Wiethaus points out that Agnes organizes her book like a diary, moving through the various liturgical feasts of the year and commenting on the events of Agnes' own life and on larger issues prevalent in the city.<sup>27</sup> Agnes' text displays her strong veneration for the eucharist. She traveled through the city to different churches to attend as many masses as possible and the altars on which the eucharist was placed formed a special part of her devotions. She often describes visions and ecstatic experiences occurring near the altar. Wiethaus points out the sense of motion and space in Agnes' text; Agnes continually moved through various spaces of the town in which she lived and even usurped traditionally male spaces such as the altar.<sup>28</sup>

Elisabeth of Spalbeek did not write her own text, nor was she instrumental in its construction. She engaged in physical rather than written performance. Elisabeth lived near Liège and in 1267, when she was about twenty, a Cistercian abbot named Philip of Clairvaux

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<sup>25</sup> Wiethaus, "Introduction," 8-10.

<sup>26</sup> Wiethaus, "Introduction," 12-13.

<sup>27</sup> Wiethaus, "Introduction," 7.

<sup>28</sup> Ulrike Wiethaus, "Interpretive essay," in *Agnes Blannbekin, Viennese Beguine: "Life and revelations"* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), 163-67.

wrote in Latin about her stigmata and her physical performances, which he had witnessed.<sup>29</sup> Elisabeth performed during the various liturgical hours of the day and engaged in dance-like actions such as beating her breast, moving quickly about the chapel, maintaining complete stillness, striking difficult poses, shaking her head, sighing and moaning, and stretching out her arms like Christ on the cross. Philip and his monks viewed these performances, as did members of Elisabeth's community among whom she became well known and attracted a cult-like following.<sup>30</sup> Philip's written text about Elisabeth's performances, known as her *vita*, is found in the *Catalogus codicum hagiographicorum bibliothecae Regiae Bruxellensis*, a collection of saints' lives.<sup>31</sup> This Latin text forms the basis for the existing research on Elisabeth by Walter Simons, Susan Rodgers and Joanna E. Ziegler, and Karen Silen.<sup>32</sup> A shortened form of

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<sup>29</sup> Susan Rodgers and Joanna E. Ziegler, "Elisabeth 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 Joanna E. Ziegler (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 301-2.

<sup>30</sup> Rodgers and Ziegler, 301-2, 306-8, 331-36; Walter Simons, "Reading a Saint's Body: Rapture and Bodily Movement in the *Vitae* of Thirteenth-Century Beguines," in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester and New York: Manchester University, 1994), 10-12.

<sup>31</sup> *Catalogus codicum hagiographicorum bibliothecae Regiae Bruxellensis*, vol. 1. (Brussels: n. p, 1886), 363-78.

<sup>32</sup> Rodgers and Ziegler; Simons, "Reading a Saint's Body"; Joanna E. Ziegler, "On the Artistic Nature of Elisabeth of Spalbeek's Ecstasy: the Southern Low Countries Do Matter," in *The Texture of Society: Medieval Women in the Southern Low Countries*, ed. Ellen E. Kittell and Mary A. Suydam (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 181-202; Karen Silen, "Elisabeth of Spalbeek: Dancing the Passion," in *Women's Work: Making Dance in Europe before 1800*, ed. Lynn Matluck Brooks (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 207-27.

Elisabeth's *vita* was translated from the original Latin into Middle English and is now available in modern English.<sup>33</sup>

### Textual Passages Referring to Dance

In the four core beguine texts I have found thirteen passages that use a word in the original language that the translator renders as “dance” in English. These thirteen passages are not the only sources for this research but they are the foundation. Through them one can gain an understanding not only of what is meant by the word “dance” in these texts, but more broadly, what connotations and implications dance may have had to thirteenth-century beguines. Chapter five moves from passages specifically about dance to passages in which bodies move in dance-like ways, but it is simplest to begin with this narrower conception of dance.

The thirteen passages that mention dance range in length from a brief portion of a sentence to an extended dance scene multiple pages in length. Agnes' and Mechthild's texts contain the bulk of the dance passages—Mechthild gives six passages, and Agnes five. Hadewijch has one poetic stanza that mentions dance and Elisabeth's *vita*, while not referring to her physical performances as dance, contains an intriguing passage in which dance is mentioned as part of the interpretation of scripture.

All thirteen passages are presented here with a brief analysis following each. To clearly display the place of the dance passage and its purpose within the text, each passage is quoted in its surrounding context. The passages that present dance in a positive way are first, followed by

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<sup>33</sup> Margot H. King, “The Life of Elisabeth of Spalbeek: translated from the Middle English,” in *A Leaf from the Great Tree of God*, ed. Margot H. King (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing, 1994), 244-75.

those passages that present it in a negative way. To organize the group of positive references, which is larger, the passages are also divided according to the form the dance takes. These forms include group/couple within group dances, solo dances, and dance used as an allegory.

### *Group Dances*

The most common form of dance appearing in these texts is a heavenly group dance of praise. In this form of dance, found multiple times in both Mechthild and Agnes, a group of holy people dance together either in heaven after the Last Judgment or in an unspecified visionary environment. This passage from Mechthild serves as an introductory example of the heavenly dance of praise. Mechthild speaks of how a person who wants to take part in the “eternal feast of the Holy Trinity” must first live a holy life on earth. She then launches into an account of what that feast will be like:

Pure loving virgins shall, moreover, follow the noble Youth, Jesus Christ, Child of the pure maiden, who is utterly filled with love, as he was at age eighteen. His Person is the most beloved of the virgins, and he is the most handsome of all. They follow him with bliss-filled tenderness into the blossoming meadow of their pure conscience. There the Youth breaks for them the flower of all virtues from which they fashion garlands that they shall wear to the eternal celebration.

When the fine meal has been enjoyed, which Jesus Christ himself shall serve, one shall look on at the most sublime dance of praise. Their soul and body shall wear the garland of their virtues which they have practiced here with great holy devotion. And they shall follow the Lamb in untold bliss; from bliss to love, from love to joy, from joy to splendor, from splendor to power, from power to the highest heights before the eyes of the heavenly Father.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 308. The Middle High German from which the English translation is taken can be found in Mechthild von Magdeburg, *Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit: nach der Einsiedler Handschrift in kritischem Vergleich mit der gesamten Überlieferung*, eds. Hans

The word used for dance in this passage is *lobetanz* (dance of praise) a word which combines the German word for praise, *loben*, with one of the German words for dance, *tanzen*. *Tanzen* is the most common Middle High German word for dance and can refer to courtly dance or to merrymaking in general.<sup>35</sup>

Several things are notable about this passage. The dance takes place in the context of other festive activities including fashioning garlands (which were often associated with dance in German love songs of the time) and a feast.<sup>36</sup> The participants in the dance are Christ himself and holy virgins. They perform the dance for the purposes of praise and celebration. This dance is also associated with the virtues, since the garlands worn to the dance are made of virtues. The impression is that the virtuous life these virgins led on earth makes it possible for them to dance in heaven.

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Neumann and Gisela Vollman-Profe (Munich: Artemis Verlag, 1990), 286. “Die reinen minnenden jungfrowwen die soellent vúrbas volgen dem edeln jungelinge Jhesu Christo, der reinen megde kint, der ist al vol minnen, als er was von ahtzehen jaren; so ist sin persone den jungfrowen allerminnenklichost und er ist allerschoenost. So volgent si ime mit wunnenklicher zarthheit in die bluejenden wise ir reinen gewissi. Da brichet inen der jungeling die bluomen aller tugenden, da machent si die edelen crentze von, die man zuo der ewigen hochzit tragen sol.

Swenne die edelen gerihte sint geschehen, de Jhesu Christus selber dienen wil, so sihet man da den allerhoehesten lobetanz. Da sol denne win ieglich sele und lip tragen iren tugenden kranz, die si hie habent vollebraht mit maniger heliger andaht. So volgent si dem lambe in unzellicher wunne; von wunnen ze minnen, von minnen ze vroeden; von vroeden se clarheit, von clarheit zuo gewaltekeit, von gewaltekeit in die hoehesten hoehin vúr des himelschen vatter ovgen.”

<sup>35</sup> Ann Harding, *An Investigation into the Use and Meaning of Medieval German Dancing Terms* (Göppingen: Verlag Alfred Kümmerle, 1973), 25, 273-74.

<sup>36</sup> Olive Sayce, *The Medieval German lyric 1150-1300*, (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1982), 197, 242, 255.

In the last line of this passage the dancers follow the Lamb, which suggests that he is the dance-leader. Christ as dance-leader is not a foreign concept in Christianity; it may derive from a passage in the apocryphal Acts of Saint John in which Christ leads the disciples in a ring dance.<sup>37</sup> Christ leads the dancers in Mechthild's text through a series of states that culminate in splendor and power. The text implies, though it does not specifically state, that the heavenly dance of praise is instrumental in bringing its participants this splendor and power.

Mechthild does not describe what this dance looks like or what form it takes, but Agnes explains the format of a heavenly dance more clearly. In a vision Agnes sees Mary, the Blessed Virgin, with a crown and on a throne beside Christ. Around the throne are seven groups of people: virgins, penitents, preachers, prelates, contemplatives, those who suffer, and those who do good works:

These all simultaneously circled the throne of the Blessed Virgin like a crown and as if dancing a round-dance, well prepared, now advancing, now retreating, so that now these, then those came closer to the Blessed Virgin.<sup>38</sup>

Agnes also sees a personal friend who is a preacher taking part in this circle dance. During the dance, this preacher takes the opportunity to speak to Christ whenever the dance brings him close

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<sup>37</sup> Wiethaus, in analyzing Agnes Blannbekin's references to dance, points out that "associating Christ with dance is an ancient Christian tradition" (*Life and Revelations*, 20, note 6); E. Louis Backman gives a quotation of the passage from the Acts of Saint John in *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1952), 14.

<sup>38</sup> Agnes Blannbekin, *Agnes Blannbekin, Viennese Beguine: "Life and Revelations,"* trans. Ulrike Wiethaus (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), 153. The original Latin can be found in Agnes Blannbekin, *Leben und Offenbarungen der Wiener Begine Agnes Blannbekin (1315)*, eds. Peter Dinzelbacher and Renate Vogeler (Göppingen: Künnerle, 1994), 456. "Hi omnes simul in modum coronae et choreae circuibant quasi tripudiantes thronum beatae virginis armato modo nunc introeuntes, nunc exeuntes, ita ut modo illi, modo isti magis appropinquarent beatae virgini."

to the center. He asks advice about what the Lord wants him to do and the Lord answers him. In this way, the dance presented here is not just a dance of praise; it is also efficacious, accomplishing something tangible. The dance brings answers and advice to Agnes' friend.

This passage contains two different Latin words for dance. The word Wiethaus translates as “round-dance” is *chorea*, and the word she translates as “dancing” is *tripudiantes*, a form of *tripudium*. In Classical Latin, *chorea* referred to a round-dance and *tripudium* to a three-step dance.<sup>39</sup> Throughout the medieval era, however, the meaning of these words did not necessarily remain the same. While *chorea* seems to have maintained its meaning, usually referring to an open or closed circle dance, *tripudium* sometimes could mean “jubilation” rather than “dance.”<sup>40</sup> Brainard points out, however, that jubilation and dance were often linked and that “dance” is probably the most common meaning of *tripudium*.<sup>41</sup> In this passage, with both *chorea* and *tripudium* in close proximity as well as the mention of “circling” (*circuibant*), it is clear that this is not just jubilation but a dance and, in fact, a circle dance.

This dance, circling around the throne, is easier to visualize than the one Mechthild described in “Pure loving virgins.” The phrase “now advancing, now retreating” seems to refer not to the circle turning clockwise, then counterclockwise, but rather to the dancers advancing into the center of the circle (“closer to the Blessed Virgin”) and retreating back to their places. The dancers do not all move inward at the same time, but first some and then others make this inward and outward movement. This is not, evidently, a unison dance of the simplest sort, but

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<sup>39</sup> Backman, 13.

<sup>40</sup> Backman, 13; Harding, 56.

<sup>41</sup> Ingrid Brainard, “Dance,” in *A Companion to the Medieval Theater*, ed. Ronald W. Vince (New York and London: Greenwood Press, 1989), 89.

rather a dance in which different individuals or groups perform different parts at the same time, creating intricate patterns.

I am inclined to think that “these” and “those” who perform these different parts, approaching and retreating, probably refer not to individual dancers but to groups of dancers. The “all” in the first sentence of the passage refers to the groups of people, including virgins, penitents, preachers, those who do good works, and so on. All these groups simultaneously perform the circle dance. It seems logical that these groups would remain together during the dance, each dancing its own part and approaching and retreating from the throne together.

This dance is “well prepared,” which suggests both that it is orderly and that it has been practiced beforehand. Simons points out that when the author of a *vita* describes and evaluates a holy woman’s bodily movements, orderliness is a strongly positive descriptor as opposed to disorder and indecency, which are both negative.<sup>42</sup> It stands to reason, then, that when Agnes presented a heavenly dance in a positive way she would portray such a dance as orderly. “Well prepared” may also imply that the dance has been rehearsed. Very few references to the concept of rehearsal or practice exist in medieval music or drama.<sup>43</sup> There is even less evidence of

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<sup>42</sup> Simons, “Reading a Saint’s Body,” 14-16.

<sup>43</sup> Stephen Wright, “Picturing Performance: the Chatsworth Manuscript and Practical Stagecraft,” and Peter Jeffery, “‘To Thee Be Silent Praise:’ the Ears of the Heart, the Affections of the Spirit,” papers presented at a meeting of the Delaware Valley Medieval Association, St. Joseph’s University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 24 February 2007. One of Jeffery’s quotations was from the thirteenth-century *Tractatus de Musica* by Jerome of Moravia. In this document, Jerome mentions that in order for church song to be beautiful, the singers must all look over the song beforehand and agree how to sing it. Jeffery pointed out that this is one of the few references to medieval musicians rehearsing. In the question and answer period following these papers, Wright, who had spoken about medieval drama, agreed that in the field of drama there is also little specific evidence of rehearsal, mostly consisting of town or guild records of people who were released from their usual work in order to practice for a play.

rehearsal for dance. I have found no other references in the sources I have examined to dances being rehearsed before being performed, although passages in some of the minnesingers' songs mention one dancer teaching steps to another. In one of Neidhart's songs, for example, a woman speaking of her knightly lover says "he must teach me his lively leaps."<sup>44</sup> Because of a dearth of information about how dances were learned or practiced it is particularly unique and valuable to find even the implication that a dance was prepared and possibly rehearsed in advance.

This passage suggests that Agnes knew about the existence of a form of dance made up of multiple groups working together in a well-ordered way. Whether she herself had seen or participated in such a dance remains, of course, speculative. Mechthild gives another example of a dance in which different groups take part. In this passage Mechthild's soul is caught up to God who shows her what heaven is like, with different choirs of angels, God's throne, and specific places for various holy people. Mechthild describes three groups of holy people in particular: virgins, martyrs, and preachers. Each group has distinctive clothing, songs, and crowns or garlands. Mechthild also describes their dance:

Thus does this throng of three blessed bands go merrily forth into the presence of the Trinity, dancing finely in a circle. Then toward them a threefold stream flows out playfully from God, filling their minds and hearts so that they sing the truth effortlessly with joy, as God has entrusted it to them.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Edmund Wiessner, *Die Lieder Neidharts* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1955), 36. "er muoz mich sīne geile sprünge lēren." Translation mine.

<sup>45</sup> *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 104; *Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, 76. "Sust gat diser drier seligen schar us spilende für die heligen drivaltekeit in einem suessen reien. So flússet inen engegen us von gotte drierleie spilunde vluot, die erfüllet iren muot, das si singent die warheit mit vroeden ane arebeit, als si got an si hat geleit."

Although Tobin's English translation labels this as a circle dance, the German word is *reien*, which can refer to an occasion for dancing, an actual dance, or a dancing-song.<sup>46</sup> *Reien* and *tanzen* are the two most common Middle High German words used for dance and while some scholars have considered *reien* to be a chain dance performed in summer and *tanzen* a more stately courtly dance, Harding has argued convincingly that medieval sources use these two words interchangeably to refer to dance in general. The only differences Harding perceives between the two is that *reien* may be more lively than *tanzen*.<sup>47</sup> Since there is no description in this passage of circling or moving around a throne, a more cautious translation of "in einem süssen reien" might be "in a fine dance."

Unlike "These all simultaneously," this passage does not describe the dancers' patterns of movement, but instead tells of their attitudes and emotions. They dance "merrily" and the stream flows "playfully" toward them. The overriding emotion is joy. This is in keeping with the emotions usually associated with dance in secular love songs of the time. For example, in a song by Tannhäuser the narrator issues a call to the dance and says, "Since God has given us bodies / we should sing / and dance joyfully."<sup>48</sup>

It is also notable that this passage links song with dance. While the text does not specifically state that the dancers move and sing at the same time, this interpretation can be inferred because the author mentions dance and song in such close proximity. Also, in other

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<sup>46</sup> Harding, 164-65.

<sup>47</sup> Harding, 29, 50, 158-63

<sup>48</sup> J.W. Thomas, *Tannhäuser: Poet and Legend* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974), 102. "sit vns got den lib hat gegeben / so svln wir singen / froliche springen." Translation mine.

sources from this era dance and song are often linked and in fact, to “sing the dance” (den reien singen) was a common phrase in minnesong.<sup>49</sup>

Agnes describes another group dance with unique elements not found in other passages about dance in these texts. The primary figure in this scene is a friar named Erlolf of whom Agnes had been fond and who had recently died. As she wept for him she had a vision in which she saw Erlolf in heaven with Saint Agnes (not Agnes Blannbekin, the beguine having the vision):

She saw friar Erlolf with an immensely large group of virgins as if he were leading a ring dance and holding hands. And next to that friar was Blessed Agnes, whom he had loved so much while he still existed in mortal life, that he always dealt with her in his sermons or communal collations. And behind her, she saw countless virgins with friar Erlolf, who were all crowned with golden crowns, but were naked, and he appeared together with them, also naked and crowned. And that nakedness was not only not unchaste or disgusting in the eyes of the onlookers, but filled the heart of that virgin with great happiness, propriety, and joy.<sup>50</sup>

This passage has several aspects in common with the previously mentioned group dance passages. Virgins are dancing and the type of dance they perform is a ring dance (*chorea*). The dancers hold hands, an element not specifically mentioned in any of the previous passages. What stands out most, though, is the nakedness. Mechthild specifically stated in “Thus does this throng” that the dancing virgins wore particular sorts of clothes and particular colors and styles

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<sup>49</sup> Harding, 164-65, 175.

<sup>50</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 157; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 468. “Vidit dictum fratrem Erlolfum cum ingenti turba virginum quasi choream ducentem et in manu et latere ipsius fratris beatam Agnetem, quam in vita mortali adhuc existens tantum dilexerat, ut semper in sermonibus suis vel communibus collationibus de ipsa sermocinaretur. Et post hanc virgines vidit innumeras cum dicto fratre Erlolfo, quae erant omnes coronis aureis coronatae, sed nudaee, et ipse una cum illis etiam nudus et coronatus apparuit. Illa quoque nuditas non solum non erat indecens vel fastidium intulit oculis intuentis, sed magnam placentiam, decentiam et laetitiam cordi ipsius virginis praebuit.”

of crowns. While the virgins in this passage are crowned, they are also naked and dancing with a male friar. Saint Agnes dances with them. This nude mixed gender dance seems strange enough in a medieval text that Wiethaus has suggested that maybe the passage is “tongue in cheek.”<sup>51</sup> Proper clothing and the outward appearance of propriety were certainly important for medieval Christian monks and nuns. The Benedictine rule, one of the earliest rules of conduct for monks, told the monks to sleep fully clothed and bathe alone behind a curtain, making public nudity well-nigh impossible.<sup>52</sup> Nakedness was not considered proper for a religious person, but then, dancing was often considered improper as well.

What does this mixed gender naked dancing mean? The answer seems to lie in the elucidation given in the last line of the quoted text. The nakedness was “not unchaste or disgusting.” Agnes, watching this dance in her vision, did not feel shame or lust but instead felt “great happiness, propriety, and joy.” Even if the imagery in this passage is different from that in the previous passages involving heavenly group dances the emotions are the same. The heavenly dance evokes feelings of joy, orderliness, and propriety.

Despite the negative connotations nakedness could have to some medieval religious Christians, Agnes uses nakedness as a positive image at other points in her text. In several other visions she sees Christ naked and feels only joy at his great beauty.<sup>53</sup> It is perhaps not so surprising, then, to find this positive image of nakedness in conjunction with a positive image of dance in Agnes’ text. The positive sense of nakedness seems to refer to the biblical story of the

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<sup>51</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 96, note 69.

<sup>52</sup> C. H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages* (London and New York: Longman, 1989), 112-13, 118-19.

<sup>53</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 101-2, 147.

Garden of Eden before the fall of Adam and Eve, when the first two humans were naked and felt no shame. St. Francis, the founder of the Franciscan order, also presented a positive image of nakedness when he used the public removal of his clothes to symbolize his renunciation of worldly possessions and his desire to return to a pure state like that of the Garden of Eden.<sup>54</sup> In a similar way, Agnes seems to envision that, after death, any shame attached to nakedness will fall away and leave only the joy of bodies that can dance and still be chaste and orderly.

The longest passage involving dance in any of these texts takes up an entire “chapter” of Mechthild’s book, entitled “The Sevenfold Path of Love, the Three Garments of the Bride, and the Dance.” This scene is written almost like a play with dialogues between the soul, also referred to as the young lady; her lover, the young man, who is Christ; and the five senses who are the soul’s handmaidens. The soul wishes to meet her lover so she dresses herself and enters the forest, where the birds are singing sweetly:

And still the young man did not come. So she sends out messengers because she is eager to dance. She sent for the faith of Abraham and the longing of the prophets and the chaste humility of our Lady, St. Mary, and all the holy virtues of our Lord Jesus Christ and all the excellence of his chosen ones. Then a splendid dance of praise takes place.

The young man finally comes and says to her: “Young lady, my chosen ones have shown off their dancing to you. Just as artfully should you now follow their lead.”

She says:

“I cannot dance, Lord, unless you lead me.  
If you want me to leap with abandon,  
You must intone the song.  
Then I shall leap into love,  
From love into knowledge,  
From knowledge into enjoyment,  
And from enjoyment beyond all human sensations.  
There I want to remain, yet want also to circle higher still.”

And the young man has to sing thus:

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<sup>54</sup> Alessandro Vettori, *Poets of Divine Love: Franciscan Mystical Poetry of the Thirteenth Century* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 3-12.

“Through me into you  
And through you from me.”

[the soul]: “Willingly with you,  
Woefully from you.”

The young man speaks: “Young lady, you have done very well in this dance of praise. You shall have your way with the Son of the virgin, for you are delightfully weary. Come at noontime to the shade of the spring, into the bed of love. There in the coolness you shall refresh yourself with him.”

The young lady says:  
“Oh, Lord, that is too much  
That she be your partner in love  
Who has no love in her,  
Unless she is moved by you.”

Then the soul says to the senses, who are her chamberlains: “Now for a while I am weary of the dance. Leave me; I must go and refresh myself.”<sup>55</sup>

After this the senses argue with the soul, trying to convince her of alternative ways that she might “cool herself.” The senses suggest such virtues as chastity, wisdom, and suffering, but the soul rejects all these, stating repeatedly that these things are certainly good, but that she wants to

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<sup>55</sup> *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 59-60; *Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, 28-29. “Noch kam der jungeling nüt. Nu sendet si botten us, wan si wil tanzen, und sant umb den gelovben Abrahe und umb die gerunge der propheten und umb die kúsche diemuetekheit únsere frowwen Sante Marien und umb alle die heligen tugende únsers herren Jhesu Christi und umb alle die frúmekeit siner userwelten. So wirt da ein schoener loptanz. So kumt der jungeling und sprichet ir zuo: ‘Juncfrowwe, alsust fromeklich sont ir nach tantzen, als úch mine userwelten vor getanzet hant.’ So sprichet si: ‘Ich mag nit tanzen, herre, du enleitest mich. Wilt du, das ich sere springe, so muost du selber vor ansingen; so springe ich in die minne, von der minne in die bekantnisse, von der bekantnisse in die gebruchunge, von der gebruchunge úber alle moenschliche sinne. Da wil ich bliben und wil doch fúrbas crisen.’ Unde muos der jungeling singen alsus: ‘Dur mich in dich und dur dich von mir.’ ‘Gerne mit dir, noete von dir!’ So sprichet der jungeling: ‘Juncfrowwe, dirre lobetanze ist úch wol ergangen, ir súllent mit der megde sun úwern willen han, wan ir sint nu minnenkliche muede. Kument ze mittem tage zuo dem brunnenschatten in das bette der minne, da soent ir úch mit im erkuelen.’ So sprichet dú juncfrowwe: ‘O herre, das ist úbergros, das dú ist din minnegenos, dú nit minne an ir selben hat, si werde e von dir beweget.’ So sprichet dú sele zuo den sinnen, die ire kamerer sint: ‘Nu bin ich ein wile tanzes muede, wichent mir, ich muos gan, da ich mich erkuele.’ ”

go to her lover and will not be dissuaded. The senses are afraid because when the soul goes to her lover they will be blinded. The soul, however, reassures the senses that she will soon return to them. Then the soul goes to the bed of love with Christ, who bids her take off her clothes (which symbolize her external virtues) so that nothing will come between them. Christ and the soul give themselves to each other in mystical union, about which Mechthild claims she can say very little. The passage ends with the statement that lovers cannot stay together always, but must soon be parted, which seems to suggest that the soul must return to the senses.

The German words Tobin translates throughout this passage as “dance” and “dancing” are variations on *tanzen*. The word he translates as “leap” is *springen*, a word often used in connection with dance, even though it can refer to leaping that is not dancing.<sup>56</sup> Variations on the phrase “an dem tanz/reien springen” (join in the dancing) are common in Middle High German references to dance.<sup>57</sup> The use of *springen* in “And still the young man did not come” does seem to refer to dance; the soul is still discussing her dance when she says she will “leap into love” (*springe in die minne*).

This scene contains two dances or perhaps two sections of the same dance. The first is a group dance of the virtues, a dance of praise while the soul waits for her lover. It is clear that the soul does not take part in this dance, because when the young man comes he urges her to join in. She says that she cannot dance unless he leads her. There follows a series of two lines each for the young man and the soul, beginning “Through me into you . . .” These stanzas are evidently the song the young man and the soul sing as they dance together, because immediately after this

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<sup>56</sup> Harding, 223-26.

<sup>57</sup> Harding, 231.

song the young man tells the soul, “You have done very well in this dance of praise,” implying that they have just danced. It is unclear whether this second dance is a couple dance just between the soul and the young man or if the two of them join the group dance of the virtues. A group dance made up of couples is the type of dance most often described by the minnesingers, in which male and female partners pair up to join a group dance.<sup>58</sup> The need for a partner of the opposite sex with whom to dance might help explain why the soul will not dance without her lover.

On a more symbolic level, Mechthild seems to be saying that the reason the soul will not dance with the virtues until her lover arrives is that the virtues are not enough for the soul that truly desires God. The virtues’ dance of praise is good, but what comes after the dance, refreshing oneself with Christ as one’s lover, is even better. Dance is not portrayed in a negative light here, as the virtues are certainly positive and the soul does eventually take part in their dance. However, the dance is not the highest good. The dance is part of the path that leads to the highest good, which is union with God.

The path the dancing soul takes in this passage is remarkably similar to the progression mentioned above in “Pure loving virgins” where the heavenly virgins follow Christ “from bliss to love, from love to joy, from joy to splendor, from splendor to power, from power to the highest heights before the eyes of the heavenly Father.” The concept of moving through various layers to the highest things, to “circle higher still” is present in both progressions. In this particular example, the dance leads the soul into knowledge and eventually “beyond all human sensations” which may refer to the ecstatic experience of union with God. The cadence of such a

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<sup>58</sup> Examples from Neidhart’s summer songs can be found in Weissner, 27, 29, 44.

list has a quality that suggests movement, repetition, circling or spiraling through the same patterns, but with changes that alter those patterns. Mechthild's words about dance might almost be a dancing-song themselves.

There are erotic overtones in this passage with a dance between a male-female couple, the soul undressing, and Christ and the soul going to the bed of love. It is not surprising to find dance connected with eroticism. Medieval secular love song often links the two, casting dance as a precursor to lovemaking and sex. In one of his songs, Tannhäuser places a sexual encounter in poetic euphemisms back-to-back with a call to the dance, and in one of Neidhart's songs he tells of a girl who has become pregnant because of dancing.<sup>59</sup> The erotic connotations in "And still the young man did not come" are less crude, perhaps, than the sexual suggestiveness in secular love songs, but they are still there; Mechthild portrays Christ and the soul as a male-female couple in love. While other writers such as the fourteenth-century mystic Henry Suso who wrote about the joyful dances of heaven and the soul as a bride may have pointed out that their visions were not meant to be taken in a physical way, Mechthild never makes such a disclaimer.<sup>60</sup> She seems, in this passage, to revel unabashedly in the joys of spiritual dance and eroticism.

Another passage by Mechthild gives a brief reference to another dance that may be either a couple dance or a dance for a couple within a group. Mechthild is extolling virginity and

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<sup>59</sup> Thomas, 114, 116; Wiessner, 36.

<sup>60</sup> Henry Suso, *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom and Little Book of Truth*, trans. James M. Clark (New York: Harper and Brothers, n.d), 44. Grace Jantzen, in *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 133-46, finds women mystics' descriptions of erotic spirituality to be more "actual" and less allegorical than men's. The difference between Suso's and Mechthild's descriptions of visions and their apparent physicality seems to fit with Jantzen's concept.

explaining that the ideal virgin practices humility, modesty, and suffering. She then directly addresses this hypothetical person: “O virgin, what God wants to give you then! He wants to be your handsome young man and wants to lead you in the heavenly dance. O wretched lame dog that I am, I would also shuffle along with you.”<sup>61</sup> The German word for “heavenly dance” here is *himmelreigen*, a combination of the word for heaven with an alternative spelling of *reien*. Mechthild uses a similar literary device when she combines the words for “praise” and “dance” in “Pure loving virgins.” Perhaps adding further descriptive words to the basic words for dance is a technique to separate the idea of inappropriate or earthly dances from dances of praise (*lobetanz*) or heavenly dances (*himmelreigen*).

Since Mechthild is addressing an individual person when she says “O virgin,” the heavenly dance described in the second line would be between this virgin and God as the young man—a couple dance. However, in the last line Mechthild says that she would also like to dance along. This hints that the dance, like the dance of the virtues in “And still the young man did not come,” is not just between one man and one woman, but could involve other people as well.

### *Solo Dances*

Up to this point, all the passages have depicted a group dance or the dance of a couple within a group and have presented dance in a positive light. Of various sorts of dances, it is probably least surprising to find group dances portrayed in a positive manner. Group dances, after all, can reinforce a sense of community and bring people together. Jonathan Alexander

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<sup>61</sup> *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 139; *Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, 109. “O maget, was dir denne got wil geben! Er wil dir ein schoene jungling wesen und wil den himmelreigen mit dir treten. O ich unselig lammer hunt, ich hülze ovch mit dir.

believes that in medieval visual art group dances have most often been portrayed positively and solo dances negatively.<sup>62</sup> Medieval texts and images often associated solo dances with paid entertainers, a group who tended to remain on the fringes of society. Female entertainers were particularly suspect. One common stereotype of a female entertainer in medieval imagery was that of Salome, the daughter of Herodias who, in the biblical account, danced seductively before King Herod in order to get the king to execute John the Baptist. Female solo dancers like Salome presented a negative image of dance, associated as they were with acrobats and gypsies, as well as sexuality, seduction, and licentiousness.<sup>63</sup>

Because of this negative stereotype of solo female dancers, it is surprising and intriguing to find two positive examples of a solo dance by a female figure. The first occurs in a passage where Mechthild describes how a saint could appear to the faithful on that saint's holy day.

Specifically, Mechthild saw Mary Magdalene dancing on her feast day:

I actually saw this on the feast of St. Mary Magdalene as one was glorifying God with songs of praise for the great honor that she received as a reward. She danced about in the choir to the holy song and looked each of the singers in the eyes. She came forward and said: "All those who honor my death, I shall be with them at the end and shall honor them in return. I shall stand ever at their side, giving as much help as they are capable of receiving."<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Jonathan J. G. Alexander, "Dancing in the Streets," in *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 54 (1996): 147-62.

<sup>63</sup> Torsten Hausmann, *Die tanzende Salome in der Kunst von der christlichen Frühzeit bis um 1500*, (Zürich: Verlag, 1980), especially 41-42. Hausmann talks about images of Salome's dance throughout history and says that before the Renaissance she was almost invariably a negative image and an example of the seductiveness of women, associated as she was with the death of John the Baptist.

<sup>64</sup> *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 235-36; *Das Fließende Licht der Gottheit*, 216. "Das sach ich werlich an Sante Maria Magdalenen tag, do man got erte mit lobelichem sange umb die grosse ere, die si ze lone hat enpfangen. Si schrikete in dem kore nach dem heligen sange und si sach einem ieglichen senger in sine ovgen, und si trat und sprach: 'Alle die jene, die

The German word *schrikete*, translated here as “danced about,” is not one of the usual words for dance and is found in none of the other passages. Harding does not include *schrikete* in her list of Middle High German dancing terms. However, it seems to have been a movement word that referred to jumping and leaping, particularly to jumping up suddenly, like starting out of bed.<sup>65</sup> Since this *schrikete* happened at the same time as the “holy song” it is probably quite correct to read it as dancing. This leaping form of dancing is probably similar to that implied by *springen*.

It is notable that Mechthild saw Mary Magdalene dancing to the song being sung in the church. Dance and vocal music are linked here, as they were in “And still the young man did not come” where the soul and the young man sang and danced together. In this case, however, it is specifically the vocal music of the church that Mechthild links with dance. Singing the divine office at the various hours of the day was one of the most important activities of medieval monks and nuns and it seems evident that beguines followed in the footsteps of the regular religious orders.<sup>66</sup> Agnes, Mechthild, and Hadewijch all describe visions they experienced at particular hours or on particular feast days, and Elisabeth solemnized the hours with her physical performances. These beguines were steeped in the liturgical music of the medieval Christian church and it seems that this music sometimes moved them to experience or envision dance.

It is also notable that the holy dancer in this passage is Mary Magdalene, a saint who was known for turning away from her prior life as a prostitute and following Christ. Since people of

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min ende eren, zuo der ende wil ich kommen, und ich wil si wider eren; alles nach dem als si moegen enpfan, so wil ich in ze statten stan.’ ”

<sup>65</sup> Georg Beneke Friedrich, *Mittelhochdeutsches Wörterbuch mit Benutzung des Nachlasses*, vol. 2, pt. 2 (Leipzig: Verlag von S. Hirzel, 1866), 209.

<sup>66</sup> Lawrence, 113-14.

the medieval era often associated dance with sinful women and lasciviousness, it is not surprising to find a former prostitute portrayed as a dancer.<sup>67</sup> What is surprising is that Mechthild interprets Mary Magdalene's dance as holy, a way for her to thank and aid her worshipers.

Mary Magdalene was a popular figure in liturgical dramas of the time, appearing in many versions of the *visitatio sepulchri* (visit to the tomb). In the biblical account in John's Gospel of Christ's death and resurrection, Mary Magdalene is the first person to whom the risen Christ shows himself; because of this, a scene between Mary Magdalene and Jesus appeared in many versions of the *visitatio sepulchri*.<sup>68</sup> In an Easter play from the Benediktbeuern manuscript, written around 1225, Mary Magdalene has a lengthy scene in which she lives a sinful life before becoming a disciple of Christ. In the play she buys cosmetics, sings, and seduces a lover.<sup>69</sup> While the stage directions do not specifically state that Mary Magdalene dances, circumstantial evidence suggests that a dance scene may have been included. Although the play is primarily written in Latin, certain sections are in German, including Mary Magdalene's song while buying the cosmetics. This vernacular song has a simple verse and melody structure that could easily have been used for dancing. Also, the scene includes additional non-speaking characters,

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<sup>67</sup> Harding gives examples of medieval German warnings against dancing, particularly against women dancing, and of dancing women being associated with the devil (72-80); Hausamann quotes John Chrysostom's invective against female mimes and acrobats who performed seductively on stage (113-117).

<sup>68</sup> Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, vol. 1 (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1933), 369-410. Young devotes a chapter to the different variations on the scene of the risen Christ, which could involve not just Mary Magdalene but also the other Marys and the disciples Peter and John.

<sup>69</sup> Laurel Braswell-Means, "Benediktbeuern Play Book," in *A Companion to the Medieval Theatre*, ed. Ronald W. Vince (New York and London: Greenwood Press, 1989) 36-37. The text of this Benediktbeuern Passion play can be found in Young, 518-33.

including a male lover and an unspecified number of other girls. These characters could have performed a dance sequence with Mary Magdalene while she sang. It is not unreasonable to assume that a dance might have been inserted here, along with the lively vernacular love-lyrics, to show Mary Magdalene's sinful life.

In Mechthild's text Mary Magdalene dances, but the purpose of the dance is not to portray her sinful life. Mechthild does not simply repeat the stereotypical association of dance with sinful women and prostitution. She uses dance as a positive image at many other points in her text, so it is not surprising that she uses this image again with Mary Magdalene. Mechthild clearly venerates Mary Magdalene, which is understandable since Mary Magdalene was a patron saint held in high honor by many beguines.<sup>70</sup> By portraying Mary Magdalene as a dancer, but a *holy* dancer instead of a sinful one, Mechthild's text subtly but effectively turns the stereotype of the sinful dancing woman on its head.

Agnes' text also gives an interesting description of a solo female dance. Agnes does not see a saint dancing, however, but a personified virtue. Agnes had been talking to her confessor about the Catholic faith and pondering the idea of faith:

And on the same day in church, during the Compline of the friars not far from the altar of the Blessed Virgin, the hand of the Lord came over her. And lo, a young girl appeared, with the most beautiful face and a golden crown and something that seemed to be made of delicate and long silk. And clapping her hands, with a happy countenance she festively danced on the highest step around the altar of the Blessed Virgin. She was also bathed in a boundless light of many colors.

This virgin, however, wondered who this girl might be that danced so happily and moved so proudly. Then the girl told her, "I am your faith. The other virtues pledged themselves to humility; I alone, on the other hand, seized pride and glory for myself, because they belong to me." But she [Agnes] did not understand how pride could belong to her. Then the girl said, "I am proud and praiseworthy above all sects and false teachings which are putrid in the sight of God. I alone enjoy truth and I possess it."

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<sup>70</sup> Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 88-89.

Within a short while, this apparition had consoled, animated and physically strengthened this virgin who had before felt desolate, sad and physically weak.<sup>71</sup>

The Latin words for dance in this passage are grammatical variations of *tripudium*, which seems to be the most common and generic word for dance in Agnes' text. "This virgin" is the usual way the scribe who wrote down this text refers to Agnes. In this example, as in "I actually saw this," the dance occurs to vocal accompaniment. The friars are singing compline, one of the liturgical hours. During their song Agnes sees Faith as a young girl dancing around the altar. Wiethaus points out that by approaching the altar, Faith enters a space usually off-limits to anyone but male priests; Faith is "delegitimizing masculine prerogative" with her "spatial transgressions."<sup>72</sup> The text states that Faith dances proudly, which might also be considered a transgression. Pride is one of the cardinal sins in Christian theology. In fact, it is often called the root of all other sins. The notion of pride as the greatest sin was well established by the thirteenth century.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, it is intriguing to find a proud dance given a positive connotation.

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<sup>71</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 144-45; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 434, 436. "Eodem die sub completorio fratrum in ecclesia non longe ab altari beatae virginis facta est super eam manus domini. Et ecce, apparuit una puella juvenis pulcherrima facie coronam auream habens, induta vestitu valde albo et quasi de serico subtili et longo et plaudens manibus tripudiabat in gradu superiori circa altare beatae virginis incedendo versus hanc virginem more pomposo et hilari vultu. Erat quoque circumfusa immenso lumine varii coloris.

Haec autem virgo mirabatur, quoniam esset haec puella sic exultans et tripudians et tam superbe incedens. Tunc ei ait puella: 'Ego sum fides tua. Caeterae virtutes sibi humilitatem conjunctam habent; ego vero singulariter superbiam et gloriam mihi usurpo, quia mea est.' Haec autem non intellexit, quomodo ejus est superbia. Tunc illi ait: 'Ego superbo et glorior super omnes sectas et errores, quae putridae sunt in conspectu dei. Sola ego veritate gaudeo, eamque habeo.'

Ex hac apparitione ista virgo, cum prius fuisset desolata et tristis et corporaliter debilis, mox nimium consolata est et exhilarata et corporaliter confortata."

<sup>72</sup> Wiethaus, "Interpretive Essay," 165.

<sup>73</sup> Morton W. Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins: an Introduction to the History of a Religious Concept, with Special Reference to Medieval English Literature* (n. p.: Michigan State

Agnes, in the text, expresses understandable doubt about Faith's pride. The answer Faith gives is that her festive, prideful dance would not be acceptable for any of the other virtues but is quite appropriate for the one true faith.

This emphasis on the one true faith makes an orthodox twist in what is otherwise an unorthodox vision of a dancing woman. In a time when the Cathars and Waldesians, considered heretics by orthodox Catholics, were being martyred for their version of the faith, adhering to and honoring the one true faith was undoubtedly a potent concept. Dyan Elliott points out that the church sponsored the beguines as a religious movement and that the church used the faith, purity and sufferings of holy women as a counter to heresy. The heretics might have had suffering, charismatic martyrs, but so did the orthodox.<sup>74</sup> In this context, Agnes' dancing Faith takes on an ideological role, denouncing the "sects and false teachings" that are "putrid" to God—a statement that would have been perfectly acceptable to, and encouraged by, the authorities of the Catholic church. This orthodoxy and anti-heretical bias does not make the transgression of Agnes' dancing Faith any less surprising, but it does make the transgression less dangerous. Faith as a woman dancing near the altar is unusual, skirting the edges of accepted Catholic belief. Faith's statements against heretics, however, bring her back in line with orthodoxy.

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College Press, 1952), 69-104. Bloomfield traces the history of the cardinal sins (often called the deadly sins today) and shows that they were popularized by the preaching of the mendicant orders and the new emphasis on confession in the twelfth through fourteenth centuries.

<sup>74</sup> Dyan Elliott, *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), 47-83; Jo Ann McNamara, "The Rhetoric of Orthodoxy: Clerical Authority and Female Innovation in the Struggle with Heresy," in *Maps of Flesh and Light: the Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*, ed. Ulrike Wiethaus (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 13-14. Like Elliott, McNamara also discusses the use of female mystics to fight heresy.

Mechthild's dancing Mary Magdalene and Agnes' dancing Faith have several things in common besides being solo female dancing figures. In both cases someone witnesses the dance—the female mystic who is looking on and perhaps also the singers in the choir whom Mary Magdalene looks in the eyes—and in both cases the performer's dance brings about consolation or help for the witnesses. The dance is not just for personal enjoyment; it also has a positive effect on someone besides the dancer. Faith consoles Agnes and makes her stronger, while Mary Magdalene promises to help those who have sung in her honor. The effectiveness of these two dances moves the dancing figures away from the realm of entertainment and toward the role of the shaman or spirit-possessed priestess who heals and helps through her dance.<sup>75</sup>

#### *Dance as Allegory*

Another passage from Agnes' text mentions dance in an allegorical fashion without any specific description of what sort of dance takes place or who is dancing. In describing a vision she had one day after mass, Agnes expounds on the meaning of the wounds of Christ, a common allegorical topic. "The wound of the right foot signifies levity, not heaviness or agility. The wound of the left foot signifies the possession of joy and happiness, what we call the 'three-step'."<sup>76</sup> The word that Wiethaus translates here as "three-step" is the Latin *tripudium*, which

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<sup>75</sup> Rodgers and Ziegler compare Elisabeth of Spalbeek's trance dances to shamanism and spirit-possession in non-Western religions. While they do not claim that Elisabeth was actually a shaman, since Christianity acknowledges no such role, they do suggest that she displayed certain shamanistic qualities such as an altered identity (310-316). I add that the female dancing figures in Agnes' and Mechthild's texts are even more shamanistic than Elisabeth, because their ritual dances bring about healing and aid to their worshipers.

<sup>76</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 19; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 72. "Vulnere pedis dextri significatur levitas, non ponderositas, sive agilitas. Vulnere pedis sinistri significatur haberi gaudium et laetitiam, quod nos vocamus tripudium."

usually means simply “dance.” In other words, an alternate translation of this passage would be “. . . the possession of joy and happiness, what we call dance.” Agnes is saying that Christ’s wounded foot allegorically means a joyful dance, giving a very positive evaluation indeed to the notion of dance and clearly linking dance with the feeling of joy, a feeling that is also prevalent in the various heavenly group dances mentioned above.

Dance is also linked with joy in an allegorical passage from Elisabeth’s *vita*. Philip of Clairvaux, the author of the *vita*, interprets the meaning of the following Bible verse: “What do we see in this Sunamite if not dances of camps?”<sup>77</sup> This obscure biblical passage comes from Song of Songs, a popular book among medieval mystics who understood the erotic dialogue between the pair of lovers to be an allegory for the love between God and the soul. Philip, however, relates the verse to the performances of the young woman who is the focus of his narrative:

For it is certain that the camp relates to battle; but dances represent gladness. For the Sunamite is interpreted as “a wretch” or “a captive.” And since our girl, in the wretchedness of her afflicted flesh, through perfect humility and pondering her own insignificance, leads her fruitful soul into captivity, as if in the worship of Christ she were already reigning in celestial pleasantness with him, she truly shows in her body the battle of the flesh, and in her face the dance of the soul. And truly, unless I am deceived, the dances of camps may be seen in her, who sometimes, as it is believed, accompanied by the triumphant weapons and the angelic dances of the most victorious Passion of Christ, fights against the enemies of our salvation, as terrible as well-ordered army camps.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 371. “Quid vidimus in Sunamite hac nisi choro castrorum?” This translation, and all subsequent translations from Elisabeth’s *vita*, are my own.

<sup>78</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 371-72. “Certum est enim quod castrum ad pugnam pertinet; sed chori laetitiam repraesentant. Sunamitis enim interpretatur ‘misera’ seu ‘captiva.’ Et cum puella nostra in miseria carnis afflictatae animam jam quasi cum Christo regnantem et coelesti jocunditate fecundam in obsequium Christi ex perfecta humilitate et propriae parvitas reputatione captivet, vere demonstrat in corpore pugnam carnis, in facie choro mentis. Et vere ni fallor, chori castrorum videri, id est notari possunt in ea, quia victoriosissimae passionis

The words I translate as “dance” in this passage are variations on the Latin *chorus*. Backman points out that *chorus* is a problematic word in medieval texts because unlike *chorea*, which consistently means “round-dance,” *chorus* can refer to a dance accompanied by song, or sometimes just to singing. Backman translates *chorus* based on the other words that surround it.<sup>79</sup> In this case, I feel confident rendering *chorus* as “dance” for two reasons. First, the connection between this *chorus* and gladness suggests that it is a danced *chorus*, like the other joyful dances in previous passages. Second, in the Vulgate (the Latin version of the Bible used throughout the medieval era) the word *chorus* is used in several contexts that clearly indicate dancing: Miriam and the Israelite women dancing with tambourines in Exodus 15:20, the Israelites dancing before the Golden Calf in Exodus 32:19, the exhortation in Psalm 150:4 to praise the Lord with tambourine and dancing, and the lament in Lamentations 5:15 that dancing is turned into mourning.<sup>80</sup> Philip was clearly well versed in biblical passages, using them throughout his account, and therefore he would most likely have associated the word *chorus* with well-known passages like the dance around the golden calf.

In “For it is certain,” Philip uses a typical medieval form of biblical interpretation that makes each specific word stand for something else. The Sunamite, a word used in Song of Songs to refer to the female lover, is a “wretch” and also is Elisabeth herself. Dances are joy and

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Christi triumphalibus armis et angelicis choris interdum, ut creditur, comitata, inimicos nostrae salutis expugnat, terribilis ut castrorum acies ordinata.”

<sup>79</sup> Backman, 13.

<sup>80</sup> *Vulgate Clementina*, electronic version created by Michael Tweedale, based on Colunga-Turrado 1947 and Vercellone 1861; available from <http://vulsearch.sourceforge.net/gettext.html>; Internet; accessed 19 November 2008.

the soul. The camps are battle, the flesh, and triumph. The meanings of these allegorical correspondences are elaborated further in chapter six, but at the moment it seems sufficient to point out that this allegorical passage, like “The wound of the right foot,” portrays dance in a positive light, as a glad expression of the soul. Another interesting note is the similarity between this passage and Agnes’ “And on the same day.” Agnes’ dancing Faith denounces false beliefs, while Elisabeth fights the enemies of the Christian faith with “triumphant weapons” and “angelic dances.” This is another example of a dancing woman being cast in an ideological role, set up as a representative of truth against other beliefs that church authorities considered false or heretical.

#### *Negative or Ambiguous Passages About Dance*

All of the passages analyzed thus far portray dance in a positive light. Out of thirteen passages that specifically refer to dance, two cast dance in a negative light and one seems ambiguous. In an extended allegory, Mechthild compares the virtuous soul to a small animal which “cannot remain in the sea when animals do their mating dance and the water is raging. It loves chastity and hurries up the highest mountain it knows . . .”<sup>81</sup> The German word for dance in this passage is *reien*, the same word Mechthild uses in other places for positive sorts of dances. While this situation implies a negative reading of dance, the actual word “mating” is not found in the original text. The sexual nature of this dance seems clear, however, since the virtuous soul, like the small animal fleeing the water, wants chastity. Mechthild portrays this dance of animals

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<sup>81</sup> *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 161; *Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, 133. “Es mag nit bliben in dem mer, so dú tier reient und das wasser woetet. Es minnet ovch kúscheit und lofffet uf den hoehsten berg, den es weis . . .”

as the wrong sort of dance, associated with lust and sexuality, as opposed to the heavenly dances which she shows in a positive light.

In one passage Agnes associates dance with the devil. She describes how the devil rejoices about making people fall into temptation, especially people who are particularly holy. “Whenever he can unsettle a just person and obstruct him in his service to God, no matter how little, he jumps [up and down] and dances, because he seems to have diminished and blocked God’s glory.”<sup>82</sup> The word Wiethaus translates as “dances” is *tripudium*, which appears elsewhere in Agnes’ text as a positive reference to dance in “The wound of the right foot” and “And on the same day in church.” The word Wiethaus translates as “jumps up and down” is *saltat*, another Latin word for dance that appears nowhere else in this text. *Saltare* can refer particularly to a leaping sort of dance.<sup>83</sup> Acrobatic entertainment dance of the sort associated with Salome from the beginning of the twelfth through the end of the fourteenth century was a type of dancing to which many Christian writers were particularly opposed.<sup>84</sup> Perhaps Agnes’ scribe chose this word, *saltare*, for the devil’s dance because it implied acrobatic dancing and the impure associations that clung to such dancing.

Hadewijch mentions dance in a less negative but still ambiguous way in her poem “School of Love.” She does not associate the dancers with sin but rather with pleasurable feelings:

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<sup>82</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 128; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 394. “Quantumcunque potest perturbare hominem justum et eum impedire, quantumcunque parum, in cultu dei, tunc ipse saltat et tripudiat, eo quod gloriam dei videtur minuisse et impedivisse.”

<sup>83</sup> Backman, 13.

<sup>84</sup> Hausamann, 303, 340-47.

But they who wish to enjoy the Beloved here on earth,  
 And dance with feelings of delight,  
 And dwell in this with pleasure,  
     I say to them in advance:  
 They must adorn themselves with virtues,  
     Or the course of study is a loss to them.<sup>85</sup>

In this poem Hadewijch talks about who will learn the most in Love's school. She contrasts the dancers and their "feelings of delight" in this stanza with the people in the next stanza, "enlightened by pure reason," who become masters in the school. The joyful dancers are not masters—dancing does not bring them true knowledge—but as long as they practice the virtues, dancing does them no harm. This idea fits with a theme Hadewijch elaborates in her letters: ecstatic, delightful emotions can be a good start but not enough to make a person "grown up" in her spiritual life.<sup>86</sup> This is reminiscent of the dance of the virtues in "And still the young man did not come," where the soul follows the young man's lead and joins in the dance but is not content only to dance, wanting instead to "circle higher."

### *Themes in the Passages about Dance*

These thirteen passages are all different from each other, but there are certain overarching concepts that run through multiple passages. It is possible to paint a picture of what "dance"

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<sup>85</sup> Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: the Complete Works*, trans. Mother Columba Hart, (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 164. The original Dutch from which the English translation is taken can be found in Hadewijch, *Van liefde en minne*, trans. M. Ortmanns, (Tielt, Belgium: Lannoo, 1982), 120. "Maer die hier met lieve willen juwren / Ende met ghevoelene dan balleren, / Ende met ghenoechten daer in baseren, / Ic segghe hen wel te voren: / Sij moeten hen wel met doechden chieren, / Ochte daer is die scole verloren."

<sup>86</sup> Especially Hadewijch's letter 10, "Virtues the Measure of Love." Hadewijch refers to feelings of delight as "sweetness." "Virtues and not sweetness are the proof of love, for it sometimes happens that he who loves less feels more sweetness. Love is not in each person according to what he feels, but according as he is grounded in virtue and rooted in charity" (66).

means in these four core beguine texts. Dance involves a gathering of people, either together as a group, as couples, or as a solo performer with an audience. There is musical accompaniment, singing by the dancers themselves or by others. The movements involved can include circling and leaping. The primary emotions associated with dance, mentioned in eight of the thirteen passages, are joy, happiness, and festivity. The theme of joy is so strong and appears so often that it is not unwarranted to assume that the feeling of joy is a necessary part of medieval dance as displayed in these texts.

Other concepts associated with dance in more than one of the passages include love, which can sometimes be erotic love or sexuality. Dance can also display the praise of God or a sense of orderliness and propriety. Feelings of pride or a lack of shame may also be associated with dance. Many of the dances in these passages accomplish some positive end, such as moving higher in the spiritual life, being consoled, or consoling others. Finally, there seems to be a connection between dance and the virtues. Hadewijch says that her dancers must be adorned with virtues or their dance is useless, Mechthild shows the virtues dancing in praise of God, and Agnes' faith alone among the virtues has sufficient pride to dance.

#### “As If” Dancing

If these thirteen passages give an impression of what dance means within these texts they also give an impression of what dance is not. Dance may be capable of expressing praise, love, and joy, but there is no indication that it can express other theological concepts that seem important to the writers of these texts, such as suffering, emptiness, or separation from God. These darker emotions, while certainly present in all four texts, are never linked with dance.

A current of ambiguity about the holiness or propriety of dance also runs through these texts. Granted, ten out of thirteen passages display dance in a positive light, a better ratio than might be expected in religious Christian writings. However, even if the blessed souls dance the devil dances as well and the chaste little animal must flee the lustful dances of its comrades. Also, Hadewijch and Mechthild both give the impression that dance represents a positive state of joy and virtue, but one that must be transcended in order to move into the highest state of spiritual life.

This ambiguity about the word “dance” and what it might mean also occurs in several of the passages from Agnes’ text where the author describes a dance but then qualifies the statement by saying that it is “like” a dance or that the people are moving “as if” dancing. For example, in “These all simultaneously” the preachers, virgins, penitents and so on make their circle around the throne of the Blessed Virgin, “as if dancing a round-dance.”<sup>87</sup> The Latin word for “as if” is *quasi*. The word *quasi* appears again in “She saw friar Erlolf” when Erlolf goes hand in hand with the crowd of naked virgins “as if he were leading a ring dance.”<sup>88</sup> There seems to be a hesitation here, whether on the part of Agnes herself or of the scribe who compiled her text, to call a dance a dance. The qualifying *quasi* suggests a defense mechanism. Given the medieval Christian church’s often hostile attitude toward dance, perhaps it seemed safest when writing about a holy dance to leave a loophole suggesting that it was not quite dance after all.

An even clearer example of the trouble medieval religious people had in naming dance occurs near the beginning of Agnes’ text, in “The wound of the right foot,” where Agnes says

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<sup>87</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 153; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 456.

<sup>88</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 157; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 468.

that “the wound of the left foot signifies the possession of joy and happiness, what we call the ‘three-step’.”<sup>89</sup> Perhaps Agnes’ scribe found this comparison of Christ’s wounds to dance not quite theologically correct and questioned her further about it, for he goes on to write, “not that there is a ‘three-step’ or dance in the way that this word denotes a festive event among us, but she could not offer another similarity.”<sup>90</sup> The text and the scribe are clearly in a conundrum. “Dance,” to this medieval religious writer, meant a certain kind of “festive event,” possibly with overtones of sin, frivolity, or sexuality. To a religious person trying to live a celibate life in a system of church authority that often frowned on dance altogether, comparing the wounds of Christ to such an ambiguous action as dance must have seemed strange and suspect. Yet Agnes “could not offer another similarity.” To her, dance was the best symbol for joy and happiness. Her scribe could evidently find no better word either and so he let the word *tripudium* stand, although with a careful qualifier.

In a similar vein, Philip of Clairvaux seems to have difficulty finding words to describe what he witnessed in Elisabeth’s performances. He repeatedly mentions how inexplicable and wondrous Elisabeth’s movements are, as in the following passage:

With a marvelously curved body she dashes her head toward the ground. Sometimes, violently seizing the front part of her recently shorn head of hair, with unmoved feet she brings her dragging head miraculously to the ground. Also in this way, seizing herself by the hair from the right and from the left, she chases and bends, dragging herself by the hand from here to there in an unheard of and inexplicable manner.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 19; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 72. “Vulnere pedis sinistri significatur haberi gaudium et laetitiam, quod nos vocamus tripudium . . .”

<sup>90</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 19, 20; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 72. “. . . non quod ibi sit tripudium vel chorea, sicut importat hoc nomen apud nos convivia—sed aliam similitudinem dare non poterat.”

<sup>91</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 365. “Mirabiliter curvato corpore caput allidit ad terram. Nonnunquam etiam capillos nuper attonso capite satis breves, a parte frontis violenter arripiens,

While this delightfully detailed movement description could easily describe a performance of a modern dancer of today, Philip does not call this sort of movement “dance.” Instead, he says that Elisabeth “displays his [Christ’s] most blessed and beatific passion in a wondrous manner of lively presentation.”<sup>92</sup> Philip describes in detail exactly what the different parts of Elisabeth’s body do at various times—her feet, hands, arms, eyes—but he does not associate this meaningful movement with dance. Only in the passage “What do we see in this Sunamite” does Philip mention dance, and then only in relation to Elisabeth’s joyful soul, not her tormented body. I believe this difficulty with terminology came about because medieval people indelibly associated dance with joy and festivity. Dance could express love or praise but not the sufferings of Christ’s passion. Therefore, when Elisabeth performed what a dance scholar of today might call an interpretive dance about Christ on the cross with extraordinary and meaningful movement Philip was at a loss for what to call it and could only say that it was “unheard of and inexplicable.”

The trouble is not merely that a scholar of today has difficulty understanding the medieval terminology for dance, but that medieval people like Philip who witnessed something outside their scheme of ordinary sacred worship practices had no terminology with which to describe what was happening. Sacred dance like Elisabeth’s must not have been widespread in medieval Europe or a terminology to describe it would have developed. Yet the references to

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immotis pedibus tractu mirabili capite terram ferit. Sic etiam a dextris et a sinistris se capiens per capillos, hinc et hinc inaudito et inexplicabili modo seipsam manuali tractu exagitat et inclinat.”

<sup>92</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 363. “. . . mirabili modo repraesentationem suae beatissimae et beatificae passionis ostendit.”

dance in the texts of the beguines suggest that there was a place in medieval thought for holy dance. The descriptions of Elisabeth's performance along with the descriptions of sacred performances in the texts of the other beguines show that dance did not exist just in the realm of thought and theory, but that there was a current of physical performance like dance, but not precisely dance, for which medieval writers had no appropriate words. It is these *quasi*-dances and sacred performances that I examine in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 5

*QUASI-DANCES: BEGUINE SACRED PERFORMANCES*

## Introduction

In the heavenly dances of the blessed described by the mystics, angels and departed souls circle the throne of God and dance through bright meadows filled with bliss. Sometimes the soul of the mystic herself may join in the dance, as in Mechthild's "And still the young man did not come." This mystical dancing brings up puzzling questions for the modern-day scholar. Although the way in which Mechthild describes the heavenly dance gives valuable information about the vocabulary Mechthild had with which to describe dance, the meanings and emotions she associated with dance, and the prevailing attitudes toward dance at the time, one vital and vexing question still remains: was Mechthild, were any of these beguine mystics, actually dancing?

"And still the young man did not come" is a good example of the ambiguities of mystic texts about dance. In this passage the soul speaks, saying, "I cannot dance, Lord, unless you lead me." Does Mechthild mean to have the soul represent Mechthild's own particular experience of dancing with Christ? Or is the soul more generic, representing any devout Christian who walks the mystical path and follows Christ in the dance? It is clear enough that Mechthild is comparing the mystical Christian life to a dance with God; it is less clear whether she is saying that she herself has participated in such a dance. Even if the soul in this passage does refer to Mechthild's own soul and if she experienced a vision in which she was whirled into the dance of Christ's love, could such a virtual performance be considered dance by today's scholarly standards? While Mechthild's soul danced, what was her body doing? Lying still and silent, or

possibly dancing along with her soul? These are very important questions. When I have presented this research to my colleagues in the field of dance, the most common response has been, “But is this dance? Was anyone really physically dancing?” In this chapter I both address that question and elude it.

The beguine texts create a complicated relationship among soul, body, heart, mind, spirit, and senses—all the parts that make up a human self. Sometimes they speak of the distinction between the body and the soul, between the outer self and the inner self, but often they make little or no such distinction and speak only of the person in relationship with God. The texts themselves do not ask or address the question, “Was this really a physical dance?” If Mechthild had wanted to describe the particular movements of the dance the soul performed with Christ, she could have done so. After all, Philip of Clairvaux was able to describe the specific movements Elisabeth performed when she portrayed Christ’s Passion. If Mechthild had wanted to explain whether she was physically moving while her soul was dancing, she could easily have given such an explanation. Instead, she chose to create an ambiguous and poetic text in which dance appears as a means to convey spiritual truth. To the extent that I elude the question of what was really happening and focus on what the beguines chose to describe and why their texts were created, I attempt to honor the ambiguity in the sources.

Although I believe that when a mystic danced she transcended the categories of physical and spiritual, I also acknowledge the importance of the physical and the visible to the field of dance studies. I, too, like my questioning colleagues, want to know what these dances looked like, felt like, and sounded like. To the extent that I face forward and address the question, “Was this really dance?” I must go beyond the beguines’ own words, reading between the lines and sometimes even beyond the page, searching for an exterior point of view. Thankfully, the four

core texts are well-suited for such an analysis. While Mechthild of Magdeburg and Hadewijch each wrote their own texts and therefore do not offer an outside observer's point of view, both women do give intriguing hints about their own physical performances. Agnes Blannbekin, whose text was written by a male scribe who copied down many of her visions and sayings, also contains accounts of Agnes' actions from the scribe's point of view. The best source for an outside point of view, however, is Philip of Clairvaux's *vita* of Elisabeth of Spalbeek. Philip gives an eyewitness account of Elisabeth's performances, which have been acknowledged and analyzed as dance by Joanna Ziegler, Susan Rodgers, and Karen Silen.<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth's *vita* is one of the most exciting sources for medieval sacred dance available in current scholarship; however, it is not the only source that offers movement description. Agnes also performed movements, documented by her scribe, that have certain similarities to Elisabeth's dances.

Using all four of these sources, I weave a tapestry of sacred physical performances among the beguines. Some of these performances can be called dance by today's standards while others may be considered dance-like. Regardless of the precise terms, there are enough descriptions of sacred physical performances to demonstrate that many beguines did express their faith through movement.

Because concepts of physicality and spirituality are central to any discussion of medieval sacred dance, this chapter begins with an overview of attitudes toward the body in medieval

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Rodgers and Joanna E. Ziegler, "Elisabeth 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 Joanna E. Ziegler, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 299-355; Karen Silen, "Elisabeth of Spalbeek: Dancing the Passion," in *Women's Work: Making Dance in Europe before 1800*, ed. Lynn Matluck Brooks, (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 207-27.

Christianity in general and in the core beguine texts in particular, then moves on to the ways in which Mechthild, Agnes, and Hadewijch described their inner experiences of divine revelation, surprisingly embodied descriptions in which the physical senses and the spiritual senses intermingled in fascinating ways. After considering the inner point of view (how the beguines described their own experiences during their performances) this analysis moves to an outward point of view (what others saw and heard as they watched). This includes the accounts by Philip and by Agnes' scribe, as well as extrapolations from what Agnes, Mechthild, and Hadewijch had to say about themselves. Addressing the exterior viewpoint brings up questions of audience and of the public nature of these performances.

Finally, this chapter concludes with a detailed analysis of the passages in the four core beguine texts in which *quasi*-dance or sacred performance occurs. In this analysis, the inward accounts of heat, trembling, pain, visions, auditions, and physical sensations intertwine with the outward accounts of shaking, freezing in place, falling, spinning, and dancing. In this way I begin to weave the tapestry of medieval sacred dance both from within and without.

#### The Human Body and Christ's Body in Christian Thought and Practice

The relationships found in the writings of the beguines between inner experience and outer display, between physical senses and spiritual senses, or between the human and the divine do not fit neatly into the categories of "body" and "soul." However, it is difficult to talk about medieval Christian sacred dance without also talking about the body and the soul. This is not just because the human body is the basic artistic medium out of which dance is created; in that sense, any discussion about dance must address the body. When considering medieval Christianity and dance, however, the body becomes of special interest because devout medieval

Christians sometimes used bodily practices such as flagellation, fasting, lying prostrate, wearing uncomfortable clothing, and so on. Extreme physical practices were especially prevalent among women, as Caroline Walker Bynum has thoroughly documented.<sup>2</sup> Because such practices are dramatic and memorable, it is easy for people of today to assume that medieval Christians hurt their bodies for the sake of their souls and privileged spirit over matter. In actuality, medieval Christian attitudes toward bodies were not that simple, and various theologians spent considerable time and ink recording their thoughts on this complicated and contested subject. For the purpose of better understanding the dances of the beguines, however, a brief overview of the body (and how it relates to dance) in Christian thought should suffice.

Christianity is one of the few world religions that has no strong tradition of danced worship. In Hinduism, for example, one of Shiva's many forms is Nataraja, the divine dancer who danced the world into being. In many African religions, dance is essential as a way to communicate with the deities. By performing specific dance movements that reflect the characteristics of a deity, dancers invoke that deity to come and 'mount' them, taking control of their bodies and dancing through them.<sup>3</sup>

In Christianity, on the other hand, dance has rarely been officially sanctioned as a form of worship, and even dance as secular entertainment has often fallen under censure. Throughout the centuries, church authorities have preached against the evils of dance and sometimes banned it

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<sup>2</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Omofolabo Soyinka Ajayi, "In Contest: the Dynamics of African Religious Dances," in *African Dance: an Artistic, Historical and Philosophical Inquiry*, ed. Kariamuwelsh Asante (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1994), 189.

entirely.<sup>4</sup> The Christians may have inherited this distrust of dance from the Romans, who considered dancing appropriate only for lower-class entertainers, or perhaps the early Christian theologians feared dance because of its association with sensuality and with the rituals of pagan religions.<sup>5</sup>

It was not just the inappropriate use of dance in pagan worship or for sensual entertainment that made early Christians concerned about dancing bodies, however. The deep-seated roots of Christian ambivalence toward dance are found in the basic tenets of Christian beliefs about human bodies. Interestingly enough, these beliefs are not wholly negative; Christian doctrine contains justifications both for honoring the body and for denigrating it.

One of the most fundamental doctrines of Christianity is the incarnation of Christ. According to the accounts in the four gospels of the New Testament, God took human form in the person of Jesus Christ and in this mortal body he lived, died, and was resurrected. Because of Christ's human death and resurrection, Christians believe that after death their bodies, too, will be resurrected. Both of these beliefs—the incarnation of Christ and the resurrection of the body—give innate value to human bodies. A person who believes that her physical body will be resurrected at the Last Judgment will probably take a different attitude toward that body than a person who believes that her body will be destroyed and only her spirit will live on. Likewise, if

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<sup>4</sup> Susan Watkins Maynard, "Dance in the Arts of the Middle Ages," Ph. D. diss. (Florida State University, 1992), 77, 78; Ernest W. McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969), 76-77, 136.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Simons, "Reading a Saint's Body: Rapture and Bodily Movement in the *Vitae* of Thirteenth-Century Beguines," in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester and New York: Manchester University, 1994), 13.

Christ performed his saving actions through the use of his human body, this gives the followers of Christ impetus to perform acts of salvation with their bodies as well.

Set alongside these doctrines that value bodies, however, are beliefs that cast suspicion on human physicality. From the biblical letters of Paul comes the concept of “flesh” as something Christians must overcome in order to achieve true spirituality. Although flesh is not a synonym for body and instead refers to the sinful tendency within human beings, the concept of flesh against spirit or body against soul recurs consistently in Christian theology and practice.<sup>6</sup> This concept, which we tend to label today as “dualism,” derived from the writings of the Greek philosopher Plato and appears most strongly in theologians who were influenced by Plato, such as Paul himself, Clement of Alexandria, and others.<sup>7</sup> It is important to note, however, that ancient and medieval Christian dualism was “less strict,” as Joachim Küpper puts it, than the dualism Western society experiences today.<sup>8</sup> The first philosopher to fully separate mind and body was René Descartes in the seventeenth century, giving rise to the term “Cartesian

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<sup>6</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum discusses the body-soul relationship in Christian theology, and how that relates to women’s conflicted views of their own bodies, in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 222-38. Bruce Holsinger compares relations between flesh and spirit to “the relationship between musical theory and musical practice” in *Music, Body and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001), 4-10, 36.

<sup>7</sup> See Margaret R. Miles, *The Word Made Flesh: a History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 35-36 for Plato’s influence on Clement.

<sup>8</sup> Joachim Küpper, “Perception, Cognition, and Volition in the *Arcipreste de Talavera*,” in *Rethinking the Medieval Senses: Heritage, Fascinations, Frames*, ed. Stephen G. Nichols, Andreas Kablitz, and Alison Calhoun (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 119-20.

dualism.”<sup>9</sup> Before Descartes, while Christianity contained some dualistic tendencies, people tended to consider body and mind/soul as uneasy partners rather than fully separate entities.

These two concepts—the dualism of spirit and flesh and the physicality of the incarnate Christ—have intertwined in many ways throughout the history of Christian thought, creating what Caroline Walker Bynum calls a theological “muddle.”<sup>10</sup> For thirteenth-century beguines, some of this confusion and controversy about the role of the body in Christian life was merely historical, while some directly influenced their daily lives and how they used their own bodies to perform their faith.

One of the very first controversies to shake the early Christian church in the second and third centuries was the conflict between Gnostic Christians and incarnational Christians. Gnostics believed that the body and the material world were evil while the soul and the spiritual world were good, and that therefore the soul had to be redeemed from the body. This belief caused many Gnostics to become ascetics, denying or punishing the body. Moreover, Gnostics did not believe that Christ had taken on a physical form, only that he had *appeared* to do so. Incarnational Christians, on the other hand, believed in the literal, physical incarnation of Christ and affirmed that both good and evil could be found in the body and the material world. The incarnational Christians eventually won the controversy and labeled Gnosticism a heresy while making belief in the incarnation an orthodox Christian doctrine.<sup>11</sup> However, it seems evident

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<sup>9</sup> Miles, 329-32.

<sup>10</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 223.

<sup>11</sup> Miles, 29-31.

that the Gnostic idea of the evils of the material world was powerfully attractive to many Christians, as similar ideas reappeared later, during the medieval era.

By the thirteenth century, medieval Christians had to contend with several competing ideas about the role of the body and the senses in how humans construct knowledge and understand God.<sup>12</sup> Two of these ideas derived from the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle, filtered, of course, through centuries of Christian theological interpretation. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht gives a convenient simplification, however: the basics of a Platonic view were that knowing truth “required an overcoming, a going beyond the physical surface as the world presents itself” while according to an Aristotlean view “there could not be any truth experience unless it relied on the perception of the material world as its starting point and basis.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, a Platonic philosophy was more likely to value the mind and an Aristotlean philosophy was more likely to value physical sense perception.

These divergent philosophical ideas meant that medieval Christians had several different frameworks available for theorizing about the body and they could pick and choose between such frameworks depending on what theological point they wanted to make. Various

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<sup>12</sup> The senses were a popular topic among medieval writers, occupying as they did a place between the outer world and the inner person. The senses could guard the inner person or they could let temptation in. For example, in Mechthild’s text, the five senses are the soul’s chamberlains. (Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin [New York: Paulist Press, 1998], 58) In the writings of the beguines the senses are usually equated with the body. In fact, the “sensible world” is a term used by medieval writers to refer to the physical or material world. Currently scholarly interest has also turned itself toward medieval conceptions of the senses: see *Rethinking the Medieval Senses*.

<sup>13</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, “Introduction. Erudite Fascinations and Cultural Energies: How Much Can We Know about the Medieval Senses?” in *Rethinking the Medieval Senses: Heritage, Fascinations, Frames*, ed. Stephen G. Nichols, Andreas Kablitz, and Alison Calhoun (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 4.

theologians were more influenced by a Platonic or by an Aristotelean view of the body and the senses. The fourth century Christian theologian Augustine focused on the mind and the soul more than the body; the soul animated the body which would otherwise be dead and the mind was illuminated by God.<sup>14</sup> Sarah Kay states that in Augustine's theology "the body risks being an impediment to knowledge, since it 'fogs' or 'cloaks' the mind."<sup>15</sup> Augustine's thinking was influential for centuries and later neoplatonists went even further than he had, favoring what Kay calls a "radical dichotomy of body and soul."<sup>16</sup>

In the late twelfth century Western scholars rediscovered the works of Aristotle and a new generation of theologians became influenced by Aristotle's ideas about the body and the senses, specifically that human experience through the senses could bring about knowledge. This Aristotelean philosophy valued the body more highly than neoplatonic philosophy did, and from the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries, the Aristotelean influence on Christian thought was greater than the influence of neoplatonism.<sup>17</sup> Thomas Aquinas, one of the great thirteenth-century Christian theologians, subscribed to Aristotelean ideas and tried to reconcile reason with faith and the sensible world with the spiritual. Aquinas believed in the "permanent mutual

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<sup>14</sup> Augustine's works are complex and his thinking should not be essentialized. For a full discussion of Augustine's view of the senses see Eugene Vance, "Seeing God: Augustine, Sensation, and the Mind's Eye," in *Rethinking the Medieval Senses: Heritage, Fascinations, Frames*, ed. Stephen G. Nichols, Andreas Kablitz, and Alison Calhoun (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 13-29.

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Kay, "Women's Body of Knowledge: Epistemology and Misogyny in the *Romance of the Rose*," in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, eds. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), 227.

<sup>16</sup> Kay, 228.

<sup>17</sup> Küpper, 119-20; Kay, 227-28.

dependence of body and soul.”<sup>18</sup> According to Aquinas’ writings, the soul was meant to be united with the body and neither could exist without the other. The body did not get in the way of knowledge, but instead through the senses helped bring about knowledge. A healthy body could be a boon to the soul; in fact, the soul could never experience true happiness without being attached to the body.<sup>19</sup>

Philosophical ideas like Aquinas’, in which the body has a useful place in Christian life, give an indication that in the thirteenth century the pendulum of Christians’ attitudes toward their bodies was swinging toward a greater emphasis on the unity of body and soul and a lesser emphasis on dualism. The forms of devotion that were popular among both members of the religious orders and laypeople in the thirteenth century also indicate an increased interest in physicality, particularly the physicality and humanity of Christ. Much devotion centered around the eucharist, which was believed to be the literal body and blood of Christ. Laypeople rushed into churches to see the priest consecrate the host and lift it up for all to see; hanging receptacles called pyxes preserved consecrated hosts and provided a visual focus for eucharistic devotion; religious men and women took communion as often as possible while many laypeople, out of reverence and awe, did not communicate at all, causing the Fourth Lateran Council to decree that every Christian must take communion at least once a year.<sup>20</sup> Books of saints’ lives recounted many miracles associated with the eucharist: hosts bled on the altar, saints distinguished between

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<sup>18</sup> Miles, 171.

<sup>19</sup> For a succinct summary of Aquinas’ s theology of the body and the soul, see Miles, 168-74. Also see Kay, 228-29.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph H. Lynch, *The Medieval Church: a Brief History* (London and New York: Longman Group Limited, 1992), 280-84.

consecrated and unconsecrated hosts, and witches or heretics stole hosts for their own purposes. The culmination of all this eucharistic piety was the official instatement of the feast of Corpus Christi in 1264, creating a religious festival solely to celebrate Christ's body. Interestingly, Thomas Aquinas had a role in composing the liturgy for this festival.<sup>21</sup>

Besides the Aristotlean philosophy of Aquinas and the popular eucharistic devotion of the time, thirteenth-century European Christians had another reason to at least give lip service to the integration of human bodies and souls. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries a splinter group of Christians called the Cathars (or Albigensians) believed that everything to do with the body was evil, especially its sexuality, and that the only route to salvation was complete asceticism. Not unlike the earlier Gnostics, the Cathars saw good and evil as warring forces, with spirit falling on the side of good and matter on the side of evil. While orthodox Catholics might have sympathized with the Cathars' asceticism and denial of sexuality, the Cathars crossed the line of orthodoxy by denying various Catholic sacraments and by allowing women to have positions of authority in the church. Orthodox Catholics responded to this "heresy" by declaring a crusade against the Cathars, hunting them down, and executing many of them.<sup>22</sup> In a backward way, the orthodox Catholic fear of the Cathars helped give legitimacy to Christians who used their bodies to express their spirituality. According to Jo Ann McNamara, women mystics were useful to the orthodox Catholic hierarchy in the fight against the Cathars; by using their bodies in holy ways

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<sup>21</sup> Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2001), 74-75; Lynch, 280-84.

<sup>22</sup> Saskia Murk-Jansen, *Brides in the Desert: the Spirituality of the Beguines* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 246-58; Miles, 214-15.

and combining body and soul, such women were a visible denial of the Cathar doctrine of the evil of the body.<sup>23</sup>

This, then, was the thirteenth-century Christianity in which the four beguines of my central texts were steeped: a religion that believed in God incarnate as Christ and in bodily resurrection and yet feared the sensuality and worldliness of the flesh; that philosophically acknowledged the mutual dependence of body and soul even as individual Christians practiced physical mortification and asceticism; that embraced the eucharistic body and blood with great devotion; and that had to tone down its own tendencies toward dualism in order to deny the extreme dualism of the Cathars.

#### The Human Body in Beguine Texts

It would not be surprising to find Hadewijch and Mechthild (and to a certain extent Agnes, through her scribe) echoing these diverse thirteenth-century Christian sentiments about the body. In fact, in reading their texts one finds a great variety of attitudes toward bodies, some typical and orthodox, some less so. This variety reflects the contrasting ideas about the body with which thirteenth-century Christians had to contend. It also reflects the variety of these women's own thoughts and experiences. It is important to remember that, despite sharing the commonality that they were all beguines who lived in western Europe within a few generations

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<sup>23</sup> Jo Ann McNamara, "The Rhetoric of Orthodoxy: Clerical Authority and Female Innovation in the Struggle with Heresy," in *Maps of Flesh and Light: the Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*, ed. Ulrike Wiethaus (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 13-14. Also see Dyan Elliott, *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), 47-83 for a discussion of women in the fight against heresy.

of each other, these women were individuals whose lives were similar in some aspects and unique in others.

Agnes, in the words of her scribe, expresses ideas about the body that seem to be a direct reflection of common Christian theology of the time. “The soul is in all parts of the body, [and] makes the body feel and activates the five physical senses”<sup>24</sup> is a common concept reminiscent of Augustine’s theology, and “every sense of the body has a pathway and exposes chastity to temptation”<sup>25</sup> is another commonplace in medieval thought. Neither sentiment is particularly unique or interesting; what Agnes did with her body as she walked through the streets and visited churches was far more transgressive than what she said about bodies.

In her book, Mechthild often discusses her body in lively and contradictory terms. Sometimes she speaks of the body and the soul as warring enemies, with the soul striving toward God and the body actively opposing the soul’s efforts. Mechthild uses startlingly negative language, calling her body a “murderer” and a “dead mongrel.”<sup>26</sup> She expresses her distrust of her body very clearly when she discusses how she took up arms against it when she believed it was holding her back from her spiritual life:

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<sup>24</sup> Agnes Blannbekin, *Agnes Blannbekin, Viennese Beguine: Life and Revelations*, trans. Ulrike Wiethaus (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), 126; Agnes Blannbekin, *Leben und Offenbarungen der Wiener Begine Agnes Blannbekin (1315)*, eds. Peter Dinzelbacher and Renate Vogeler, (Göppingen: Künnerle, 1994), 388. “. . . anima est in omnibus membris corporis et corpus sensificat et quinque sensus corporales exercet in corpore.”

<sup>25</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 138; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 420. “Quilibet enim sensus corporis viam habet et exponit castitatem tentare.”

<sup>26</sup> Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 41, 112; Mechthild von Magdeburg, *Das Fließende Licht der Gottheit: nach der Einsiedler Handschrift in kritischem Vergleich mit der gesamten Überlieferung*, eds. Hans Neumann and Gisela Vollman-Profe, (Munich: Artemis Verlag, 1990), 8, 83. “morder,” “tote hunt.”

I had to remain constantly in great fear and throughout my youth had to deliver great defensive blows against my body. These were sighing, weeping, confessing, fasting, keeping vigils, scourging with rods, and constant adoration. These were the weapons of my soul by means of which I so completely conquered the body that in twenty years the time never came that I was not weary, weak, and sick . . .<sup>27</sup>

Mechthild had purposely damaged her body and made herself sick for the sake of her soul. This is the sort of passage that leads dance scholars to claim that medieval Christians hated and denied their bodies. However, in other parts of Mechthild's book she speaks in glowing terms of the connection between her body and soul. She delights in the physicality of her humanity because it reflects the humanity of Christ: "When I reflect that divine nature now includes bone and flesh, body and soul, then I become elated in great joy."<sup>28</sup> When Mechthild imagines how glorious her body will be after it is resurrected, she calls it "my dearly beloved" and tells it: "In the past my whole well-being depended on you / Now all your consolation depends on me. . . . / Eternal day has arisen for us. / Now we shall receive our reward."<sup>29</sup> This passage echoes Aquinas' concept of the eternal mutual dependence of the body and the soul and takes a very different tone from the previous passage in which Mechthild was bent on defeating her body. The seeming contradictions within Mechthild's text (the body is an enemy, the body is beloved) reflect the

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<sup>27</sup> *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 143; *Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, 113. "Do muoste ich steteklich in grossen vorhten stan und muoste alle mine jugent grosse schirmeschlege uf minen lichamen schlan: das was súfzen, weinen, bihten, vasten, wachen, besmenschlege und betten steteklichen an. Dis waren dú waffen miner sele, da ich den lip mit úberwant also sere, das bi zwenzig jaren nie die zit wart, ich were muede, siech und krank . . ."

<sup>28</sup> *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 157; *Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, 129. "Swenne ich das gedenke, das goetlich nature nu an ir hat bein und vleisch, lip und sele, so erhebe ich mich mit grosser vroede."

<sup>29</sup> *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 261; *Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, 244. "Ettewenne lag alles min heil an dir, nu lit aller din trost an mir. . . . Der ewige tag ist úns entstanden, nu soen wir únsern lon enpfan."

contradictions in thirteenth-century Christian beliefs about the body as well as the growth and change in Mechthild's own thoughts; the passages about the dearly beloved body come toward the end of her book and were probably written in her later years. Whatever Mechthild's personal ideas, however, the ideology of dualism alongside the doctrines of the incarnation and the resurrection likely made it possible for her to contain such a paradox within her writings.

Hadewijch, unlike Mechthild, does not discuss the body and the soul as opposites or as enemies. She mentions both body and soul in her text, but she also mentions mind, heart, spirit, being, and oneness. There is very little sense of dualism in Hadewijch's writings; the closest she comes is when she talks about God's humanity and divinity: "With the Humanity of God you must live here on earth, in the labors and sorrow of exile, while within your soul you love and rejoice with the omnipotent and eternal Divinity in sweet abandonment."<sup>30</sup> However, Hadewijch brings humanity and divinity together far more often than she separates them. Her great theme is *minne* (love) and she tends to speak about experiencing love in her whole being, not just with a single part such as the body or the soul. In describing what she calls "fruition," the union of the human self with God, she says,

But they abide in one another in fruition, mouth in mouth, heart in heart, body in body, and soul in soul, while one sweet divine Nature flows through them both, and they are both one thing through each other, but at the same time remain two different selves—yes, and remain so forever.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: the Complete Works*, trans. Mother Columba Hart (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 59; Hadewijch, *De brieven van Hadewijch*, trans. Paul Mommaers (Averbode: Altiora, 1990), 50. "Metter menscheit gods suldi hier leuen in aerbeide ende in ellenden, Ende metten moghenden eweleken god suldi Minnen ende Jubileren van binnen met enen sueten toeuerlate."

<sup>31</sup> *Hadewijch: the Complete Works*, 66; *De brieven van Hadewijch*, 74. "Mer si ghebruken onderlinghe ende elc anderen Mont in mont, ende herte in herte, Ende lichame in lichame, Ende ziele in ziele, Ende ene soete godlike nature doer hen beiden vloyende, Ende si beide een dore hen seluen, Ende al eens beide bliuen, Ja ende bliuende."

The impression here is that union with God is far bigger than the limiting ideas of body and soul, that it encompasses Hadewijch's entire being so that she cannot separate out her different parts.

This passage by Hadewijch is remarkably similar to one in Mechthild's text, in which Mechthild compares angels, who are only spirit, with humans who are also made of flesh. She finds humans to have the better part:

The soul alone with its flesh is mistress of the house in heaven, sits next to the eternal Master of the house, and is most like him. There eye reflects in eye, there spirit flows in spirit, there hand touches hand, there mouth speaks to mouth, and there heart greets heart.<sup>32</sup>

This passage, like Hadewijch's, gives a sense of the entire person coming in contact with God in a way too large to be explained without mentioning many different parts of the human being: eye, hand, mouth, heart, and spirit.

If the writings of the beguines display a certain dualism, they also display a certain sense of unity and wholeness. However, the beguines' theologies of embodiment are not displayed as much in what they said about the body as in what they did and experienced with their bodies.

#### Experiencing Revelation: The Senses, the Body, and the Spirit

Mechthild and Hadewijch both wrote vivid passages describing what they experienced when they received their visions and revelations from God; Agnes' scribe also gave lively accounts of what Agnes saw, heard, felt, tasted, and smelled during her revelations. These

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<sup>32</sup> *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 157-58; *Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, 129. "Dú sele ist mit irem vleisch alleine husvro in dem himelriche und sitzet bi dem ewigen wirt, im selber allerglichest. Da spilet ovge in ovge und da flússet geist in geiste und da rueret hant ze hande and da sprichet munt ze munde and da gruesset hertz in herten."

accounts can give a dramatic impression of each woman's inner experience, including her bodily experience, as she encountered the divine. It is easy, however, to walk on dangerous ground when discussing inner experience. Recent scholars writing about mysticism have moved away from the focus on mystical experience as an intense psychological state that once characterized much writing about the mystics. Grace Jantzen critiques scholars and philosophers who are preoccupied with analyzing mystics' psychological states and experiences. Jantzen finds that the questions such scholars tend to ask—whether mystical experiences are fact or not, what mystical experience says about religion in general, whether mystical experience can truly be put into words—have very little to do with what the mystics themselves cared about. According to Jantzen's reading of medieval mystical texts, mystics were not interested only in having an intense inner relationship with God but also concerned themselves with many outward matters such as social issues and politics.<sup>33</sup>

Amy Hollywood points out how the notion of experience has been strongly gendered in studies of mysticism. Scholars writing about mysticism have often made a distinction between “the feminine— affective, emotional, visionary, and often erotic; and the masculine—speculative, intellectual, and often explicitly antivisionary.”<sup>34</sup> Intense inner experience certainly falls into the former category, that of the feminine. Having separated experience from intellect and the feminine from the masculine, many early twentieth-century scholars devalued the former and extolled the latter. More recent scholars, decrying gender-bias, have rejected the categories of

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<sup>33</sup> Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1-12.

<sup>34</sup> Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 8.

affective and speculative entirely. Hollywood, however, keeps the categories (because they exist even in the medieval texts and cannot be ignored) while discarding the gender distinction. She finds that male mystics can be experiential and females can be intellectual or that, just as likely, both experiences and theorizing about those experiences can be found in a single person's text. Hollywood also shows that distinctions between affective and intellectual mysticism blur even more when visionary and affective mystics write about coming to a place beyond emotion where they are indistinguishably merged with God.<sup>35</sup>

Following Hollywood's lead, therefore, I examine the beguines' descriptions of inner experiences as one aspect of their mysticism; in the "Performing Revelation" section below I move on to the more outward aspects of performance. The vivid descriptive details of embodied experience from the point of view of the performer are of interest to me as a dance researcher because they let me put myself "inside the skin," so to speak, of these women who are distant from me in both time and space. While reading (and experiencing?) their words it is possible to glimpse both what they felt and what meaning they drew from it when, as they put it, they fell into ecstasy, were ravished by God, or were drawn up into heaven. However, even while becoming immersed in vivid, embodied description it is important to remember that such glimpses are just that—fleeting glimpses of experience and not the experience itself. Each woman chose, within her own cultural and historical context, what to write and how to write it; the text was then copied and transmitted through many centuries. As Hollywood puts it, because medieval scholars study language and text, "we must recognize that we have no access to an

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<sup>35</sup> Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 6, 16; Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, 6-9.

unmediated experience.”<sup>36</sup> Dyan Elliott notes that because medieval women’s experiences come down to us in mediated form does not negate the fact that these women had experiences—it simply means that scholars cannot know precisely what those experiences were.<sup>37</sup> Even though mediated, these accounts can provide useful information, especially about what these women (and sometimes their scribes or confessors) valued and found important enough to record.

When reading the visionary texts about Agnes’, Mechthild’s, and Hadewijch’s spiritual experiences, several things are immediately striking: these women’s visions were rarely just visual, and their spiritual experiences often included bodily sensations as well. Certainly, all three women did describe “out-of-body” experiences in which the spirit took the primary role. Hadewijch tells of one such revelation: “Later, one Easter Sunday, I had gone to God; and he embraced me in my interior senses and took me away in spirit. . . . Then I returned into myself.”<sup>38</sup> Many of Hadewijch’s visions follow this pattern of going away in spirit and then returning. Mechthild also describes leaving her body:

God’s true greeting, coming from the heavenly flood out of the spring of the flowing Trinity, has such force that it takes away all the body’s strength and reveals the soul to herself, so that she sees herself resembling the saints, and she takes on a divine radiance. Then the soul leaves the body, taking all her power, wisdom, love and longing. Just the tiniest bit of her life force remains with the body as in a sweet sleep.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Hollywood, *Soul as Virgin Wife*, 21.

<sup>37</sup> Elliott, 1-8.

<sup>38</sup> *Hadewijch: the Complete Works*, 272; Hadewijch, *Het visioenenboek van Hadewijch: uitg. naar handschrift 941 van de Bibliotheek der Rijksuniversiteit te Gent*, ed. H. W. J. Vekeman, (Nijmegen: Dekker & Van de Vegt, 1980), 59, 61. “Daer na eens paeschs daghes wasic te gode ghegaen / ende omuinc me van binnen mine sinne / ende nam mi inden gheeste . . . Ende doen quamic weder in mi seluen.”

<sup>39</sup> *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 40; *Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, 7. “Der ware gottes gruos, der da kumet von der himelschen fluot us dem brunnen der fliessenden drivaltekeit, der hat so grosse kraft, das er dem lichamen benimet alle sin maht, und machet die

God takes away the soul, leaving the body behind. When the mystic returns to her body after experiencing divine revelation, she often feels distress. “And with this I returned, woeful, to myself,” Hadewijch says after one vision.<sup>40</sup> Agnes’ scribe describes this process a bit more fully: “When she had returned to herself after this great vision, she became very weak in all her limbs and intensely tired in her whole body, but she was strengthened and comforted in her heart.”<sup>41</sup> In this case, Agnes felt physical distress but emotional comfort after she had gone away from and returned to her body.

Out-of-body experiences, however, are not the only sort of revelations the beguines describe. Their texts reveal a great variety of revelations, experienced both inwardly and outwardly, in the body or the spirit or some unspecified place between. Agnes’ scribe, trying to make sense of it all, organizes Agnes’ revelations into types:

She said that she saw this as closely as if it were there present in the soul, and she neither noticed or felt that she was in any way tied to the body. . . . She also said that this rapture and ecstasy happened to her rarely, except on feast days. And when she received communion of the sacred body of the Lord, then she was often enraptured in ecstasy, so that she did not know whether she was in the body or outside the body. But at other times, there was rarely an ordinary day when she did not experience a visitation, aroused by an ecstasy, but nonetheless sensing clearly that she remained in the body. And within

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sele ir selben offenbar, das si sihet sich selben den heligen gelich und enpfahet denne an sich gotlichen schin. So scheidet dú sele von dem lichamen mit aller ir maht, wisheit, liebin und gerunge, sunder das minste teil irs lebendes belibet mit dem lichamen als in eime suessen schlaffe.”

<sup>40</sup> *Hadewijch: the Complete Works*, 280; *Het visioenenboek*, 89. “Ende ic wart met dien weder bracht iamerlike in mi seluen.”

<sup>41</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 72; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 234. “Post hanc visionem magnam ad se reversa facta fuit valde debilis in omnibus membris suis et vehementer toto corpore fatigata, sed corde vigorata fuit et confortata.”

herself, in the depth of her expanded mind, she was illuminated, and secrets were disclosed to her.<sup>42</sup>

Agnes' scribe describes three kinds of revelations in this passage. In the first sort, Agnes sees with the soul and does not feel her body. These revelations are extraordinary and happen only on feast days. Second, when she takes communion she experiences raptures in which she cannot tell if she is in or out of her body. And finally, almost every day she experiences revelations in which she stays in her body and is told secrets by God.

Mechthild makes a similar differentiation between three "places" where God may speak to a person's soul:

The first place is a person's senses. This place is equally accessible to God, the devil, and all creatures. They can speak here as they wish.

The second place where God speaks with the soul is in the soul. No one can enter this place but God alone. But when God speaks in the soul, it happens without any kind of awareness by the senses, in a great, mighty, swift union of God with the soul. Thus the senses cannot hear this delightful conversation. . . .

The third place where God speaks to the soul is in heaven, when God raises up the soul in the pleasure of his will and suspends her there where she may take pleasure in the wonder of him.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 155; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 462. "De se quoque ait, quod haec vidit tam familiariter, ac si praesens ibi foret in anima, nec advertit nec sensit aliquo modo se alligatam corpori. . . . Hunc quoque raptum et excessum dixit sibi raro accidere nisi in festivitibus, et quando communionem sacri corporis dominici acciperet, tunc saepe rapiebatur in extasim, ita quod nesciebat, utrum esset in corpore an extra corpus. Aliis autem temporibus raro fuit dies naturalis, quo non visitaretur aliquo excessu excitata, sed tamen sensit bene in corpore se manere et intrinsecus, dilatato mentis sinu, illuminabatur, et arcana ei pandebantur."

<sup>43</sup> *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 251; *Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, 232-33. "Die erste stat sint des menschen sinne. Disú stat ist gemeine gotte, dem túfel und allen creaturen in ze varende, ze sprechende nach der selben willekor. Die ander stat, da got mit der sele redet, das ist in der sele. In die stat mag nieman komen dnee got alleine. Swenne aber got in her sele sprichet, das geschihet ane aller hande wissentheit der sinnen mit grosser, creftiger, sneller einunge gottes in der sele; so moegent die sinne das wunnenkliche reden nit vernemen . . . Die dritte stat, da got mit der sele sprichet, das ist in dem himmelriche, swenne got die sele ufrukket mit sines willen wollust und henget si da zuo, da ir sines wunders gelusten muos."

Mechthild's categories do not overlap perfectly with Agnes', though there are some similarities. God revealing himself to Mechthild's senses seems comparable to Agnes' visions in the body. When God speaks in Mechthild's soul without her senses being aware it sounds similar to Agnes' feast-day ecstasies in which she does not feel connected to her body. Taken together, these two descriptions of kinds of experiences suggest a great variety of possible ways that the divine could enter into the mystic's world. While some of these ways seem to involve only the spirit, others are bodily indeed.

Agnes, in particular, often experienced what she termed "physical visions" in which the senses of the body were fully involved, seeing or experiencing a physical thing in a spiritual way. For example, one time Agnes saw sparks of fire jumping from the eucharistic host to the priest's mouth, and at another time she saw sunlight reflecting from a crucifix turn the figure of the crucified Christ completely blue.<sup>44</sup> A third example involved Agnes feeling physical changes in her body:

Another time, when she prayed in church, she felt a renewal of the spirit and a change in her heart, so that in the fire of devotion the blood of her lower body was drawn back to the heart. And she could not keep silent about what was in her heart, and even had to pronounce it loudly. She was truly astonished about this.<sup>45</sup>

The change in Agnes' blood caused her to speak out loud in church, much to her own surprise. There is no indication here that the soul or the spirit had gone anywhere. Something spiritual was happening and the body and its senses were fully involved.

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<sup>44</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 41, 85.

<sup>45</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 98; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 302. "Una vice, cum in ecclesia oraret, sensit innovationem spiritus et cordis immutationem, ita ut in incendio devotionis sanguis praecordiorum ad cor se reciperet. Et ea, quae in corde habebat, tacere non poterat, quin ore personaret. Ipsa vero super hoc mirabatur."

Agnes, Mechthild, and Hadewijch used an amazing array of sensory detail in describing their revelations. Because the senses were synonymous with the body in much medieval writing, the use of the senses in these texts indicates that the beguines were experiencing the divine in their physical bodies.<sup>46</sup> The sense of sight is the most obvious of the bodily senses to use in perceiving God—the very word “vision” implies seeing.<sup>47</sup> All three women did see the divine; they describe complicated visual allegories in which such varied objects as trees, crowns, spinning discs, and nets—usually with several sections and/or colors—represent different sorts of Christians, paths of the Christian life, virtues, and so on. At least as frequently as visual revelations, however, the women describe revelations that involve the other senses as well. They heard voices, music, and other sounds. All three tasted God, though Agnes describes it most vividly as a sweetness in her mouth after she took the eucharist: “All earthly sweetness was in comparison to this sweetness as vinegar is in comparison to honey.”<sup>48</sup> Agnes also experienced God through her sense of smell; when she kissed the altar after mass was celebrated on it, she

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<sup>46</sup> Although the five senses usually refer to the physical self and the way it perceives the world, medieval people also had a notion of an “inner sense” or an “eye of the mind” by which the soul perceived the world, not necessarily with the help of the bodily senses. See Gumbrecht, 5-6 and Vance, 18-23. Sometimes when these women say they experienced God’s revelations in their senses, they may be referring to an inner or spiritual sense rather than the bodily senses, as in the passage where Hadewijch is embraced by God in her “interior senses.” However, since the senses ordinarily mean the exterior bodily senses and Hadewijch makes a point of saying “interior” when she means an inner or spiritual sense, it seems evident that much of the sensory detail in the beguine texts does in fact refer to the physical, bodily senses.

<sup>47</sup> I use the word “revelation” instead of “vision” precisely because of this difficulty. It does not seem possible to hear or touch a vision, but a revelation can certainly be auditory or kinesthetic.

<sup>48</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 38; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 122. “. . . omnis dulcedo creata in comparatione illius dulcedinis esset sicut acetum in comparatione mellis.”

smelled something like a freshly baked roll and was even able, through the miraculous aroma, to determine which friar had celebrated the mass.<sup>49</sup>

Tasting and smelling spiritual revelations might seem stranger than seeing or hearing them, but it was through the sense of touch that Agnes, Mechthild, and Hadewijch had truly startling encounters with the divine. They felt burning sensations, as in this example from Agnes, when she had just seen a vision of a wounded hand during mass:

The Lord also laid the palm of His hand over her mouth and face, and from this contact she felt a marvelously fragrant odor and the fire of devotion and love in her heart. And she glowed from such ardor of desire that she could barely contain herself. She felt the fire from the contact with the wounded hand also physically in her face.<sup>50</sup>

Both Mechthild and Hadewijch also report feeling heat or burning. This could be a pleasurable sensation, as in Agnes' touch of God's hand, or it could be painful. All three women mention feeling physical pain, though sometimes this pain was pleasurable or swallowed up in the greater experience of God's presence. Hadewijch, speaking of a person who loves God violently, says that "he fears he will lose his mind, and his heart feels oppression, and his veins continually stretch and rupture, and his soul melts."<sup>51</sup>

One of the most vivid ways in which these women experienced God through touch was in union with God as a lover, which could involve embraces, caresses, and other erotic sensations.

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<sup>49</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 39.

<sup>50</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 111-12; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 348. "Expandit quoque dominus palmam per os ejus et faciem, ex cujus contactu sensit miram fragrantiam odoris et incendium devotionis et amoris in corde; et tanto ardore desiderii aestuabat, ut vix sustinere posset. In facie quoque sensit corporaliter incendium ex contactu vulneratae manus."

<sup>51</sup> *Hadewijch: the Complete Works*, 65; *De brieven van Hadewijch*, 70. ". . .al mint een soe dat hi ontsinnen waent, Ende dat sijn herte versuchet, Ende sijn aderen altoes recken ende scoren, ende sine ziele smeltet."

Agnes felt “in all of her flesh not a sexual but a chaste delicious pleasure.”<sup>52</sup> Mechthild refers to an experience involving touch as God’s “greeting”:

My body is in great torment, my soul is in sublime bliss; for she has both gazed upon and embraced her Lover in her arms. He causes her, poor wretch, torment. When he draws her up, she flows. She cannot hold herself in check until he brings her within himself. She would like to speak but cannot, so utterly has she been enmeshed in sublime union with the awe-inspiring Trinity. [. . .] She looks at him and says to him, “Lord, give me your blessing.” He looks at her, draws her up again, and gives her a greeting that the body cannot express.<sup>53</sup>

Mechthild is both narrator and subject in this passage. She has chosen to speak of her soul’s experiences in the third person, a literary technique she often uses in her book. Since Mechthild says that her body cannot express God’s greeting it might seem that the body is not involved in this experience at all. In the first line, however, Mechthild clearly states that both body and soul are experiencing, respectively, torment and bliss. It is also notable how many seemingly physical actions Mechthild’s soul can take. It gazes, embraces, flows, speaks, and is enmeshed. I sometimes suspect, when reading passages like this, that Mechthild’s concept of the soul was closer to what I might term the “self” (encompassing multiple aspects of the human person) than to the disembodied being of pure thought that many twenty-first-century people might imagine a soul to be.

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<sup>52</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 134; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 406. “. . . in carne sua tota non libidinosam, sed castam dulcorationem . . .”

<sup>53</sup> *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 44-45; *Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, 11. “Min licham ist an langer qwale, min sele ist an hoher wunne, was si hat beschovwet unde mit armen umbevangen iren lieben alzemale. Von ime hat sú dieqwale, die vil arme. So zúhet er si, so vlússet se; si kan sich nüt enthalten untz er sú bringet in sich selber. So spreche si gerne und si enmag. So ist si gar verwunden in die wunderlichen drivaltekeit mit hoher einunge. . . . So sihet si in an und aprichet im zuo: ‘Herre, gip mir dinen segen.’ So siht er si an und zúhet se wider und git ir einen gruos, den der licham nit sprechen muos.”

The most overtly erotic and often-quoted description of an extremely physical union with God comes from Hadewijch's eucharistic vision. While taking communion, Hadewijch experienced what she terms "fruition" with Christ:

With that he came in the form and clothing of a Man, as he was on the day when he gave us his Body for the first time; looking like a Human Being and a Man, wonderful, and beautiful, and with glorious face, he came to me as humbly as anyone who wholly belongs to another. Then he gave himself to me in the shape of the Sacrament, in its outward form, as the custom is; and then he gave me to drink from the chalice, in form and taste, as the custom is. After that he came himself to me, took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him; and all my members felt his in full felicity, in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity. So I was outwardly satisfied and fully transported.<sup>54</sup>

The sensuality in this passage is not hidden; it is not even sublimated. Hadewijch saw Christ as a beautiful man who belonged to her, and she to him. After she had taken the eucharist she felt him in her arms, felt his whole body pressing against hers. This delightful experience brought her physical satisfaction. The words "outwardly" and "humanity" reveal the bodily nature of Hadewijch's embraces. Christ was believed to have two natures, the human and the divine, and in this passage it seems to have been the humanity of Christ that Hadewijch took to herself as a lover.

Many Christian theologians would probably have been horrified at the beguine mystics' romps with God through the senses of smell, taste, and sometimes erotic touch. Augustine and

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<sup>54</sup> *Hadewijch: the Complete Works*, 281; *Het visioenenboek*, 95, 97. "Daer mede quam hi in die ghedane des cleeds / ende des mans dat hi was op dien dach / doen hi ons sinen lichame iersten gaf also ghedane mensche / ende man / Soete ende scoene / ende uerweent ghelaet tonende / ende also onderdanechleke te mi comende / Alse een die eens anders al es / Doe gaf hi mi hem seluen in specien des sacraments in figuren alsoe men pleghet / Ende daer na gaf hi mi drinken vten kelke ghedane ende smake alsoe men pleghet / Daer na quam hi selue te mi ende nam mi alte male in sine arme / ende dwanc mi ane heme / ende alle die lede die ic hadde gheuoelden der siere in alle hare ghenoege / na miere herten begherten / na miere menscheit / Doe werdic ghenoeghet van buten in allen vollen sade"

Pseudo-Dionysius (an anonymous theologian of the fifth through sixth centuries), in categorizing visions, put purely intellectual revelations highest on the scale and visions involving imagery lower down.<sup>55</sup> If the senses and not just the spirit had to become involved, Augustine ranked sight as the purest of the senses and the one closest to God, while relegating touch to the lowest spot. Every other sense had a particular gateway—eye, ear, nose, mouth—through which it let the sensible world enter the inner person, and that gateway could be regulated. Touch, however, Augustine feared, could enter anywhere, affecting the whole body inside and outside and inciting lust.<sup>56</sup>

In the writings of the beguines touch did affect the entire body, the entire person, but unlike Augustine these women did not seem to distrust the sense of touch. Their concept of the senses was closer to that of Aquinas, who placed touch highest in his hierarchy, calling it “the foundation of all the other senses.”<sup>57</sup> Experiencing God with all the senses, including touch, is at the core of both Mechthild’s and Hadewijch’s understanding of the divine. Hadewijch says, “all that is seen in the spirit when one is ravished by Love is understood, tasted, seen, and heard through and through.”<sup>58</sup> She acknowledges the multi-sensory nature of her revelations; even though she uses the word “seen” she admits that what she really means is not just sight. Mechthild, in a similar passage, goes even further, declaring “I do not know how to write, nor

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<sup>55</sup> Barbara Newman, “What Did It Mean to Say ‘I Saw’?: The Clash between Theory and Practice in Medieval Visionary Culture,” *Speculum* 80 (2005): 12.

<sup>56</sup> Vance, 16-17.

<sup>57</sup> Miles, 171.

<sup>58</sup> *Hadewijch: the Complete Works*, 289; *Het visionenboek*, 131. “Want al dat men siet metten gheeste / die met minnen es op ghenomen / dat dore kint men / dat dore smaect men / dat dore siet men / dat dore hoert men.”

can I, unless I see with the eyes of my soul and hear with the ears of my eternal spirit and feel in all the parts of my body the power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>59</sup> The sensation of God’s touch on her body is a prerequisite for the creation of Mechthild’s book. She cannot write down her visions unless she has experienced them with her whole being.

It is important to note what a crucial role in divine revelation Mechthild gives to the body and the sense of touch; she sees and hears with her soul and spirit, not with her physical senses, but she feels with her body. Through multi-sensory experiences that engulfed all the parts of her being, both physical and spiritual, Mechthild knew God’s power and it was this experience that enabled her to understand and to write. Dance scholars of today often debate the relationship between body and text, between dancing and writing, asking how knowledge is physically inscribed.<sup>60</sup> This question is evidently not a new one. Both Mechthild and Hadewijch, who wrote their own books rather than dictating or co-authoring them, experimented with different genres of poetry, prose, and vision writing in an effort to capture what they had felt—what was beyond the ordinary capacity of words.

Employing all of the five senses, Mechthild’s, Agnes’, and Hadewijch’s revelations became embodied, their experiences of God directly tied to their physicality. Another way in which the beguines’ texts indicate physicality, besides the use of sensory details, is through movement words. All three texts have a strong sense of motion in their visionary accounts and

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<sup>59</sup> *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 156; *Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, 127. “Ich enkan noch mag nit schriben, ich sehe es mit den ovgen miner sele und hoere es mit den oren mines ewigen geistes und bevinde in allen liden mines lichamen die kraft des heiligen geistes.”

<sup>60</sup> One anthology that addresses these questions is André Lepecki, ed., *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004). See especially Lepecki’s own essay in the volume, “Inscribing Dance,” 124-39.

poetic passages, and even in relatively prosaic sections. A sampling of the verbs these women employ can suggest this sense of motion, though the full impact requires a complete reading of the texts. Hadewijch falls to her knees, quivers, clings, melts, trembles, devours, is embraced by God both inwardly and outwardly, and feels herself bound in the chains of love.<sup>61</sup> Mechthild flows, soars, suffers, sinks, shudders, sighs, plays, and dances.<sup>62</sup> Agnes shudders, kisses, burns, swells, falls, and weeps.<sup>63</sup>

A third way the texts show the presence of the body is by using the word “flesh.” When Mechthild experiences God’s “greeting,” she says that it “cuts through all my bones, all my veins, and all my flesh.”<sup>64</sup> As previously mentioned, flesh had a particular theological connotation within medieval Christianity, indicating not just the physical body but also the sinful impulses of human beings’ earthly natures. Because the two (body and sin) had often been conflated in Christian theology, the word “flesh” usually carried a negative association. Mechthild, however, uses the word in a positive sense to refer to intense physicality rather than sin. In another description of God’s “greeting” she tells how he comes to her soul, her body, and her flesh:

Then she begins to taste his sweetness and he begins so to greet her with his Godhead, that the power of the Holy Trinity penetrates fully her soul and her body; and she receives true wisdom. . . . And then she begins to taste with delight his love on her flesh. And then he begins to strengthen with holy feeling in her soul all his gifts.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> *Hadewijch: the Complete Works*, 280-82, 351-53.

<sup>62</sup> *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 40-42, 158, 183.

<sup>63</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 27, 39, 134, 143

<sup>64</sup> *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 320; *Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, 297. “. . . alle min aderen und alles min vleisch dursnidet.”

<sup>65</sup> *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 227; *Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, 206. “. . . so beginnet si ze smekende sine suessekeit; und so beginnet er si ze gruessende mit siner gotheit, das die kraft der heligen drivaltekeit ir sele und iren lip al durgat, und da enpfat si die waren

In this passage, Mechthild does not give any value judgements about the different aspects of her being that experience God's power. Both her soul and her body receive God equally. It is her flesh in particular that tastes the delight of love and her soul that accepts God's gifts, but Mechthild does not place either love or gifts above each other in a hierarchical manner. Instead, this description of union with God also gives a sense of the unity of the human person.

Agnes and her scribe also use the word "flesh" to describe a revelation that happened to Agnes after she took communion:

She was suddenly filled with such sweetness of spirit that it spilled into her flesh in such a way that there was not one place on her whole body where she could not feel physically the invaluable sweetness. And she remained in this sweetness physically as much as spiritually for the whole day, flowing over with delights and spiritual joy.<sup>66</sup>

Flesh, body, and physicality seem equated in this passage as Agnes' spirit spills out through all the parts of her self. Physical and spiritual sweetness combined to overwhelm Agnes with joy. In all three passages just quoted, the "flesh" is not a sinful aspect of the human person to be pushed aside, but rather one part among many that can combine with spirit, bones, soul, veins, and body in experiencing God. These full-being experiences that Mechthild and Agnes describe seem to bring together body and soul, the outward and the inward self.

In many cases, Agnes, Mechthild, and Hadewijch do not specify whether a particular revelation is interior, exterior, bodily, or spiritual, preferring to remain ambiguous on the matter.

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wisheit; . . . und so beginnet si denne vroeliche ze smekende an irme vleisch sine liebi; und so beginnet er alle gabe ze bestetgende mit heliger vuelunge in ir sele."

<sup>66</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 146; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 438. ". . . repente repleta est tanta dulcedine spiritus, ut redundaret in carnem ejus, ita ut per totam corpus ejus non esset locus, ubi non sentiret corporaliter inaestimabilem suavitatem. Et in hac suavitate tam corporali quam spirituali permansit per totam diem illum delitiis affluens et gaudio spiritus."

Many revelations begin with the phrases “I saw” or “I heard” and give no further indication of where or how this revelation took place. This suggests that in such cases the mystic was more interested in telling the content of the revelation that was shown to her by God than the details of her own experience as the revelation happened. Most of the visions involving dance analyzed in the previous chapter fall into this category. For example, in “She saw Friar Erlolf” did Agnes see Erlolf within her soul, in heaven, or elsewhere? Where or how she saw him does not seem as important as the fact that she did see him, and that he was dancing with a throng of virgins, in bliss.

Another sort of revelation in which the role of the body is not specified occurred when the mystic came into such a complete union with God that she did not distinguish herself as a separate entity. In Agnes’ case, she went within herself, into a light, and became completely engulfed in God:

Finally, she was suddenly swallowed up within into a miraculous light and kindled by Divine fire. And there she was completely enraptured in God, so that she could not be conscious of herself nor anything else except God’s infinite sweetness, goodness, and lusciousness, through which she enjoyed and looked upon God.<sup>67</sup>

There is no indication here of body or soul or even of Agnes’ self-awareness. She had become fully swallowed by God. Hadewijch describes what seems to have been a similar experience in which she was caught up in the spirit and experienced great enlightenment. Then, in the midst of her vision, she saw Christ, her beloved:

I fell out of the spirit—from myself and all I had seen in him—and, wholly lost, fell upon the breast, the fruition, of his Nature, which is Love. There I remained, engulfed and lost,

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<sup>67</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 120; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 370. “Tandem subito absorpta est intus in lumen mirificum et inflammata igne divino. Ibique totaliter rapta est in deum, ut nec se ipsam adverteret nec aliquid aliud quam dei infinitam suavitatem, bonitatem et dulcedinem, qua deum contuens fruebatur.”

without any comprehension of other knowledge, or sight, or spiritual understanding, except to be one with him and to have fruition of this union.<sup>68</sup>

Is this union physical? Is it spiritual? Hadewijch says she had fallen out of the spirit, fallen into God. It was only God and oneness with him that mattered to her then; even enlightenment and knowledge had become unimportant. While textualizations of these sorts of revelations do not mention the role of the body, they seem to transcend all categories of body or spirit, conveying a sense of the oneness of the human person as she met with the divine.

In conclusion, Agnes, Mechthild, and Hadewijch describe their inner experiences of revelation in many different ways, including ways that are more physical, more spiritual, or that twine the two together. There is ample textual evidence of these beguines describing their encounters with God in ways that are very bodily and physical, using all five senses and sometimes venturing into surprisingly sensual, even erotic imagery. It is clear that these women's experiences of the divine were strongly felt, embodied encounters.

### Performing Revelation: Audience and Liturgy

In the previous section I examined how Mechthild, Hadewijch, and Agnes (through the pen of her scribe) described their experiences of divine presence and revelation. All three women reported feeling God's presence not just in their spirits, but in their physical bodies. Their descriptions proceeded very much from their inward points of view; the reader gets a sense of what Mechthild felt as she experienced God's "greeting," but it remains unclear what such a

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<sup>68</sup> *Hadewijch: the Complete Works*, 279; *Het visioenenboek*, 87, 89. "Doe vielic buten den gheeste van mi / ende van al dien / dat ic in hem ghesien hadde / ende viel al verloren in die ghebrukeleke borst siere naturen der minnen / Daer in bleuic verswolghenleke verloren buten alle verstantesse van el yet te wetene / noch te siene / noch te verstante / dan .i. te wesene met hem / ende dies te ghebrukene."

mystical experience would have looked like to outside observers. When Mechthild saw the dancing blessed in heaven, when Agnes was comforted by the dancing faith, did the visionary movements they experienced have any effect on their outward appearances? What did other people see? A woman holding herself stiff and rigid? Swaying rhythmically? Falling to the ground? When Mechthild's soul went to God and danced with him, did her body dance too?

It is impossible to answer these questions from descriptions of the mystic's inner experience. However, these texts contain more than just descriptions of experience. Mechthild's and Hadewijch's texts contain hints about the way their inner experiences interacted with the outer world, hints that are analyzed later in this section. For an observer's perspective on what a mystic's revelations looked like, Agnes' *Life and Revelations* and Elisabeth's *vita* are invaluable. The portions of Agnes' book that tell of her outward actions rather than the revelations she dictated to her scribe give a number of intriguing descriptions of movement, and Philip of Clairvaux's *vita* of Elisabeth is almost entirely composed of a lengthy, vivid description of this beguine's performances.

If the notion of inner experience has its pitfalls for scholars, however, so too does that of outward actions. Here is where the question of "But did it really happen?" truly becomes a thorn in the scholar's side. Medieval people believed in and recorded instances of miraculous happenings—stigmata, levitation, boiling blood, lengthy fasting, and so on—that seem unlikely from a modern-day scientific mindset. While it may not be productive to discuss the reality or unreality of such occurrences, it would be remiss to ignore them. Miracles large and small exist in the medieval texts and it is necessary for a medieval scholar to deal with them in some way.

One way to address the question of what "really happened" is to treat everything as interpretation, not fact, and accept that reality is unknowable. According to Robert Berkhofer,

such “dereferentialism,” taken to the extreme, can mean that texts and other representations do not correspond to any real thing, that there is nothing but the text.<sup>69</sup> Most traditional historians, Berkhofer says, do not find texts alone to be enough, seeking some context as well. In my experience, most traditional dance scholars have a similar reaction to studies based entirely on texts, wanting instead to picture real human bodies dancing, or at least to know that physical dances actually happened.

Joanna Ziegler and Mary Suydam both use theories of performance to solve the difficulty of miracles and “what really happened.” Ziegler posits Elisabeth of Spalbeek’s performances as theater, pointing out that in theater there is a certain suspension of disbelief, a lack of concern over whether actions are genuine as long as they effectively communicate their message.<sup>70</sup> Suydam looks at texts as things meant to be interacted with, and is “less concerned with authorial intent than with recognizing such texts as ongoing sources for transformation.”<sup>71</sup>

To return to the issue of mediation, just as texts about inner experience are mediated and there is no accessing an unmediated experience, so too texts about performances are mediated and there is no accessing an unmediated performance. Amy Hollywood is interested in how women’s words were mediated and resisted being mediated; she says that she takes medieval

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<sup>69</sup> Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 10.

<sup>70</sup> Joanna E. Ziegler, “On the Artistic Nature of Elisabeth of Spalbeek’s Ecstasy: the Southern Low Countries Do Matter,” in *The Texture of Society: Medieval Women in the Southern Low Countries*, eds. Ellen E. Kittell and Mary A. Suydam (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 190.

<sup>71</sup> Mary Suydam, “Visionaries in the Public Eye: Beguine Literature as Performance,” in *The Texture of Society: Medieval Women in the Southern Low Countries*, ed. Ellen E. Kittell and Mary A. Suydam (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 141.

women's words seriously, something I attempt to do for women's performances.<sup>72</sup> Instead of attempting to discern the truth of a particular action or performance, I examine how these women's actions were recorded and mediated. Karen Silen takes a similar tactic in her research on Elisabeth of Spalbeek when she considers what Philip of Clairvaux recorded about Elisabeth in his *vita*, what he failed to record, and what his intentions seem to have been.<sup>73</sup> The important premise here is that what medieval writers recorded in their texts is not a precise mirror of what they actually performed. Even so, the texts can give valuable hints about real performances, both through the words of the text and its silences or gaps. To borrow Dyan Elliott's reasoning concerning the actual existence of women's experiences, we can indeed know that these women created performances, although we cannot know precisely what those performances were. The evidence for beguine sacred performance and dance suggests a great deal and confirms very little. What can be confirmed is that performances of various sorts play a large role in the four beguine texts I have chosen to examine.

The inner experiences of Agnes, Mechthild, and Hadewijch were not simply private revelations within the soul meant for the mystic alone. The revelations and experiences of these women became public, became performance by being recorded in text—the act of writing implies an audience and a desire to share one's knowledge or insights with others. But beyond the simple fact of being recorded, a number of other aspects of the beguines' revelations bring them out of the inner realm and into the outward world.

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<sup>72</sup> Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, 6.

<sup>73</sup> Silen, 216-18.

The texts of Agnes, Mechthild, and Hadewijch all contain passages in which the beguine's inner experience affects her outwardly in visible ways, in which the activities of the soul leave a mark on the body. Medieval Christians believed that the spiritual world profoundly affected the material world; the stories of miracles and the reverence medieval people held for relics clearly display the belief that God could reach down and change the physical world, and that physical things that were touched by God held holy power.<sup>74</sup> If God's spirit and the prayers of holy people could change the physical world, it follows logically that what a mystic experienced inwardly would also display itself outwardly in a way that could be perceived by others.

Hadewijch describes a time when her inward state so strongly affected her outward appearance that she had to remain in bed:

It was a Sunday, in the Octave of Pentecost, when our Lord was brought secretly to my bedside, because I felt such an attraction of my spirit inwardly that I could not control myself outwardly in a degree sufficient to go among persons; it would have been impossible for me to go among them.<sup>75</sup>

She does not specify the ways in which she could not control herself outwardly, but they were probably dramatic; publicly trembling and falling did not prevent her from attending church (as will be discussed below), so a physical manifestation of her inward spiritual attraction strong enough to keep her from going out to receive the eucharist must have been suitably impressive.

Mechthild, too, became bedridden because of her experiences in the spirit. After a vision in

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<sup>74</sup> Miles, 184-85.

<sup>75</sup> *Hadewijch: the Complete Works*, 263; *Het visioenenboek*, 23. "Het was in enen sondaghe Ter octauen van pentecosten dat men mi onsen here heymelike te minen bedde brochte Om dat ic gheuoelde / soe grote treckinghe van binnen van minen geeste / Dat ic mi van buten onder die menschen soe vele niet ghehebben en conste dat icker ghegaen ware"

which she was shown the torments of hell, she says, “I was so wretchedly in pain from the stink and the unearthly heat that I could neither sit up nor walk and was without the use of my five senses for three days, like someone struck by thunder.”<sup>76</sup> Even though she saw hell in a vision only, it still affected her body.

In another vision, Mechthild prayed to God who freed a thousand souls from purgatory.<sup>77</sup> These souls, however, appeared so disfigured that they could not enter heaven. God then told Mechthild, “You should bathe them in the tears of love that now flow from the eyes of your body,”<sup>78</sup> whereupon a lake appeared and all the spirits bathed in it. It is notable that the tears that saved the sinners from purgatory were not spiritual tears but tears of the body. It seems that Mechthild was weeping while having this vision and that her physical tears made their way into the visionary world, becoming a holy lake. In this passage, the outward physical act had inward spiritual significance.

Agnes also found the physical and the spiritual to be linked when she went to a surgeon to get bloodletting done. The blood boiled as it came out and both Agnes and the surgeon were surprised at this, because they believed that boiling blood was caused by eating spicy foods,

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<sup>76</sup> *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 130; *Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, 102. “Do wart mir armen von stanke und von unirdenischer hitze so vil we, das ich nit mohte sitzen noch gan unde was aller miner fünf sinnen ungewaltig drie tage als win mensche, den der tunre het geslagen.”

<sup>77</sup> Releasing souls from purgatory was a common task for medieval holy women, who used prayers, weeping, and various forms of suffering and penance to either shorten the time that souls had to spend in purgatory or to free them altogether and send them to heaven. Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 234-35; Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1995), 108-36.

<sup>78</sup> *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 77; *Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, 46. “Du solt si baden in den minnetrehnen, die da nu vliessent usser den ovgen dines lichamen.”

which Agnes did not do. But God's voice within Agnes told her, "This heat does not stem from nature, but from grace, because God ignites the soul with divine heat, and warms the soul kindled in such fashion. And this is the reason for this heat of the blood."<sup>79</sup> God's grace in the soul, therefore, had caused Agnes' physical blood to become hot.

The connection in the beguine texts between inner spirituality and outer manifestations implies performance because of the likelihood that these manifestations would be seen and noticed by others. If God's works happened within the soul without any physical manifestation, it would only affect the beguine herself, but if the works of God that happened within a person's soul were revealed in the body then those works could be seen by others, such as the surgeon, who might thereby be strengthened in their faith.

The physical manifestations of the beguines became what Mary Suydam has termed sacred performance.<sup>80</sup> Suydam is not the only scholar to notice elements of performance in beguine texts.<sup>81</sup> However, she has used performance theory to examine beguine texts in a unique way, viewing these women's lives and ecstasies as "public performances rather than privately

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<sup>79</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 56; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 188. "Iste calor non est a natura, sed a gratia, quia deus animam divino calore accendit, et animam sic accensam calefacit, et inde est calor iste sanguinis."

<sup>80</sup> For Mary Suydam's writings on beguine performance, see "Beguine Textuality: Sacred Performances," in *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality*, ed. Mary A. Suydam and Joanna E. Ziegler (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 169-210; and "Visionaries in the Public Eye."

<sup>81</sup> Murk-Jansen says, "To modern eyes much of the Beguines' work appears to be intensely personal, but it is important to remember that it is above all didactic literature. The women were writing to teach others and the texts were intended as spiritual guidance for their communities" (35-36). Newman is getting at the same concept when she points out that the mystic's "I" is "shaped by the performative context of her writing, for no matter how 'autobiographical' her text, she is a representative lover whose experience is meant to provide a paradigm for others, illumining all the phases and degrees of love" (*Virile Woman*, 143-144).

received ‘visions’.’<sup>82</sup> Drawing on Richard Schechner’s theories of ritual, Suydam isolates two aspects of beguine ecstasies that highlight the ritualistic nature of their actions and turn what could have been ordinary movement into sacred performance. One, these ecstasies were transformative; they accomplished something tangible, changed something not just for the woman performing but for others.<sup>83</sup> Mechthild’s tears freed souls from purgatory. Agnes’ bowing, as I explain below, caused those around her to increase in faith. The visionary Mary Magdalene dancing in the choir brought help and comfort to the singers. In all of these cases, performance brought about transformation.

The second ritualistic element Suydam sees in beguine ecstasies is the presence of an audience.<sup>84</sup> These women’s ecstasies took place primarily in public spaces, often in a church during the mass. When they tranced, trembled, fell to the ground, spoke aloud, wept, threw their hands in the air, or danced, other people were present and watching them. The presence of an audience, in effect, made a revelation into a performance.

The four texts I examine show beguines creating public performances centered around the liturgical structures of the day and the year. The church year was a mosaic of important feast days; some of these (such as Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost) were related to Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection, and other feast days were devoted to various saints. In Agnes’ book, the accounts of her revelations nearly always begin with a sentence telling what

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<sup>82</sup> Suydam, “Visionaries,” 132.

<sup>83</sup> Suydam, “Visionaries,” 136.

<sup>84</sup> Suydam, “Visionaries,” 132.

feast day it was.<sup>85</sup> Mechthild, while less diligent about specifying the exact date of her visions, gives several examples of events that happened on particular feasts.<sup>86</sup> Hadewijch, too, begins most of her descriptions of visions by relating what feast day it was and sometimes which of the hours was being sung.<sup>87</sup>

The divine office, the services chanted at various hours of the day, was one of the central parts of medieval monastic devotion. In a monastery, the divine office would form the structure of a religious day. Monks and nuns rose in the middle of the night to go to the choir and chant matins, and the other hours continued throughout the day—lauds, prime, terce, sext, none, vespers, and finally compline which was sung before retiring for the night. Each hour had a set pattern of prayers, psalms and hymns, and readings from the Bible as well as other religious literature like lives of saints.<sup>88</sup> Unlike mass, which was held once a day in most churches and which laypeople commonly attended, the hours of the divine office were only celebrated by members of the cloistered religious orders, priests, and perhaps by guests at monasteries or by devout nobles who had their own chapels and books of hours.<sup>89</sup> It is important to note that both the mass and the divine office were conducted entirely in Latin, so laypeople who knew no Latin

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<sup>85</sup> For example, *Life and Revelations*, 34, 41, 52, 54-55, 69, 131, 146-47.

<sup>86</sup> *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 84, 164, 166, 235, 275.

<sup>87</sup> *Hadewijch: the Complete Works*, 273, 276, 278, 285, 289, 293.

<sup>88</sup> For an in-depth explanation of each of the hours (primarily from a musical point of view) see Lila Collamore, "Prelude: Charting the Divine Office," in *The Divine Office in the Latin Middle Ages*, eds. Margot E. Fassler and Rebecca A. Baltzer (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3-11.

<sup>89</sup> Bernard Hamilton, *Religion in the Medieval West*, 2nd edition (London: Hodder Arnold, 2003), 53-61.

would not understand the words, though they undoubtedly could follow the pageantry and ceremony of the mass.

While beguines were not strictly cloistered like monks or nuns, attending mass and celebrating the hours formed an important part of their devotions, as seen in these women's texts. Agnes had many of her revelations during mass, and it is also evident that she celebrated the hours with prayers. Even though she received great spiritual consolation during her ecstasies, several times when an ecstasy threatened to keep her from celebrating the hours as she was accustomed to, she forcibly pulled herself out of the ecstasy.<sup>90</sup> Elisabeth's performances were cued very specifically to the hours of the divine office, displaying a different part of Christ's Passion during each hour and following the liturgical order of the service.<sup>91</sup> Mechthild mentions praying at night, which probably refers to compline. In her book, Mechthild also includes prayers to be said at each of the seven hours.<sup>92</sup> Hadewijch specifies that some of her visions took place during matins or mass, and she goes further to mention the specific part of the service during which she was taken up in the spirit, once during the epistle, and once after the third lesson.<sup>93</sup>

The interrelation of these women's prayers and revelations with holy days and the services of the hours and of mass supports the performativity and the public nature of such revelations. It is possible that some revelations may have occurred at home in a beguine's

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<sup>90</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 57, 131.

<sup>91</sup> *Catalogus codicum hagiographicorum bibliothecae Regiae Bruxellensis*, vol. 1 (Brussels: 1886), 363-71.

<sup>92</sup> *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 289-91.

<sup>93</sup> *Hadewijch: the Complete Works*, 273, 285.

private prayer cell. Agnes specifically mentions that she was alone in prayer when certain revelations were given to her.<sup>94</sup> The majority of her revelations, however, took place in one of the many churches that Agnes frequented.<sup>95</sup> It was Agnes' habit to travel around Vienna, the city in which she lived, and sometimes even to other towns in order to attend mass at many different churches. In these churches, Agnes experienced revelations in front of audiences that included monks, nuns, other beguines, laypeople, and peasants from the country.<sup>96</sup>

Elisabeth's performances, like Agnes', had an audience, though this audience came to Elisabeth rather than her traveling to them. Elisabeth was well-known as a holy invalid throughout the province of Liège, where she lived, and her fame attracted visitors such as Philip of Clairvaux, other abbots and monks (along with their servants and grooms), and even such distinguished persons as a German nobleman and the king of France.<sup>97</sup> The abbot of St. Trond (who was Elisabeth's cousin) had a special chapel with an attached bedroom built for her, so that

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<sup>94</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 32, 61, 97.

<sup>95</sup> In the *vitae* of some medieval holy women, their biographers point out how the women tried to retreat from the public eye in order to pray or have ecstasies; two of the women I discuss in chapter six, Christina the Astonishing and Ida of Louvain, are good examples of this. However, the fame that these women acquired, becoming well enough known to have their lives recorded, suggests that not everything they did was in private and that perhaps the biographers emphasized this reclusiveness because it was considered appropriate for women. Regardless, none of the women I examine displayed such shyness. Philip points out that he and other monks were present while Elisabeth performed, and Agnes' scribe, far from emphasizing her reclusiveness, usually presents her as a very social woman.

<sup>96</sup> *Life and Revelations*. Some of these audiences occurred in the following circumstances: Agnes attended a mass with other beguines (39); she went with a few others to a private mass in the Franciscan friars' church (52); she attended a service held by the Bishop of Passau which was so crowded that people were trampled and died (54); she traveled to a church in a different town (73); she went to a monastery to hear a friar preach to the nuns there (102); she mentions a peasant woman from the country being in church with her (104).

<sup>97</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 363, 371, 374-76.

she could easily get up from her bed and perform the hours.<sup>98</sup> Philip, chronicling Elisabeth's performances during the hours of the divine office, never explicitly states that Elisabeth's performances occurred during services held in the chapel, but it seems likely that they did, since Philip clearly links specific parts of Elisabeth's performances with specific sections of the services of the hours, such as the psalms or the lessons.

The exterior visibility of Elisabeth's performances is obvious: Philip and other visitors traveled great distances to view Elisabeth's enactment of Christ's Passion. The other three beguines, although less obvious in their performances, were also being watched by those around them. Once when Agnes experienced a revelation during mass, her companion poked her so that she would come out of her ecstasy and witness the elevation of the host, the high point of the mass.<sup>99</sup> While the text does not say precisely what Agnes looked like during her ecstasy, it is clear that her companion (and maybe others in the church) was watching her and could tell by her physical performance that she was experiencing ecstasy and revelations. In one of her prayers, Mechthild thanks God for the "visible favor" he has shown to her; one can assume she means that this favor was visible to other people, who could then see God's works in her.<sup>100</sup> Hadewijch, too, was seen by others as she performed her ecstasies. One Pentecost, Hadewijch was in church, most likely with the other beguines of her community. As the choir sang matins,

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<sup>98</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 373.

<sup>99</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 101.

<sup>100</sup> *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 320.

Hadewijch trembled so violently that she felt her limbs were about to break. This trembling and the ecstasy that followed it must have been visible to everyone in the church.<sup>101</sup>

While the beguines whose texts I examine undoubtedly valued their personal, inner experiences of God, these experiences did not always remain inward but instead manifested through outward, physical displays. These beguines were not content simply to experience God; they also desired to communicate their faith and their revelations to those around them, sometimes through writing, sometimes through public performance. Women may not have been permitted to perform the greatest dramatic ritual of the Christian faith, the consecration of the eucharist during mass, but they created their own rituals of performance cued to the liturgy of the mass and of the hours of the divine office. Far from being private, quiet, and inwardly focused, these performances could surprise and sometimes disturb their audiences, causing onlookers like Philip and Agnes' scribe to spend a great deal of ink expressing their awe and interpreting what they had seen.

### Textual Evidence of Sacred Performance

#### *Overview*

Throughout the four core texts there is evidence of Hadewijch, Mechthild, Agnes, and Elisabeth creating visible, physical actions to perform their faith. These actions include kneeling, bowing, and falling to the ground; copious weeping and sighing; making the sign of the cross; posing in perfect stillness; shaking or trembling; kissing a sacred object; and striking one's

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<sup>101</sup> *Hadewijch: the Complete Works*, 280. I am indebted to Suydam's "Beguine Textuality" for her reading of Hadewijch's eucharistic vision as a performance occurring in a public space with an audience (186-191).

own body. I call these actions, to borrow the phrase from Agnes' scribe, *quasi*-dances, or to borrow Suydam's term, sacred performances. Many of these sacred performances, though not called dance by the men and women who wrote about them, can be examined as dance by scholars of today—as physical movements performed in public, communicating messages of faith that were understandable to their audiences. Often these performances had musical accompaniment, the chanting of mass or the various hours. Karen Silen argues that Elisabeth's sacred performances should be termed dance because they communicated to an audience primarily through movement rather than words.<sup>102</sup> I agree with Silen about Elisabeth's dance and add that some of the other three women's communication through movement, particularly Agnes', should also be termed dance. While it would be overstating the case to argue that every communicative gesture—every instance of bowing, for example—was dance, there were certainly instances like Elisabeth's in which bowing became dance. The line between dance, *quasi*-dance, and gesture is far from clear. What is clear is that a continuum of forms of movement constituted sacred performance.

The types of sacred performance that appear in more than one text are of special interest. Recurrent performances across multiple texts suggest that there may have been particular forms of movement common to beguines. Philip's descriptions of Elisabeth's dances are especially vivid, exciting in the amount of detail they give about specific movements Elisabeth performed. By itself, though, Elisabeth's *vita* is only one source. The other three texts may not contain as much vivid movement description, but when reading them alongside Elisabeth's *vita* it is possible to discover relationships between the other women's sacred performances and

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<sup>102</sup> Silen, 220.

Elisabeth's dances. Each woman's performances were unique, of course, but since they all participated in the same religious movement and lived in a limited geographic area and within a century of each other, it is reasonable to consider them as related, influenced by the same cultural milieu.

### *Stillness*

It may seem strange to begin a discussion of dance and sacred performance with the topic of stillness. Stillness seems to be the opposite of motion. Any dancer who has created choreography, however, knows that stillness can be as important to the structure of a performance as movement. Endless movement with no moments of rest may cause a dance to appear robotic or dull. Stillness focuses the audience's attention in a way that rapid motion cannot; when a performer freezes in a dramatic pose audience members may experience a moment of breathless excitement in which the image of the performer etches itself in the mind.

In her performances, Elisabeth often made use of stillness, both during her dances and while she lay in bed before rising to perform:

I must not omit that at this, just as at the other hours, before she rises she is raptured, and for a long time she remains completely stiff in that posture in which she is raptured, without feeling or moving or breathing, like an image of wood or stone, in such a way that no part of her may be touched or moved, not even the smallest finger, without the whole structure being moved.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 364. "Illud tamen non aestimo praetermittendum, quod tam hac quam aliis horis antequam surgat rapitur, et in eodem statu in quo rapitur non modico spatio ut imago quaedam ligni aut lapidis sine sensu et motu et flatu tota rigida perseverat, ita quod de ipsa nihil tangi aut moveri potest, nec etiam minor digitus, quin tota machina moveatur." This translation, and all subsequent translations from Elisabeth's *vita*, are my own.

In this rapture before beginning her performance, Elisabeth displayed complete stillness.

Philip's narrative about Elisabeth's dances is structured around these times of stillness; Elisabeth performed for each of the hours of the divine office, and each performance began and ended with a period of complete bodily stillness that Philip calls rapture. From a purely aesthetic point of view, beginning and ending in stillness seems a good choreographic choice. During her dances of the hours, Elisabeth performed many difficult and dramatic movements and her raptures may have served to frame those movements, making them appear even more incredible in contrast to her total stillness.

It is important to remember, however, that Philip does not read Elisabeth's raptures as frames for movement or as enhancements to the drama of her performance; he does not interpret any aspects of Elisabeth's performance, including her stillness, as aesthetic choices but instead as a display of the greatness of God. As Karen Silen notes, "His purpose is to record a miracle, not a dance."<sup>104</sup> Philip's focus is not on the performer as an artist but instead on the performance as a vehicle for bringing about the increase of the Christian faith. In his text, Philip often expresses amazement over the incredible difficulty of Elisabeth's poses and movements; however, he does not believe that her virtuosity came from any natural skill on her part or from the fact that she performed the same movements many times over. A dancer of today, considering Elisabeth's phenomenal schedule of seven complete performances a day, would probably assume that she remained in excellent physical condition through such a regimen and that she perfected her movements through constant practice. The scholars Susan Rodgers and Joanna Ziegler,

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<sup>104</sup> Silen, 216.

commenting on Elisabeth's dances, say that "too many movements are repeated too often for them not to have been a carefully rehearsed, well-nuanced, and precise routine."<sup>105</sup>

Philip, however, emphasizes not the rehearsed nature of Elisabeth's dances but instead their spontaneity and miraculous quality. He describes how she had been an invalid her entire life, unable to rise from her bed except when led by God to enact her sacred performances. Philip assures his readers that "the movements and steps of this virgin, which will be described later, proceed not from herself but rather from a certain divine and secret ability."<sup>106</sup> Why does Philip so vehemently deny Elisabeth's role in creating the dances she performed even as he expresses admiration for the difficulty of those same dances? Part of the reason for this seeming contradiction probably derives from a similar paradox in the medieval Christian theology of visions. As Barbara Newman explains, medieval Christians believed that authentic visions came suddenly from heaven as gifts of God that did not require any action on the part of the receiver; authentic visions were not created by an overactive imagination or brought about by hours of prayer and discipline. Even though monks, nuns, beguines, and other religious Christians used prayer and meditation to cultivate visions, authors of saints' lives downplayed such disciplined techniques and presented visions as sudden and unexpected—not sought-after—in order to bolster the authenticity of such visions.<sup>107</sup>

In a similar way, Philip presents Elisabeth's performances as directly given from God, not cultivated through her own efforts, probably in an attempt to portray her dances (certainly a

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<sup>105</sup> Rodgers and Ziegler, "Trance Dance of Faith," 336.

<sup>106</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 364. ". . . motus et gressus ipsius virginis inferius prout fieri poterit describendi, non ex ipsius sed potius ex quadam divina et occulta virtute procedunt."

<sup>107</sup> Newman, "What Did it Mean?," 5-6.

less usual form of spiritual revelation than visions) as something orthodox and authentically Christian rather than something dangerous and possibly pagan. The authorities of the Christian church had often proved themselves ambivalent or even hostile toward dance. Philip must have realized that Elisabeth's performances could be seen as inappropriate. In portraying her performances as the spontaneous pouring out of God into a weak human vessel, he was probably seeking to clearly identify her as a holy woman rather than as a woman who was mad or demon-possessed.<sup>108</sup> It is impossible to know what Elisabeth herself thought about the artistry or rehearsal that went into creating her dances because she did not write about her own life. It seems evident, though, that her dances had some level of cultivation and artistic choice, as her movements and postures seem to have been carefully selected in order to best portray the message of her dances—the Passion of Christ—and to synchronize neatly with the texts of the services for the various hours during which she performed.

If Philip does not present Elisabeth's moments of total stillness as a choreographic frame for movement (though they might well have served as such), how does he interpret such immobility? He seems impressed by the completeness of Elisabeth's rapture, how she becomes fully unresponsive and barely breathes. In the passage above he mentions that she became so stiff that moving her little finger shifted her entire body. One assumes that either Philip or one of the men with him had tested this by poking her! Philip tells of another test in a later passage; during one of Elisabeth's raptures a feather was laid over her mouth and nose to test her

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<sup>108</sup> Christina the Astonishing, another thirteenth-century beguine, was persecuted as a demon-possessed madwoman by the people of her town until various clergy who viewed Christina's performances labeled her as holy. Elisabeth could easily have suffered the same fate. Thomas de Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina the Astonishing*, trans. Margot H. King (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing, 1999), 20, 26-27.

breathing.<sup>109</sup> The completeness of Elisabeth's trance seemed to indicate to Philip that it was miraculous, not human, in nature. If she were simply choosing to stand still, it would make sense that various parts of her body could be moved separately, but since her stillness was a miracle, it was complete and perfect. When Philip considers the meaning of Elisabeth's raptures (though he does not relate her inner experiences in her own words), he understands them to be moments of rest and rejuvenation interspersed between her difficult and painful movements. He says that during her trance in stillness she is "sighing and finding relief from the heaviness of labor to heavenly and spiritual comfort."<sup>110</sup> So perhaps he does understand stillness as a frame for movement, but in a spiritual rather than an artistic way.

Stillness was often associated with the divine in medieval Christian theology. Caroline Walker Bynum points out that medieval people believed the nature of matter was to corrupt, but the nature of God was to remain changeless. Material things that remained still and changeless partook, to an extent, in divinity; for example, relics of saints' bodies that did not corrupt were considered holy.<sup>111</sup> If motion and change were of the material world, and stillness and incorruptibility were divine, Elisabeth's stillness could emphasize the holy nature of her performance, aligning herself for a time with divine stillness. Women, with the natural cycles of their bodies and their supposedly volatile sensuality and emotions, usually fell on the side of changeableness and the natural world. For a woman to overcome this and be considered holy,

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<sup>109</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 366.

<sup>110</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 365. ". . . a laboris importabilitate respirans et suspirans ad supernum et spirituale solatium."

<sup>111</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, "Matter and Miracles," (paper presented at the meeting of the Delaware Valley Medieval Association, Princeton University, New Jersey, 8 December 2007).

she needed to be chaste, enclosed (preferably cloistered), silent, and still.<sup>112</sup> Although Jo Ann McNamara argues that female concepts of purity were more dynamic, a male theologian's ideal of a holy woman was most likely to be a fully cloistered virgin who spent her days in silence except when she chanted the hours.<sup>113</sup>

Although most beguines did not conform to this ideal—they were not cloistered and could speak to and interact with laypeople—many in addition to Elisabeth also displayed stillness and trance. In fact, stillness seems to have been a hallmark of holy women and a readily recognizable sign of divine presence.<sup>114</sup> Both Agnes and Hadewijch experienced raptures in stillness: while receiving a series of visions Agnes spent a day “without doing anything else, neither eating nor drinking nor speaking any word”<sup>115</sup> and after Hadewijch came out of a vision she “remained lying until late in the day, inebriated with unspeakable wonders.”<sup>116</sup> Although neither of these instances of stillness seems as complete (and certainly not as fully described) as Elisabeth's raptures, they were of a similar nature—a time of spiritual rest in some way related to divine revelation.

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<sup>112</sup> Kay, 214-15; Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, “Chaste Bodies: Frames and Experiences,” in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, eds. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), 24.

<sup>113</sup> McNamara, 13-14.

<sup>114</sup> Simons, “Reading a Saint's Body,” 16-17.

<sup>115</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 146; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 438. “. . . nihil aliud faciens nec manducans nec bibens nec verbum aliquod loquens.”

<sup>116</sup> *Hadewijch: the Complete Works*, 286; *Het visioenenboek*, 117. “. . . bleef ligghende verdronken tote hoghe op den dach in onsegheleke wondere.”

Elisabeth did not restrict stillness only to the times before and after her performances.

Moments of stillness also appeared during the performances themselves as Elisabeth formed and held various poses. These poses might represent Christ on the cross, Christ being whipped, the Virgin Mary, Saint John, or as in this passage, postures of prayer:

She conveys devout prayer with the postures of her body, now standing upright with her hands joined together and her eyes open and raised to the sky, now inclining herself properly and respectably, moving toward the ground without bending her knees; sometimes even by bending the knees, with the hands always joined together and placed in front of her face and her eyes slightly lifted to the sky. In all such postures that she interposes, she stands for intervals (not too long or too short but of a moderate length) as stiff as a statue, and if someone touches the tip of her finger or the end of her elbow or any other part, her whole body moves together, as if her vital spirit were not within her, as I mentioned above.<sup>117</sup>

In these poses Elisabeth displayed the same complete stillness as before, when she lay raptured in her bed. These stillnesses did not last for long periods of time like the previous raptures, however, but instead a “moderate length.” Elisabeth posed in common gestures of prayer that any Christian of the time might have used, clasping her hands, raising her eyes toward heaven, kneeling, and bowing. However, by using so many different prayer postures and by freezing in them, Elisabeth created something beyond ordinary gesture, a movement theme and variations on the subject of prayer.

While in this passage Philip only describes Elisabeth’s poses, not the movements used to transition between the poses, it is obvious that she must have shifted between the poses with

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<sup>117</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 366. “Gestu etiam corporis devotam orationem insinuat, modo stans recta manibus junctis et oculis apertis elevatis ad coelum, modo declinando se modestissimo et honestissimo motu versus terram absque genuum flexione; aliquando etiam flectendo genua, manibus semper junctis et ante faciem constituis et oculis mediocriter erectis ad coelum. In omnibus autem istorum statuum morulis quas non multum diu nec multum breviter sed mediocriter interponit, stat sicut statua, sicut rigens; et quotiens tangitur vel summitas digitorum seu extremitas cubiti vel quaecumque pars ejus, tota simul movetur, ac si non esset in ea vitalis spiritus, ut supra memini me scripsisse.”

some sort of movement. Dancers understand the importance of transition—between sections of a dance, between movements, or between poses—and know that sometimes the best transitions are subtle ones. Since Philip does not describe dramatic movement between Elisabeth's prayer poses (while in other sections he describes her dramatic movements in detail) it seems reasonable to guess that her transitions between poses were not elaborate.

In this section of her performance, Elisabeth used both stillness and the motion that made the transitions between moments of stillness to convey the concept of prayer. In dance, purposeful stillness is a choice rather than a mere lack of motion, and a dancer standing still on stage has not necessarily stopped performing. In most dances, motion and stillness go hand in hand. Elisabeth seemed to understand this. Not content merely to be enraptured in stillness, she moved as well, returning eventually to a quiet resting point. Given the medieval Christian ideas of stillness as divine and motion as human, Elisabeth's dances with their violent and dramatic motions beginning, ending, and moving through stillness could be read in the following way: divine stillness cannot fully exist in a material world of bodies and motion, but even though bodies are corrupt and changeable, they are the tools that humans have been given and they can be used in holy ways. Philip never explicitly interprets Elisabeth's dances in this way, but his lengthy descriptions of the movements she performed imply that he believed both her stillness and her motion to be holy and to convey spiritual ideas. It is important and telling that he does not place stillness above motion but instead acknowledges that everything Elisabeth did with her human body glorified God. If one thirteenth-century abbot saw the sacredness of a young woman's moving, human body, there were probably others as well who accepted physical performance as a genuine expression of the sacred.

*Kneeling, Bowing and Falling*

Kneeling, bowing, and falling prostrate to the ground are all movements that imply humility, contrition, or submission to a higher power. In biblical accounts, prophets who heard the voice of God or saw his glory often fell on their faces in fear and awe.<sup>118</sup> In Catholic services today, the congregation kneels and rises several times and the priest bows deeply to the eucharist. Such physical signs of devotion were equally important, if not more so, in medieval Christianity. Medieval Christians knelt in prayer, during mass, and in the presence of the eucharist; they genuflected in various forms of deep bows before bishops and before the image of the cross; and they sometimes even prostrated themselves on their faces before the altar.<sup>119</sup> Because medieval people often bowed and knelt as expressions of submission to or reverence toward authority, not just to God but also to secular rulers, these actions were more common and less startling than they may seem to us today, but certainly still full of meaning.<sup>120</sup>

Kneeling or bowing to pray was hardly noteworthy among medieval Christians, and all four beguines undoubtedly did so. Agnes went beyond simple kneeling, however, in her prayers during the season of Lent: “This virgin used to say five thousand Our Fathers and as many Hail Marys with as many genuflections, falling down on her face, so that she completed the number

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<sup>118</sup> For example, Moses in Exodus 34:8 and Ezekiel in Ezekiel 1:28.

<sup>119</sup> Gerhard Podhradsky, *New Dictionary of the Liturgy*, (Staten Island, New York: Alba House, 1966), 43, 95, 110.

<sup>120</sup> J. A. Burrow, *Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 11-27.

of those prayers on Easter Day.”<sup>121</sup> Over the weeks of Lent, Agnes repeated her prayers and her prostrations over and over until they numbered five thousand; the genuflections would have accented the spoken prayers, making a full-bodied and dramatic expression of piety. Agnes clearly planned these prostrations in advance and performed them purposefully—her text even describes how a devil came to visit her, trying to keep her from her devotions, but only caused her to redouble her efforts.<sup>122</sup>

Other instances of bowing were not pre-planned, instead serving as a sudden physical reaction to the presence of divinity. Hadewijch, during matins on Pentecost, heard an eagle tell her to make herself ready for union with God: “I fell on my knees and my heart beat fearfully, to worship the Beloved with oneness, according to his true dignity; that indeed was impossible for me.”<sup>123</sup> Such kneeling resembles the prostration of the prophets in the Bible—a sudden falling in fear before God’s greatness. Since Hadewijch describes a visionary experience in which an eagle spoke to her, there might be some question of whether she actually knelt physically or not. However, since she says she felt her heart beating, and since falling to one’s knees in church would have been an appropriate action, it seems reasonable to assume that Hadewijch did kneel physically.

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<sup>121</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 142; *Leben und offenbarungen*, 428. “Consuevit haec virgo per omnem quadragesimam dicere quinque millia pater noster et totidem ave maria cum totidem veniis in faciem procidendo, ita quod in die parasceve complevit numerum illius orationis.”

<sup>122</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 142.

<sup>123</sup> *Hadewijch: the Complete Works*, 281; *Het visioenenboek*, 91, 93, 95, 97. “Ende ic stoent op mijn knien / ende mijn herte gheberde vreseleke dat enechleke te anebedene / na sine werde werdecheit / dat doch mi onghereet ware.”

Agnes' text also reports several forms of sudden, supernaturally prompted bowing. One of these is of particular interest because it was not performed in church, but in the public street:

Another increase in our faith happened, most worthy of every veneration. This devout maidservant of Christ, visiting churches because of a sermon or indulgence or out of devotion, often passed the house of a certain merchant, and whenever she walked by, unconsciously showed reverence to the basement by bowing. This was noticed by devout, attentive persons who accompanied her; in speaking to her about it, they all made jokes about it. She, however, was unable to stop this kind of veneration which she did not engage in of her own will, but because of the instigation by the Holy Spirit, as became clear at the end.

Namely, when she had completed [her veneration] properly, priests from the parish came with devotion, hymns and songs, with banners and a procession of clerics and the people to carry away the Body of the Lord [the host] that a certain witch had hidden in a wine vessel for her own profit [in the aforementioned basement]. Driven by remorse, the woman, a witch, confessed this to a priest, and, to save her person, secretly disappeared. When the persons who previously laughed saw this, they all together praised the Lord in admiration.<sup>124</sup>

The text explains that Agnes' bowing was an involuntary physical movement; she could not stop venerating the basement of the merchant's house even when her friends teased her about it.

While kneeling in church might have been an ordinary act performed by many devout Christians, disruptive acts of veneration in the public street, especially by a woman, were a riskier matter.

Agnes' audience could easily have interpreted her bowing as insane behavior or even possession

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<sup>124</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 40-41; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 132, 134. "Aliud fidei nostrae augmentum omni veneratione dignissimum accidit: quod ista devota ancilla Christi visitando ecclesias praedicationis vel indulgentiae vel devotionis causa frequenter praecederet cujusdam cauponis domum, et quotiescunque transiret, reverentiam faceret cellario nesciens inclinando. Quod devotae personae cum ea comitantes advertentes notaverunt et ei de hoc loquentes in solatio corridebant. Ipsa vero ab hujusmodi adoratione cessare non poterat, quia non hoc sensu proprio, sed instigante spiritu sancto faciebat, quod rei eventus declaravit.

Nam cum hoc bene perfecisset, venerunt sacerdotes de parochia cum vexillis et cum processione cleri et populi, et corpus domini, quod ibi quaedam malefica in vase vini absconderat propter lucrum suum, cum reverentia, hymnis et canticis asportaverunt. Nam illa mulier malefica ducta poenitentia hoc ipsum cuidam sacerdotum retulit et personam suam salvans clam recessit. Quod factum cum vidissent personae, quae prius riserant, admirantes dominum collaudabant."

by an evil spirit. However, the text gives an explanation for Agnes' bowing, an interpretation of the movement that makes it holy. A witch had hidden a eucharistic host inside the basement and Agnes had been showing devotion to the eucharist by bowing in the street. Agnes was vindicated; her public performance was not the action of a crazy woman, but of a holy woman, and it had the effect of increasing the faith of her companions.

This is not the only passage in which Agnes' performance of kneeling or bowing was effective in bringing about change. In one case, Agnes saw what she thought was a consecrated host lying uncovered on the altar. Once consecrated by the priest the host was supposed to be treated with great dignity, so letting it lie uncovered was disrespectful. Agnes became so worried that she went to investigate and fell to her knees before the altar. Upon kneeling, she immediately felt a sense of peace. When she rose, however, she became worried again so she knelt back down and once again felt comforted. This kneeling and rising happened multiple times.<sup>125</sup> As in the incident with the basement, Agnes' veneration is presented by the text as something not entirely voluntary; it was prompted by a divinely induced feeling. Also paralleling the basement scene, in this case Agnes' performance once again proved effective. A priest came over to the altar (probably prompted by her dramatic and repeated kneeling and rising) and took away the host to treat it with reverence.

One Easter when Agnes knelt before the altar she experienced another form of involuntary prostration. She had been praying for a specific group of friends and asked God to give her a sign that he had heard her prayer:

And soon a voice came to her [speaking], "Quickly move behind the altar." Yet when she came behind the altar, she immediately began to feel the most excruciating pain

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<sup>125</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 104.

throughout all of her body in the extremities and the joints of the extremities of her whole flesh, so that she could not hold herself [up] and fell to the earth. And through this she was not less crucified in her heart, but rather the pain and bitterness of the Passion were as great in her flesh as in her heart so that she earnestly believed that she was about to breathe her last breath.<sup>126</sup>

Agnes, obeying the voice she heard, fell to the ground in agony and could not move away from the spot behind the altar. The passage goes on to tell that Agnes wept “devout tears” and even though she was in pain she felt spiritual sweetness. After a while, though, she became concerned that she was lying in such a public place. She prayed that she would be able to get up and perform her usual devotions for the liturgical hours. Once she had prayed, she was miraculously able to rise again, and the pain left her.<sup>127</sup>

Many devout medieval Christians displayed their faith through taking part (either figuratively or more literally) in the sufferings of Christ. Physical and spiritual suffering played a large role in the stories of many medieval saints, both male and female. Such a preoccupation with pain may seem unnatural or destructive to modern readers, but medieval people often found pain productive, bringing about greater good in the world or a closer identification with Christ.<sup>128</sup> Agnes’ pains behind the altar certainly fit this model; along with the pain, she felt sweetness and comfort, and the pain itself was an answer to prayer.

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<sup>126</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 143; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 430, 432. “Moxque facta est vox ad eam: ‘Cito propera post altare.’ Veniens autem retro altare statim coepit sentire dolorem vehementissimum per totum corpus suum in membris et in juncturis membrorum per omnem carnem suam, ita ut non valens se sustentare procideret in terram. Nec eo minus in corde cruciabatur, immo tantus fuit dolor et acerbitas passionis tam in carne quam in corde, ut ferventer crederet, quod deberet spiritum exhalare.”

<sup>127</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 143.

<sup>128</sup> Miles, 191-92; Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 245-59.

In all three of these passages from Agnes' text—bowing to the basement, protecting the uncovered host, and falling behind the altar—Agnes made dramatic movements that the text portrays as involuntary. Such involuntary, sudden outbursts of performance fit well into the medieval concept of sudden, holy outbursts of revelation or prophecy, and it is likely that the text stresses the unplanned nature of Agnes' performances in order to highlight their miraculous nature. Agnes' three performances all took place in a public venue, either at church or in the street, and they all drew some form of audience attention: the companions who laughed at her, the priest who came over to investigate, or the fellow churchgoers in front of whom Agnes did not want to make a scene. Whether or not the idea of people noticing her pains behind the altar truly disturbed Agnes (other portions of the text present her as anything but shy and retiring) she was, whether she wished it or not, creating a public performance.<sup>129</sup> Additionally, in all three passages Agnes' actions brought about real change, whether that be an increase in faith for her friends, due reverence being given to the host, or a clear answer to Agnes' prayer. Through sudden, miraculous, public performances of kneeling, bowing, or falling, Agnes used her body to display her faith and to effect change in those around her.

Elisabeth, like Agnes, fell to the ground and could not rise during a portion of her portrayal of Christ's Passion. While in Agnes' case her scribe does not describe what

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<sup>129</sup> Agnes' concerns about lying in a public area and her desire to be at home in a place more "appropriate" for a woman seem at odds with her outgoing, convention-defying nature as expressed in the rest of the text, in which she kisses altars, criticizes priests, and runs around town visiting different churches. It is possible that Agnes' scribe accentuated this expression of modesty in order to fit Agnes' life and actions more readily into the parameters people of his time expected for holy women. Ulrike Wiethaus, in the introduction to her translation of Agnes' *Life and Revelations*, says that the scribe's "image of an ever-reluctant Agnes reproduces the humility formula required of female visionaries and should not necessarily be taken at face value" (9-10).

movements, if any, she performed while lying behind the altar, Philip describes the details of Elisabeth's violent motion:

Then she is not able to proceed, because she cannot rise to her feet, but rolls and revolves upon the ground. Also, she often strikes her head on the ground with hard strokes, as if her head, hands and arms in succession and also her whole body would truly tell that which is prophetically written of the Lord's sufferings: *The sorrows of death surrounded me*, etc.<sup>130</sup>

Elisabeth certainly did not lie still in her depiction of Christ's agony—she rolled and struck various body parts on the ground. This performance is especially intriguing when set alongside the description of Agnes' experience of the Passion. Agnes' scribe tells what Agnes felt inwardly, the pain and sweetness she experienced, while Philip chooses to describe Elisabeth's outward appearance and the movements she performed. Philip says that Elisabeth experienced great pain as she rolled on the floor, ("she is afflicted with incomparable anguish and tortures, beyond what I have been able to express or describe"),<sup>131</sup> but it is the movements that expressed her sufferings, rather than her inward experience of pain or sweetness, that he describes. Nonetheless, even though Agnes and Elisabeth were two separate women in different situations with different performance styles, they both performed the Passion through falling to the ground in an expression of Christ's suffering. The two descriptions are thematically similar and seem to be recounting, in different ways, performances that had similar meanings to the performers and to the audience. Might Elisabeth have felt severe pain, like Agnes', in her flesh and her heart as

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<sup>130</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 366. "Tunc non potest procedere, quin immo nec surgere super pedes; sed super terram volvitur et rotatur. Frequenter etiam duris percussionibus caput collidit ad terram, et quasi continue caput, manus et brachia, etiam totum corpus vere diceret illud propheticum quod Domino patienti adscribitur: *Circumdederunt me dolores mortis*, etc."

<sup>131</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 366. ". . . ultra quam exprimi valeat aut describi incomparabilibus angustiis affligitur et torturis."

she danced on the floor? Philip's description certainly leaves plenty of room for such an assumption. Might Agnes have rolled and struck her head on the ground as she lay in agony behind the altar? There is no indication of such movements in the text, but since Agnes had already performed a sequence of movements as she knelt before an altar, rose to run quickly behind it, fell to the ground in a paroxysm of pain, and then wept an "exceedingly abundant stream" of tears, it seems likely enough that she continued to express her pain through movement rather than through stillness. But whether in movement or stillness, Agnes, like Elisabeth, was creating a sacred performance, a visible reminder of Christ's Passion.

### *Weeping and Sighing*

Weeping, as found in the beguine texts, was not just flowing tears or the sound of sobbing, but rather it was a physical action often accompanied by prostration. Weeping could indicate misery, pain, or a sense of unworthiness to approach God. Mechthild describes how she often wept before she received the eucharist:

Whenever I, in my unworthiness, am about to go up and receive the body of our Lord, I examine the countenance of my soul in the mirror of my sins. There I see myself as I lived, as I am now living, and as I shall live in the future. In this mirror of my sins I see nothing but alas and woe. Then I cast my face to the ground and weep plaintively, if I can, because eternal incomprehensible God is so kind that he wants to bow down to the filthy puddle of my heart.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 292; *Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, 273.  
 "Wenne ich arme dar zuo gan und muos enpfahen den lichamen únsers herren, so besihe ich das antlitze miner sele in dem spiegel miner súnnden. Da sihe ich mich inne wie ich gelebet habe, wie ich nu lebe und wie ich noch leben wil. In disem spiegel miner súnnden da sihe ich niht inne denne owe und owe. So wirf ich min antliz zuo der erden und klage und weine, eb ich mag, das der ewig unbegriffelicher got also guot ist, das er sich wil neigen in den unvletigen pful mines herzen."

Mechthild did not merely shed a few tears; she cried plaintively with her face to the ground, a clear physical declaration of her misery at her own sins and her gratefulness for the kindness of God.

Agnes, too, wept. She prayed that she would be given the “grace of tears” at each of the seven hours of the day, and when this happened as she asked, she was barely able to complete her usual devotions for the hours because of the violence of her weeping. The tears had a positive spiritual effect, giving Agnes confidence to ask for greater things when she prayed.<sup>133</sup> In this case Agnes was not weeping because of her own deficiencies or misery, but instead she offered her weeping as a sacrifice to God in much the same way as she offered her five thousand genuflections. Weeping became an effective tool to increase the power of Agnes’ prayers.

Elisabeth wept and groaned as she portrayed Christ’s sufferings. Philip tells that “frequently she gives out, between her punishments, groans and sobbing as if she were dying.”<sup>134</sup> These groans seem to have been an integral part of her physical performance, interspersed with rolling and striking various parts of her body against the ground. Elisabeth’s groans did not always indicate suffering, however. As Elisabeth performed with a prop, a tablet bearing an image of Jesus, she kissed the image and sighed. Philip describes her sighs in some detail: “During this, she lets out generous, deep, delighted, and loving sighs with a serene motion of her

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<sup>133</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 55.

<sup>134</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 366. “Frequenter etiam inter poenas gemitus et singultus quasi mortales emittit . . .”

breast and throat and with sweet sounding whispers of her lips that come from the inmost secrets of her heart.”<sup>135</sup> These sighs had nothing to do with suffering, but instead with love and delight.

Philip points out the motion of the breast that produced Elisabeth’s sighs. She was breathing deeply, a common relaxation strategy and one used by today’s dancers in many exercises. Given Elisabeth’s demanding performance schedule, it would make sense for her to have had excellent breath control and to have made use of the quiet times during her performances (as Philip describes them, her ecstasies or the moments between her punishments) for breath and recovery.

Weeping, groaning, or sighing seemed to accompany certain beguine performances in much the same way that joyful singing often accompanied medieval secular dances. Vocalizations went along with the movements, accented the movements, and sometimes, like Elisabeth’s sighs, were created by the movements. Such vocalization is far from the medieval stereotype of the silent, suffering woman and suggests a full-bodied engagement by these women in their performances.

### *Shaking and Trembling*

The motions of shaking or trembling can imply fear, although in the beguine texts this was a sacred fear in anticipation of God’s presence. Throughout most of her life, Agnes’ scribe reports, “a certain fear had always invaded her so that her very limbs shook and her teeth

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<sup>135</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 367. “Inter haec larga, profunda, jocunda et amorosa suspiria cum aliqua serena commotione pectoris et gutturis necnon et labiorum susurrio dulcisono ex intimo cordis arcano producit.”

clattered until she had received communion.”<sup>136</sup> After a pivotal revelatory experience, this trembling left her. Hadewijch, too, trembled before her well-known eucharistic vision:

On a certain Pentecost Sunday I had a vision at dawn. Matins were being sung in the church, and I was present. My heart and my veins and all my limbs trembled and quivered with eager desire and, as often occurred with me, such madness and fear beset my mind that it seemed to me I did not content my Beloved, and that my Beloved did not fulfill my desire, so that dying I must go mad, and going mad I must die. On that day my mind was beset so fearfully and so painfully by desirous love that all my separate limbs threatened to break, and all my separate veins were in travail.<sup>137</sup>

Hadewijch associates her trembling with a peculiar mix of love, fear, and madness. Her desire was so great that she could not contain herself. The language here is rich and full, giving a sense of both the violence of Hadewijch’s love and of the movements through which she expressed her love and fear.

It is notable that both Agnes’ and Hadewijch’s instances of trembling occurred before receiving the eucharist. Pious medieval Christians took the biblical injunction (in 1 Cor. 11: 27-32) to prepare themselves before receiving Christ’s body and blood very seriously. In the thirteenth century, most Christian laypeople took communion only once a year, at Easter, after having gone through confession with their local priest.<sup>138</sup> There seems to have been a

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<sup>136</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 27; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 94. “. . . invasit eam quidam tremor, ut etiam quaterentur membra ejus et dentes ad invicem, quousque ipsa communicasset.”

<sup>137</sup> *Hadewijch: the Complete Works*, 280; *Het visioenenboek*, 91. “Te enen cinxen daghe wart mi vertoent inde dagheraet / ende ic was dear / ende mijn herte / ende mijn aderen / ende alle mine lede scudden / ende beueden van begherten / ende mi was alst dicke heeft gheweest / Soe verwoeddeleke / ende soe vreesleke te moede / dat mi dochte / ic en ware minen lieue ghenoech / ende mijn lief en uerwilde minen nyet dat ic steruen soude / ende al uerwoedende steruen / Doe was mi van begherliker minnen / soe vreesleke te moede / ende soe wee / dat mi alle die lede die ic hadde sonderlinghe waenden breken ende alle mine aderen waren sonderlinghen in arbeiden”

<sup>138</sup> Hamilton, 92-93; Miles, 282-83.

widespread sense of fear and awe about the eucharist. Even for those who took communion very often, like Agnes and Hadewijch, it was a deeply moving experience and often the occasion for revelations and performances. It is also important to remember, as noted in “Performing Revelation” above, that such performances of shaking and trembling before communion occurred during mass, in a public church, in front of many eyes.

### *Kissing Holy Objects*

Another movement Agnes repeatedly performed was kissing the cloth that lay upon the altar where mass was celebrated. While it was common enough for laypeople to kneel before altars to pray, actually approaching the sacred space of the altar near enough to touch it was reserved for male clergy, as Ulrike Wiethaus points out.<sup>139</sup> In particular, kissing the altar as a sign of reverence for Christ was an action reserved for the priest who, according to the liturgy, kissed the altar several times while he celebrated mass.<sup>140</sup> Agnes, however, regularly approached the altar after mass was finished:

During these days, it happened that she kissed the cloth of the altar on which Mass had been celebrated that day. Out of devotion, she was actually used to doing this every day. In this kiss, the Lord gave her devotion the consolation that always, when she kissed the altar when on that particular day Mass was read, she felt a miraculous sweet scent similar to a warm [freshly baked] roll. Yet that sweetness surpassed without comparison the smell of a roll. The reason was that because of the scent of this sweetness, she felt the most luscious transformation in her spirit.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Wiethaus, “Interpretive Essay,” 163.

<sup>140</sup> Podhradsky, 110.

<sup>141</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 117; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 364. “His diebus accidit, ut oscularetur super pallam altaris, in quo illa die missa fuerat celebrata – hoc enim prae devotione solita erat facere omni die – in quo osculo dominus ejus devotioni reddidit hanc consolationem, ut semper, quando altare oscularetur, in quo illa die missa fuisset dicta, ipsa sentiret miram

This kissing of the altar after mass was a performance that Agnes repeated daily, sometimes multiple times each day as she traveled around Vienna to different churches, hoping to attend as many masses as possible.<sup>142</sup> At least once she returned in the evening, long after mass was finished, to kiss the altar again.<sup>143</sup> In this way Agnes' performances, like Elisabeth's, became a repeating pattern that moved through time, marking certain intervals for the performance of the sacred.

Agnes' altar-kissing went beyond the bounds of ordinary piety for laywomen. She did not content herself with a single kiss; instead, her kisses "covered the altar" and she "kissed it everywhere."<sup>144</sup> This was an extravagant and dramatic display that undoubtedly drew attention. Agnes' scribe must have been aware that other clergy could have viewed Agnes' unusual performance with suspicion, and he repeatedly assured his readers that she performed these kisses out of devotion. The miraculous aroma that Agnes received when she kissed the altar was another assurance of holiness. God himself had authorized Agnes to kiss the altar, the scribe seems to be saying, by giving her a sweet aroma and a sweetness that she could feel in her spirit.

Elisabeth, too, kissed a representation of Christ, but the object of her devotions was not an altar but a painted image that she used as a prop in her performances:

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odoris suavitatem ad modum similiae calidae. Tamen suavitas istius incomparabiliter odorem vincebat similiae. Nam ex hujus odoris suavitate in spiritu sensit immutationem suavissimam."

<sup>142</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 106.

<sup>143</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 39.

<sup>144</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 117; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 364. "discooperiens altare" and "illud deosculans."

Immediately after, a tablet having a very well painted image of the crucified Lord is offered to her; holding it with both her hands, open and uncovered, she gazes with great devotion at our most sweet Lord. And she often repeats these words, again and again, increasing in intensity: *Here, soete Here*, that is, *Lord, sweet Lord*. Her most pure lips, from which extensive grace clearly shines out, often give sweet kisses to the feet of the image of the Lord.<sup>145</sup>

Elisabeth struck poses in various positions while embracing and kissing the tablet. Philip does not tell of any sweetness of taste or scent that Elisabeth experienced while kissing the image of Christ, but that is not surprising because never in his account does he focus on Elisabeth's experience. However, he does say that joy could be seen in Elisabeth's face, and because of her expression and her words he believed she was experiencing sweetness. Like Agnes' scribe, Philip reads Elisabeth's extravagant kisses as a sign of devotion to God. While Elisabeth's kisses were less transgressive than Agnes'—she did not take the role of a male priest in approaching the altar—there was a certain sensuality inherent in a young woman kissing and dancing with a picture of a young man. Philip, however, does not seem troubled by such implications; he presents Elisabeth's kisses not as sexual in nature but instead as “pure.”

For a pious medieval Christian, whether male or female, a certain sensuality toward God seems to have been acceptable. The biblical book Song of Songs, written in the form of a wedding song between two lovers, begins, “Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth / for your breasts are better than wine,” and while medieval biblical commentators did not take the overt sexuality of the book at face value, they did interpret it, beginning in the twelfth century, as an

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<sup>145</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 367. “Statim offertur ei tabula quaedam optime depictam habens imaginem Domini crucifixi; quam apertam et discoopertam ambabus tenens manibus, devotissime contemplatur dulcissimum Dominum. Et crebro commemorat haec verba, frequenter ingeminans: *Here, soete Here*, id est *Domine, dulcis Domine*. Purissimis labiis, in quibus diffusa gratia manifeste relucet, saepe Dominicae pedes imaginis dulciter osculatur.”

allegory for the love between God and the soul.<sup>146</sup> Members of religious orders, both male and female, were encouraged to envision Christ as their bridegroom—in a spiritual way.<sup>147</sup> The twelfth century abbot Bernard of Clairvaux, in his sermons about the Song of Songs, used sensual language about God’s relationship with the soul, but qualified his statements by warning that this image of love was not to be understood physically, but instead spiritually.<sup>148</sup> Some Christians, however, did not issue such qualifiers; Grace Jantzen points out that female mystics used erotic language in a way that seems both physical and spiritual at once.<sup>149</sup> This is certainly evident in Hadewijch’s and Mechthild’s descriptions of union with God, quoted in “Performing Revelation” above, in which sensual and even erotic touch figures highly. Elisabeth’s kissing and crooning over the painted image of Christ fits well into this strand of sensual spirituality. Her actions could easily be seen as an outward mirror of what Mechthild and Hadewijch describe so vividly as inner experience.

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<sup>146</sup> E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of my Beloved: the Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1990), xvii, 3-16.

<sup>147</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, a twelfth-century abbot of the Cistercian order, is credited with the formation of “bridal mysticism” in which the soul (envisioned as female) comes to her lover Christ (envisioned as male) in visions, ecstasy, and union. When performed by male monks, this bridal mysticism involved a certain amount of gender transgression. See Ulrike Wiethaus, “Christian Piety and the Legacy of the Medieval Masculine,” in *Redeeming Men: Religion and Masculinities*, eds. Stephen B. Boyd, W. Merle Longwood, and Mark W. Muesse (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 48-61. For female beguines, of course, the soul’s union with Christ could be a traditional heterosexual pairing.

<sup>148</sup> Matter, 121-33.

<sup>149</sup> Jantzen, 139. Jantzen’s section entitled “The erotic other” is about Hadewijch’s use of sensual language and how it compares to male mystics’ writings (133-146).

*Striking One's Body*

Images of flagellants beating themselves with whips come easily to mind when envisioning medieval Christian religious practices. While such practices were not extremely widespread, certain pious Christians did engage in flagellation, self-mutilation, and other forms of physical asceticism.<sup>150</sup> These practices had a number of purposes. Penitential actions could be used to publicly display remorse for sins, to combat or atone for lust, or to imitate Christ and partake in his suffering.<sup>151</sup> Bynum argues that this last reason, the imitation of Christ, was a particularly powerful motivation for many medieval Christian women who believed that sharing in Christ's sufferings was not only holy, but also that through suffering they could save sinners, free souls from purgatory, and bring about greater good in the world.<sup>152</sup>

Despite this seeming valorization of self-inflicted suffering, church authorities in the twelfth through fourteenth centuries often urged pious Christian women to be moderate in their penitential practices.<sup>153</sup> Amy Hollywood has questioned to what extent women really identified with suffering, and to what extent women's suffering was extolled by male authors in their accounts of women's lives.<sup>154</sup> While suffering does appear as a theme in the four core beguine

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<sup>150</sup> Bynum examines women's ascetic and penitential physical practices, particularly as relates to food, in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, esp. 208-211.

<sup>151</sup> Lynch gives an example of a woman who was to be publicly beaten as penance for adultery (287). Bynum discusses penitential actions warding off lust (*Holy Feast*, 215). Women's imitation of Christ is one of Bynum's major themes and is found throughout *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*.

<sup>152</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 246-51.

<sup>153</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 239-43; Wogan-Brown, 33.

<sup>154</sup> Hollywood, *Soul as Virgin Wife*, 24-25.

texts, it is not the central theme nor does it outweigh other concerns. In their research on Elisabeth of Spalbeek, Susan Rodgers and Joanna Ziegler point out that while Elisabeth's dances are dramatic and fully embodied, she does not perform any of the more "bizarre and incredible" physical actions that are attributed to certain medieval women.<sup>155</sup> Neither do Mechthild, Hadewijch, or Agnes.

Agnes' text describes one instance when she beat herself, on a Good Friday. The occasion for her self-flagellation was this: doubting whether God would hear her prayers when she interceded on behalf of others, Agnes asked for three signs. After the first two signs occurred (rain caused dust to settle during the Holy Week services, and Agnes was saved from a great crush of people) Agnes asked for the last sign, that she be given the miraculous ability to endure suffering:

And on the day of the Lord's Passion, she received a thousand blows by flagellating herself with a juniper branch. She covered herself thoroughly in blood, because that branch was so rough, and she did not beat herself lightly. She also said that she endured sweetly [i.e. in good spirits].<sup>156</sup>

Beating herself and being able to endure it brought Agnes to a state in which she had confidence to address God. She then prayed for six specific people and knew that her prayers would be answered.

Agnes' flagellation had nothing to do with penance for her sins or with combating lust. However, it could certainly be seen as an imitation of Christ. On the anniversary of the day

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<sup>155</sup> Rodgers and Ziegler, 307.

<sup>156</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 55; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 184. "Et in die passionis domini cum quodam ramo juniperi se flagellans mille plagas accepti, cum virga illa foret tam aspera, et ipsa non leniter percuiens, sed ad sanguinis effusionem se cruentens. Dixit etiam quod suaviter sustineret."

when Christ was beaten and crucified, Agnes beat herself. As Christ's suffering brought about a larger good (the salvation of the world) so too did Agnes' suffering (her prayers for others being heard and answered).

There may be other meanings one could ascribe to Agnes' flagellation, as well, which can be elucidated through looking at Elisabeth's text. Elisabeth often struck herself with her hands during her performances. Philip writes that after Elisabeth rose from her period of stillness in her bed she began to celebrate matins, the first hour of the divine office:

She walks most respectably through her chamber without interruption, and as she comes and goes she strikes herself repeatedly in the jaw with both palms in turn, resonant harmony resounding from there in a clear and concordant manner: in this way she celebrates the first vigil of the night instead of with psalmody as if on beautifully sounding drums and cymbals.<sup>157</sup>

During the part of matins when the choir of monks or nuns would normally chant a psalm Elisabeth instead paced up and down, striking the sides of her face. Philip indicates the rhythmic nature of her palm-striking by comparing it to drums or cymbals. What was the purpose of Elisabeth's performance of striking herself? Philip interprets these beatings, and Elisabeth's subsequent movements of seizing herself by the clothes and hair, dragging herself along, clenching her fists, and rolling her eyes to be a physical performance of Christ's suffering, both from the perspective of Christ (who was seized and beaten) and of Christ's persecutors (who did the seizing, dragging, and beating.) Through all these movements, Philip says, "she weaves in

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<sup>157</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 364. ". . . incedit honestissime per cameram suam et sine intermissione eundo et redeundo utraque palma crebro ordine se percutit in maxillis, clara exinde et concordi sonorum constantia resultante: et sic diu loco psalmodiae quasi in tympanis et cymbalis benesonantibus primi nocturni vigiliis solemnizat."

her deeds the beginning of the Lord's Passion."<sup>158</sup> Philip goes on to describe how Elisabeth moved from striking her face to beating various parts of her body:

After this she immediately strikes herself in such a strong way that other parts of her whole small body bend toward the ground from the weight of the beatings, now on the jaw, now on the back of the head, now between the shoulder blades, now on the neck. And then she strikes herself precipitously upon the previous parts, or with a marvelously curved body dashes her head toward the ground. Sometimes even violently seizing the front part of her recently shorn head of hair, with unmoved feet she brings her dragging head miraculously to the ground.<sup>159</sup>

Elisabeth's beatings escalated from rhythmic cheek-slapping to striking her entire body to acrobatic feats in which she struck her head against the ground. The increasing drama of this performance is evident in Philip's words. Her body was "marvelously curved" and the way she struck her head on the earth without moving her feet was "miraculous." As I imagine these violent movements, I too find them amazing, if not precisely miraculous; such motions would certainly require strength, risk-taking, agility, and a keen sense of timing.

Rodgers and Ziegler suggest that Elisabeth's self-beating had a purpose beyond imitating Christ's beating. In dance cultures that make use of spirit possession and shamanism, they point out, striking oneself rhythmically can be a way to induce trance.<sup>160</sup> In their article they cast Elisabeth as a sacred trance dancer, entering a liminal state in order not just to represent Christ, but actually to *become* Christ inasmuch as a young woman could do so in a male-dominated

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<sup>158</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 364. ". . . in suis gestis textit exordium Dominicae passionis."

<sup>159</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 364-65. "Post quae statim seipsam percutit, nunc ita fortiter in maxillam quod ad aliam partem totum corpusculum suum versus terram ex pondere percussione inclinatur, nunc in occipite, nunc inter scapulas, nunc in collo. Et tunc in anteriorem partem seipsam praecipitanter impellit, vel mirabiliter curvato corpore caput allidit ad terram. Nonnunquam etiam capillos nuper attonso capite satis breves, a parte frontis violenter arripiens, immotis pedibus tractu mirabili capite terram ferit."

<sup>160</sup> Rodgers and Ziegler, 311-12.

religion. Rodgers and Ziegler seem justified in their reading of Elisabeth as a trancer; their anthropological evidence about the ways trance dancers in various present-day cultures perform meshes well with Philip's own description of Elisabeth performing both stillness and movement in an ecstasy. Rodgers and Ziegler describe the shaman-like purpose of Elisabeth's trance dance: "She joined worlds—human and divine—together for the short time her trance progressed. . . . She also seemed to have worked for the benefit of her community, possibly to bring her audience into greater closeness with Christ."<sup>161</sup> In this light, Agnes' physical prayer of a thousand blows could also be read as a trance-inducing mechanism. Through altering her physical self by flagellation, Agnes altered her mental and spiritual self as well in order to reach a heightened state in which she could confidently pray for others in her community. Both Elisabeth and Agnes used a well-regulated degree of physical pain, along with rhythmic movement, to achieve specific physical and spiritual results—in Agnes' case, entering a state in which she was able to stand between worlds and intercede for others, and in Elisabeth's case, focusing herself in such a way that she could perform extraordinary physical movements that made Christ manifest.

One final comparison seems relevant here. Elisabeth striking herself rhythmically as she paced up and down seems to mirror, to a certain extent, the preparations many dancers of today perform before going onstage. Such preparations can be quite ritualistic—although I have never seen anyone slap their cheeks, dancers in the wings often perform repetitive warm-ups or stretches, deep breathing exercises and sometimes, in the case of religious dancers, prayer. Elisabeth's pacing and rhythmic striking, in that context, almost seems to have been a physical and spiritual warm-up for her subsequent dramatic movements.

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<sup>161</sup> Rodgers and Ziegler, 314.

*Making the Sign of the Cross*

Making the sign of the cross, like kneeling, is another physical expression of faith that has been used throughout the history of Christianity and is still performed today by Roman Catholics. To make the sign of the cross, a person typically uses one hand to draw a vertical stroke and then a horizontal one in front of the body. The sign can also involve touching one's own body at each of the four points of the cross—forehead, chest, left shoulder, and right shoulder. The sign of the cross appeared very early in the history of the Christian liturgy; in the second century it was being used in baptism and confirmation, and by the medieval period it had become a common gesture of blessing.<sup>162</sup>

Medieval Europeans saw crosses often, both above the altars in churches and carried in processions through the streets. The cross was the preeminent symbol of Christianity; when medieval Christians looked at crosses they were reminded of Christ's suffering and the salvation of humanity, and when they marked themselves with the sign of the cross they affirmed their place in the Christian church and their acceptance of Christian beliefs. To the beguine mystics, making the sign of the cross was not just a rote gesture, but an action that could express devotion and even ward off evil:

Whenever a person thinks well of himself, vain honor immediately leaps forth out of a corner of the human heart along with sinful desire and tries to sprawl out into the five senses. Then one should take oneself in hand and instantly beat one's breast in humble fear and bless oneself with the sign of the holy cross. Then it will immediately disappear, as if it had never existed. I in my wretchedness have often had this experience.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Podhradsky, 185.

<sup>163</sup> *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 285; *Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, 266.  
 “Swenne der mensche iht guotes gedenket von ime selben, so kumt zehant die ital ere gesprungen us dem winkel des menschlichen herzen mit einer súntlichen wollust und wil sich

In this passage, Mechthild gives advice to others who want to live a holy life. She explains that to defeat sinful desires that might spring up in the senses (the physical part of a human), physical actions are most effective. The actions she suggests are beating the breast (perhaps similar to Elisabeth's striking herself, discussed above) and making the sign of the cross. Upon blessing oneself in such a way, Mechthild says, the temptation will instantly vanish. What precisely this breast-beating and crossing oneself looked like in performance remains unclear from this passage, but the effects of the performance were obvious. Mechthild had often used her performance of the cross to eradicate "vain honor" and "sinful desire" and she suggests this method to other Christians.

Elisabeth's performance of the cross was more dramatic than Mechthild's. Philip gives a lengthy description of how she represented the sign of cross during her performance of the second nocturn. Elisabeth did not use only her hands to mark the cross, but instead created full-body images, images in motion:

With marvelous devotion of prayer, beyond what can be written or described, her face, signs and bodily gestures bear witness to that mark: with her face she shows devotion and attention beyond the capacity of human ability. She presses herself into the sign of the cross in various and proprietous ways, with the signs of her face and her breast and the whole front part of her body. First she rotates herself from her head to her breast in a straight line, tracing her fingers across herself from ear to ear, and extending the lines straight along the surface of her face. Then she traces her hand from the upper part of her forehead towards her navel, straight along the middle of her breast. She also stretches out her hand from her head as far down toward her feet as she is able, with her body standing upright and the lines corresponding across, and represents most correctly the form of the cross.<sup>164</sup>

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breiten in die fünf sinne. So sol der mensche sin gemuete zuo twingen und sol sich zehant vúr sin herze mit diemuetiger vorhte slahen und segen sich mit dem segne des heligen crúzes, so wirt si zehant ze nihte als eb sú nie wurde. Das han ich arme dike bevunden."

<sup>164</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 365-66. "Mirabilis et ultra quam scribi aut narrari posset devotae orationis, vultu, signis et gestu corporis insignia protestantur: vultu, quem ultra capacitatem

“That mark” refers, of course, to the sign of the cross. The movement description here is not easy to follow, and it is difficult to visualize precisely where Elisabeth put her hands or how her torso moved, but it is obvious that she created lines and shapes with her body that indicated the lines of the cross, and that she moved between these shapes in various ways. She rotated, extended, and stretched—and in all this, she represented the cross.

Philip goes on to describe another way in which Elisabeth performed the cross at the hours of sext, none, and vespers. He had already mentioned that Elisabeth displayed the stigmata, physical manifestations of the wounds of Christ in her hands, feet and side:

So in each of the three hours, immediately after the rapture which according to her custom always precedes the hour, she quickly gets out of bed and places one foot above the other and one wound above the other, standing upright, with her hands and arms stretched out in the form of the cross; in this way she remains immovable for some time, with her eyes open but seeing and sensing nothing.<sup>165</sup>

Elisabeth put her feet and arms into the shape of Christ on the cross, just as she probably saw it displayed in crucifixes—one foot above the other so that the nail would be driven through both. She held this posture in what appeared to be a trance state for some time. Philip then describes how she lowered herself backward without the aid of her hands in what sounds like a backbend,

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humani ingenii devotum exhibet et attentum; signis, quia vultui suo nec non et pectori et toti anteriori parti corporis variis et decentissimis modis imprimit signa crucis. Primo avertit se a vertice usque ad pectus in directum et transversaliter ab aure usque ad aurem, ducendo digitos et rectissimas protrahendo lineas per superficiem faciei. Deinde a superiori parte frontis usque versus umbelicum, recte et per medium pectoris transversaliter ducens manum. Item a capite quantum potest manum subtus extendere versus pedes, corpore stante recto, correspondente linea transversali, rectissimas exprimit formas crucis.”

<sup>165</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 369. “In singulis igitur tribus horis, statim post raptum, qui semper horam ex more praecedat, de lecto velociter egrediens, pedem pedi et vulnus vulneri superponit: stans recta, manibus et brachiis in formam crucis extensis, oculis apertis nihil videns nec sentiens, sic aliquamdiu manet immota.”

reminiscent of the acrobatic dancers of the period. She lay on the ground, beat her breast repeatedly, and then began to move along the floor:

With that completed, instead of walking with her feet (because she cannot walk with one foot always set atop the other) she changes position while lying down by rolling herself over her breast and back and sides, in a way that cannot be described. And then she rises quickly and stands upright upon her foot which is the only thing touching the ground, without the support of the other foot or hands. Let the reader note how miraculous this is.<sup>166</sup>

Still in her crucifix shape, Elisabeth moved through her performance space by rolling on the ground and then rose suddenly to stand balanced on one foot. As he so often does in his narrative about Elisabeth's performance, Philip expresses wonder at these movements, attempting to describe them even as he says they cannot be described. For me, reading Philip's description recalls modern concert dances I have seen in which the dancers often perform rolls and turns on the floor. Elisabeth's purpose in dancing, of course, was different from the purposes of modern dancers, but the sorts of rolls she performed may not have been entirely dissimilar, as there are a finite number of methods with which one can locomote while rolling.

Then she stretches herself out again in the form of a cross. And when she is supported on the earth with just the one foot, as I said, she bends her whole body with one side toward the ground, and thus for a long time the girl stands suspended in this way, bending vigorously toward one side, with her hanging body held up by a single wounded foot in a way that is beyond manly strength.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 370. "Quibus finitis, quia non potest incedere, cum pes semper sedeat super pedem, pro incessu pedum jacendo et, modo quem explicare nequeo, volvendo se super pectus et dorsum et latera, locum mutat. Et tunc super pedem qui solus adhaeret terrae, sine alterius pedis aut manus adminiculo surgit alacriter et stat recta. Quod quantum sit mirabile, notet lector."

<sup>167</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 370. "Tunc iterato se in figuram crucis extendit. Et quandoque solo pede, ut dictum est, terrae innitens, a parte unius lateris versus terram totum corpus inclinatur et ita stans diu stat in pendulo sic ad alterum latus fortiter inclinata puella, et ultra vires viriles uno vulnerato pede sustinet pendens corpus."

Philip reiterates the miraculous nature of Elisabeth's performance by reminding his readers that Elisabeth is a sickly young woman performing movements that seem beyond the capacity of even a strong, healthy man. The movements do indeed sound difficult—rising and falling without the aid of hands, holding an off-balance tilted position—but not beyond the capacity of a skilled and well-rehearsed dancer. As discussed above in the section entitled “Stillness,” Elisabeth had ample opportunity to practice and perfect her movements, as she performed these dances multiple times every day. Virtuoso movements performed on stage by dancers of today can elicit a similar sense of awe. Difficult balances on one foot, exciting lifts and aerial maneuvers, multiple turns completed with skill and grace—all these can cause an audience to gasp in wonder or burst into spontaneous applause. Philip's account is written for the purpose of spiritual edification, so he interprets his sense of wonder at Elisabeth's movements as a religious awe of the miraculous, but it is not difficult to read between the lines and imagine Philip's eyes widening or his breath coming more quickly in kinesthetic sympathy as Elisabeth balanced on one foot, fully tilted to the side, or executed a graceful backbend all the way to the floor.

### Conclusion

In the four core beguine texts, examples of sacred performance abound. These examples run the gamut from common physical expressions of faith such as kneeling in prayer or crossing oneself to dramatic and lengthy movement sequences like Elisabeth's portrayals of Christ's Passion. To return to the question I proposed at the beginning of this chapter, the question of “What actually happened?” it seems evident that the beguines did create actual bodily performances. Physicality, motion, and stylized movement played a significant role in their displays of spirituality. What precisely these sacred performances looked like often remains

vague; most descriptions of kneeling, trembling, kissing holy objects, and so on were not written for the purpose of recording movement but instead to convey spiritual ideas and to increase the faith of the readers. Even Philip's extremely detailed descriptions of Elisabeth's dances give only brief images of certain high points in her movement, often leave out transitions entirely, and give no hint at all, as Silen has noted, of matters like musical accompaniment.<sup>168</sup>

Another area that remains vague is precisely where, in the spectrum of sacred performance, ordinary movement leaves off and dance begins. The philosophical question of "What is dance?" goes far beyond the scope of this dissertation, but I believe that most dancers of today, given the chance to view Elisabeth's performances, would label them as dance. On the other end of the spectrum, most would not consider a church congregation kneeling to pray to be dance. However, between these two ends of the spectrum from everyday sacred gesture to extraordinary sacred performance are many mottled shades of color. Was Agnes dancing in her rituals of reverence to the basement? Was Mechthild dancing when she made the sign of the cross and beat her breast to drive away sinful thoughts? These in-between cases, these *quasi-*dances, make up the bulk of the beguine sacred performances discussed in this chapter, and while it would certainly be possible to analyze each one for its dance-like and non-dance-like qualities, I believe such an analysis would be missing the larger point.

These beguine texts portray bodily experience and bodily movement as a primary way of worshipping God, communicating with God, and communicating faith to other believers. Some of these sacred performances were full of difficult, extraordinary movements, while others included more ordinary movements lent sacredness by the place or time or way in which they

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<sup>168</sup> Silen, 218.

were performed. The line between the ordinary and the extraordinary blurred in the sacred performances of the beguines, and this very blurriness suggests an important point. These four beguines and those who wrote about them did not distinguish between sacred performances based on their difficulty or how far they went beyond ordinary movement. Certainly, Philip marveled at Elisabeth's backbends and violent rolling and called these performances miraculous, but he also called her trances in stillness and her simple manner of walking through her bedchamber miraculous. Agnes' self-flagellation was a miracle not because of the complexity of the movements but because she was given endurance and because her movements led her into prayer. Mechthild's crossing herself was a miracle because it drove away evil. These women, and the men who wrote about them, gave the same weight to performances that could be called gesture, *quasi*-dance, and dance. In this way, dance was not divorced from ordinary movement, but instead the two were incorporated equally into sacred performance. It was the holy and miraculous nature of these performances, not the movements being performed, that set them apart from everyday life. The interpretation of the performance, its meaning and purpose (as determined by whoever was doing the recording) is what gave it its value.

This conception of medieval sacred dance and sacred performance is entirely different from most modern ideas of concert dance. Those who observed the beguines do not seem to have asked, "Is this performance dance?" Instead, they were much more concerned with determining, "Is this performance authentically sacred?" Philip's entire narrative was devoted to proving the sacredness of Elisabeth's performances. Many of Agnes' performances also required validation from higher powers, either her scribe or other church authorities, in order to be proved authentically sacred.

It is not necessary to throw aside modern conceptions of dance—indeed, I have used them heavily in this chapter—but one must sometimes temporarily bracket them in order to begin to understand medieval conceptions of sacred dance and sacred performance. In the examples presented in this chapter, certain commonalities appear in the dances and *quasi*-dances that the medieval authors considered to be sacred performances.

Although a few were prepared in advance, many sacred performances were sudden, involuntary, and unplanned (or at least they gave the impression of being unplanned—I am reminded of Isadora Duncan's choreographies that were often mistaken for improvisations). The authors of these texts understood the unplanned nature of a sacred performance to be a sign of its authentic holiness; the performer was not moving her body entirely on her own but instead was led, or at least helped, by God.

Most sacred performance went beyond the bounds of the ordinary in some way; this could be through extraordinary movement (Elisabeth's backbends), through common religious gestures repeated or abstracted (Agnes' thousand blows or Elisabeth's variations on the cross), or through ordinary movement occurring in a time, place, or manner that was somehow out of bounds (Agnes bowing in the street or kissing the altar).

Sacred performance engaged the inner person of the performer as much as the outer person. Hadewijch, Mechthild, and Agnes all reported their inner experiences while performing God's presence, and even Philip speculated on Agnes' inner state as she danced, her feelings of pain or peace. In sacred performance, the inner self affected the outer appearance and the physical was touched by the spiritual. Only if a performer gave indications of being in the correct inner spiritual state would the performance that resulted be considered sacred. For example, Elisabeth's rolling and thrashing on the floor would probably not have been recorded

as a sacred performance if she had not been able to convince Philip that her violent movement was representative of the pain of Christ's Passion.

Most importantly to the medieval authors of these texts, sacred performance encouraged devotion or piety in the performer and in the audience. Using movements such as shaking, bowing, or striking themselves, sacred performers could prepare themselves to enter God's presence through prayer or through ecstasy. When others observed such performances, they were moved to greater faith or to a sense of wonder at the power of God. This spiritual edification of performer, audience, or preferably both was at the heart of medieval sacred Christian performance and dance, and the beguines themselves emphasized what they learned from God during their revelations and performances far more than they emphasized the experience of receiving revelation or the act of performance.

In light of the meanings of sacred performance to medieval Christians it is possible to look back on the visionary descriptions of dances from chapter four with a slightly altered view. If sacred dance was inward as much as outward, and if its purpose was to bring about an increase of faith, it seems fruitless to divorce visionary dance from bodily dance, especially when it is often unclear to the reader whether the vision involved physical movement or not. These beguines expressed their faith through movement and dance, and they used dance in their visions and as a lively metaphor. That visionary dance and bodily dance are found among the same group of women was not coincidence—those who value physical performance and who engage in dance themselves are more likely to use dance as a positive symbol or metaphor than those who do not dance.

I am not suggesting that these texts indicate that all beguines were dancers. Rather, some beguines like Elisabeth were clearly dancers, some like Agnes created sacred performances that

approached dance, and for others like Mechthild and Hadewijch we do not have enough observational evidence to say whether they danced or not, though they clearly valued their physical experiences and used their bodies to approach God. These women lived within the same larger milieu, were influenced by the same forces, and acknowledged themselves as parts of a larger community of holy women. There are many powerful recurring threads running through the beguines' texts including devotion to the eucharist, visions and auditions, physical experiences of the love of God, and concern for the spiritual growth of the community. Sacred performance and dance is another such powerful thread, and one that interweaves with the others in a way that supports the whole. Whether they performed through words, gestures, or dances, performance was an integral part of these beguines' spiritual lives.

## CHAPTER 6

## CONTEXTUALIZING DANCE AND SACRED PERFORMANCE

## Introduction

The analysis in this research has so far been primarily textual, focusing deeply on specific words by specific authors. The four beguine texts, however, did not exist in isolation, nor did the dances and sacred performances described in them. These beguines lived among other medieval Europeans, men and women, clergy and laypeople, many of whom danced or had opinions about dance. The purpose of this chapter is to situate the beguine writings about dance and sacred performance within the larger context of dance and sacred performance in medieval Europe. I return to several themes I have already established in the previous two chapters of textual analysis, some that relate to dance and some that relate to sacred performance. This chapter reaches broad rather than deep, ranging across a multiplicity of sources contemporary to the core beguine texts in order to view sacred performances in the context of their time. The questions I address in this chapter do not seek to define dance and sacred performance but instead to situate such phenomena. Were women like Elisabeth, Agnes, Mechthild and Hadewijch isolated cases, uniquely ahead of their time in their bodily spirituality? Or were they part of a larger movement of sacred dancers and sacred performers?

The contextual sources in this chapter have far greater range and scope than the textual sources in the previous chapters. The four core beguine texts were by or about women who lived in the thirteenth century in Germany or the Low Countries, a fairly narrow slice of medieval Europe. For contextual sources I go farther afield, reaching through different areas of Europe and through times from the twelfth through the fourteenth century. The period sources in this

chapter were written by and about both men and women. Some were laypeople, some were regular clergy such as priests and bishops, and some were members of cloistered religious orders such as monks and nuns. The one thing all the sources have in common in that they speak about dance and, more particularly, that they inform the knowledge I have gained from the core texts. This mosaic of sources is necessarily selective—the medieval sources that mention dance could fill far more than a single chapter. The sources I have selected are all written texts; while images of dance and musical notation are also valuable in the study of dance, I do not analyze such sources myself, instead referring when necessary to scholars in the fields of art history and musicology. For the most part, due to the constraints of time, the sources in this chapter are English translations.<sup>1</sup> I have preferred primary sources to secondary, but when unable to seek out the primary sources myself, I reference the work of other scholars whose findings are important to this research. The fundamental criterion used to select these contextual sources was that of close relationship to the themes already established through textual research.

In the first half of this chapter I contextualize dance in medieval Europe, and in the second half I contextualize sacred performance. The two categories are broad and overlapping and some themes common to one category may very well appear in the other. However, there were certainly dances that were not sacred performances and sacred performances that were not dances. Moreover, the concept of “dance” had certain connotations to many medieval writers, connotations that did not mesh easily with Christian concepts of the sacred. I examine these sticking points and ambiguities further as I come to them. I do not intend the categories of dance

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<sup>1</sup> In the case of the songs of the minnesingers, some of which are only available in Middle High German, I have previously translated many of them in my earlier research and will use those translations here.

and sacred performance to become a duality, however, and I acknowledge that in my analysis, as well as in the sources I present, such categories are fluid and contested. A performance that one writer considered sacred might have been denounced as sinful by another writer. Therefore, I do not necessarily accept the categories into which medieval sources place certain dance or performance events. Instead, I examine them with the eye of a modern scholar, asking what can be known about such performances and how today's scholars can approach such events through the mediation of the scribes and chroniclers who recorded medieval performances, and through the inevitable mediation of distance and time.

### Dance in Medieval Europe

It is clear enough that people in medieval Europe danced. The evidence, while not overwhelming, is substantial and there is no need to give a comprehensive overview here. While no dance author has created a definitive study of medieval European dance, authors in other fields have made many contributions. The evidence for medieval European dance includes the lyrics and musical notation for dancing-songs; dancing figures depicted in illuminated manuscripts, stained glass, frescoes, and sculptures; descriptions of dance in literature; prohibitions against dance; references to dance in chronicles and registers; and not least, the many lively traditions of folk dance in Europe that have continued to this day.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For medieval dancing-songs in general, see John Stevens, *Words and Music in the Middle Ages: Song, Narrative, Dance and Drama, 1050-1350* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 159-98; for German minnesong in particular, see the references to dancing-songs and the dance theme in Olive Sayce, *The Medieval German Lyric 1150-1300* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1982); for a broad range of references to dance in music, literature, and visual art see Susan Watkins Maynard, "Dance in the Arts of the Middle Ages," Ph. D. diss. (Florida State University, 1992); for dancing figures in stained glass and sculpture, particularly images of Salome, see Torsten Hausmann, *Die tanzende Salome in der Kunst von*

In his often-cited book, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine*, E. Louis Backman divided medieval church dances into sacred and popular ones.<sup>3</sup> In Backman's organizational scheme, sacred dances were performed by clergy and popular dances were performed by laypeople, though Backman acknowledged that there were dances in which both laypeople and clergy took part or that were performed by laypeople with the blessing of the clergy and therefore do not fit easily into either category. Subsequent authors have used categories like Backman's not just for medieval church dance but for medieval dance in general, entrenching the concept of a sacred/secular divide in dance literature. Ann Harding, for example, in her examination of medieval German dancing terms, sees no connection between the actual, physical dances that she terms secular and the visionary dances that she terms mystical: "These two concepts of dancing, the secular (which is condemned) and the mystic, have completely separate traditions. [. . .] The mystics completely dissociate the realities of earthly, secular dancing from the dancing imagery they employ."<sup>4</sup> This idea of a strong sacred/secular split, not just in medieval European dancing but in Western dance in general, has found its way from

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*der christlichen Frühzeit bis um 1500* (Zürich: Juris, 1980); for images of dance in illuminated manuscripts see Rudolf Georgi Aachen, *Minnesänger: Vierundzwanzig farbige Wiedergaben aus der Manessischen Liederhandschrift*, 3 vols. (Verlag Woldemar Klein, 1972) and Jeffery F. Hamburger, *The Rothschild Canticles: Art and Mysticism in Flanders and the Rhineland circa 1300*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990); for a general view of dance in visual art see Jonathan J. G. Alexander, "Dancing in the Streets," *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 54 (1996): 147-62; for Christian writings about dance, prohibitions against dance, and European dances that have continued to the present day, see E. Louis Backman, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1952).

<sup>3</sup> Backman, 50.

<sup>4</sup> Ann Harding, *An Investigation into the Use and Meaning of Medieval German Dancing Terms* (Göppingen: Verlag Alfred Kümmerle, 1973), 81-82.

scholarly authors like Backman and Harding into general dance books intended for students or casual readers. The book *Dancing* by Gerald Jonas, which accompanies the public television series of the same name, is a heavily-illustrated book that covers dance around the world and throughout history. I have used this book in introductory university classes for non-dance majors. The brief section on dance in Christianity maintains that “removed from consecrated ground, dance in the West flourished as a secular arena for social interaction and as the basis of a vigorous secular theater,” a split which the author claims “opened the way for secular forms of dance that would not have been allowed in the sacred precincts of the church.”<sup>5</sup>

Insisting on such a clean-cut divide between sacred and secular medieval dance gives sacred dance short shrift. According to Harding’s scheme, sacred dance is removed entirely from the realm of actual practice and into the realm of theory. While a theoretical dance may still be a dance, depending on one’s definitions, it is liable to hold less weight for dance scholars than an actual physical dance that was once performed. Additionally, if European secular dance, as my introductory students read in *Dancing*, led to important new forms of dance such as social court dances and the spectacles that gave rise to ballet, the obvious corollary is that European sacred dance led nowhere, that it in fact died out around the time of the Reformation. This binary of secular/sacred, therefore, almost invites researchers to delve into the former as an ancestor of Western concert dance and to ignore the latter as an anachronism or at best an interesting philosophical idea.

While it may once have been convenient for scholars to divide medieval dance into sacred and secular, such an organizational scheme has now become too simplistic. Over the last

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<sup>5</sup> Gerald Jonas, *Dancing: the Pleasure, Power, and Art of Movement* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992), 37-38, 47.

few decades, research in many fields has highlighted the fluidity of medieval boundaries between secular and sacred and between clergy and laity.<sup>6</sup> The existence of semi-religious groups such as the beguines exemplifies these porous boundaries. A laywoman could join a group of beguines and live a pious lifestyle without taking formal vows, and it would have been equally possible for her to leave the beguines to marry and raise children, to take the vows of a nun and join a convent, or to remain a beguine her entire life. Would such a beguine be considered sacred or secular at the various points of her life? What about the dances she might perform?

The in-between state of the beguine lifestyle is only one example of fluid medieval notions of sacred and secular. Priests who led their congregations in worship interacted constantly with the secular world, trying to find ways to make the ceremonies of faith dramatic enough to capture the interest of their parishioners who might also be attracted by minstrel entertainments, games, songs, and dances.<sup>7</sup> The festivals that marked Christian holidays and saints' days were occasions for sacred celebrations within the boundaries of a church, but these celebrations also spilled over into the churchyards, streets, and fields of the community and might take on more boisterous, less clerical characteristics.<sup>8</sup> Even the clergy of the religious orders, monks and nuns, interacted with the rest of the world more than one might suppose from reading the rules of the orders. In theory, nuns in particular were supposed to be strictly

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<sup>6</sup> For one example of such scholarship, see the anthology edited by Lawrence Besserman, *Sacred and Secular in Medieval and Early Modern Cultures: New Essays* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> For an interesting look at the possible conflict between minstrels and preachers for their audiences, see Maria Dobozy, *Re-Membering the Past: the Medieval German Poet-Minstrel in Cultural Context* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2005), 124-42.

<sup>8</sup> Backman, esp. 50 and 95.

cloistered away from the secular world, but in practice they brought in visitors (including lay relatives), taught children, and traveled beyond their confining walls.<sup>9</sup> The people who entered a religious life were, after all, the sisters, brothers, cousins, and children of those who remained in the secular world. The courtly society of the European nobility, in particular, seems to have spanned both sides of the lay/clergy divide. Clergy were sometimes censured for having hawks, hounds, and fine clothing, just like their non-clergy noble relatives.<sup>10</sup> Themes prevalent in courtly art and literature found their way into religious art and literature as well. Religious mystics echoed the courtly love being sung by troubadours and minnesingers throughout Europe. In her love-poems about God, Hadewijch adopted the persona and language of a questing knight-errant like those in popular courtly literature.<sup>11</sup> Visual artists of the late Middle Ages, both painters and sculptors, portrayed religious subjects such as the Virgin Mary in much the same style they used for Greek goddesses or courtly ladies.<sup>12</sup> The flow of influence did not run only from the secular world to the sacred, either; religious ideas and art forms influenced secular ones as well in an interweaving tapestry of cultural themes and images. Minstrels who sang heroic

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<sup>9</sup> The bishops who visited monasteries and convents recorded such lapses in their registers. One notable register from the thirteenth century is that of Eudes of Rouen, *The Register of Eudes of Rouen*, trans. Sydney M., Brown (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1964), 46, 50, 80, 530-31. Anne Bagnal Yardley has found similar injunctions against nuns having visitors and leaving their nunneries in English bishops' registers in her book *Performing Piety: Musical Culture in Medieval English Nunneries* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 79-80.

<sup>10</sup> Eudes of Rouen.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1995), 137-67.

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Besserman, "Introduction. Sacred and Secular in Medieval and Early Modern Cultures: Issues and Approaches," in *Sacred and Secular in Medieval and Early Modern Cultures: New Essays* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 11-12.

epics about great kings and princes also sang the lives of saints and in fact, when the lives of the troubadours were recorded in written form, the authors of such lives imitated certain aspects of saintly *vitas*.<sup>13</sup> In the fields of medieval musicology and theater history there has been lively debate about whether and to what extent secular songs and plays derived from the songs and liturgical dramas of the church.<sup>14</sup> While a theoretical divide did exist between the lay world and the religious world in medieval Europe, in many practical matters the same ideas colored both, even if there were subtle differences in shading. It seems likely that in dance, as in the other arts and many aspects of life and culture, lay and religious concepts intertwined and sometimes merged. To write off medieval sacred dance as entirely divorced from popular or secular dance is simply not possible for a dance scholar of the twenty-first century.

The concept of a fluid boundary between the secular and the sacred has two important implications for this research. First, it does not make sense in the context of this research to consider “sacred dance” synonymous with “clerics dancing” as Backman did. It seems evident that some clerics who danced might not have had sacred purposes in mind. For example, the

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<sup>13</sup> Stevens, 235-67; Cyril Aslanov, “The Imitation of Hagiographic Formulas in Occitanian *Vidas* (Lives of the Troubadours),” in *Sacred and Secular in Medieval and Early Modern Cultures: New Essays*, ed. Lawrence Besserman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 19-27.

<sup>14</sup> Hans Spanke believes that the thirteenth-century secular *Rondeau* (a musical dance-form) derived from the earlier twelfth-century religious *Rondeau*. Hans Spanke, “Tanzmusik in der Kirche,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 31 (1930), 143-70. However, more recent scholars like Olive Sayce find no convincing evidence that courtly song had its roots in religious music. (21) For the debate in the study of medieval drama, see Glynne Wickham, “Introduction: Trends in International Drama Research,” in *The Theatre of Medieval Europe: New Research in Early Drama*, ed. Simon Eckehard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1-18. Wickham’s review of literature shows that early twentieth-century drama scholars believed that secular forms evolved from sacred forms, while more recent scholars believe that a strong secular tradition existed alongside the sacred dramas even in the earlier medieval era.

thirteenth-century bishop Eudes of Rouen reported an incident where a priest named Walter was charged with a number of indiscretions, among them that “he led the dancing at the marriage of a certain prostitute whose marriage he had himself performed.”<sup>15</sup> According to Eudes, Walter and several other priests had formerly had sexual relations with this prostitute, so perhaps it was not primarily the dancing that Eudes was censuring. Regardless, Walter’s dance, though performed by a cleric, hardly seems likely to have been considered sacred by anyone.

Conversely, there were laypeople like Elisabeth of Spalbeek who, although not members of the clergy, displayed their piety through sacred forms of dancing. While sacred dance was clearly a unique subcategory of medieval dance with its own characteristics, the identity of those performing the dance was only one of the characteristics that made the dance sacred. The purpose of the dance and where it was performed held at least as much weight as who performed it. Therefore, when I consider sacred performance I discuss some dances that Backman and others may very well have labeled secular.

Second, the flexible boundaries between sacred and secular lifestyles and art forms allow me to use contextual sources concerning all varieties of medieval European dance in order to inform my core texts. The focus of this research is on sacred dance and performance, but medieval sacred dance (like medieval music, visual art, and drama) was undoubtedly cross-fertilized with more secular forms of dance. Even though individual church authorities, monks, nuns, beguines, nobles, and peasants had different experiences of dance and different beliefs about the appropriateness of dance in various times and places, there seems to have been a certain implicit understanding among most medieval writers about what this thing called “dance”

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<sup>15</sup> Eudes of Rouen, 429.

involved and what its purposes were. It is possible to find and compare similar concepts of dance in the most bawdy songs of the minnesingers and the sermons of reformers. It is also possible, by examining the ways in which various sources agree about what constitutes a dance and yet disagree about where, when, and by whom dances should be performed (and what the consequences to a dancer's soul or body might be) to gain an impression of the broad sweep of the dances and ideas about dance that existed in medieval Europe.

### *Festivity*

In chapter four I concluded that the words used for “dance” in the four beguine texts carried strong connotations of communal festivity. A dance was a festive event including not just dancing but also singing and feasting. This can be seen in Mechthild's description of a heavenly feast in which holy virgins in a beautiful outdoor setting weave flower gardens, eat, and participate in “the most sublime dance of praise” with Christ.<sup>16</sup> Agnes' scribe, explaining Agnes' use of the word *tripudium*, says that this word “denotes a festive event,” implying that a dance is not just movement but festivity as well.<sup>17</sup> Harding comes to a similar conclusion through her extensive study of medieval German dancing terms; the words for dance do not refer only to dancing itself but to “general merrymaking” which could also include music, food,

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<sup>16</sup> Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 308.

<sup>17</sup> Agnes Blannbekin, *Agnes Blannbekin, Viennese Beguine: Life and Revelations*, trans. Ulrike Wiethaus (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), 19, 20.

showing off one's fine clothes, playing various sorts of games, and jousting or other feats of arms.<sup>18</sup>

Many medieval sources besides the beguines considered dance and festivity closely interlocked. Henry Suso, a fourteenth-century Dominican friar and mystic who preached and ministered primarily to women, described the delights of heaven, including dance:

See, the fair city shines with inlaid gold, it glows with noble pearls, set in precious stones, clear as crystal, reflecting red roses, white lilies, and all kinds of living flowers. Now, look thyself at the fair heavenly meadow, ah, the whole joy of summer is there, the fields of bright May, the valley of true happiness! Here one sees the happy glances exchanged by lovers; here are harps and fiddles; here they sing, and leap and dance, and play all joyful games. Here there is abundant joy, gladness without sadness, for ever and a day.<sup>19</sup>

Just like Mechthild's heavenly dancers, Suso's dance and sing in a summertime meadow.

Instrumental music and games are part of their festivities. All these concepts seem to be linked—music, dance, love, joy, and summertime.

In the courtly songs popular among the nobility of the thirteenth century, dance was a common theme, and the descriptions of dance found in such songs have many similarities with each other and with the descriptions by Mechthild and Suso. The poet Konrad von Kilchberg composed a song with the following lines: "Come then, young people, let us / join the throng rich with joy / upon the meadow of roses / where flowers poke up through the grass. [. . .] Look lively, children, / the flowers are springing up. / The people sing and dance / and are joyful because of the bright May."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Harding, 5, 13-14.

<sup>19</sup> Henry Suso, *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom and Little Book of Truth*, trans. James M. Clark (New York: Harper and Brothers, n.d), 90.

<sup>20</sup> Carl von Kraus, *Deutsche liederdichter des 13. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: Max Nieweyer Verlag, 1952), 236. "Wol ūf, kinder, gēn wir dar / an die fröiderīchen schar

This song is only one example of the recurring theme of joyful festivity through song and dance. In song after song by the German minnesingers, dance was connected to summertime, particularly the month of May when the snow had melted, the flowers were blooming, and the birds were singing. Young people went out to the forest or the meadow and picked flowers to make themselves dancing wreaths. They sang and danced merrily and joined together as couples.<sup>21</sup> It is hard to overstate the effect the repetition of these themes can have on the reader. After several dozen songs, the mere mention of a bird's melody or a flower wreath is enough to evoke images of summertime, dancing, and young lovers.

The month of May may have been the most common occasion for dance in minnesong, but the characters in these songs also found other times for festive dance throughout the year. In one of Neidhart's songs, an indoor dance on a winter Sunday heated up the room with both dancing and drinking.<sup>22</sup> Besides Sundays, when people were not supposed to work, other occasions for festive dance in minnesong included harvest and Christmas.<sup>23</sup> While these references to dance are fictional, drawn from popular love-songs of the era, they probably bear as

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ūf den anger rōsevar, / dā die bluomen dur daz gras ūf dringent. . . . / ihr geilent iuch jungen, / die bluomen sint entsprungen, / ir singet den reien / und wesent froelich frō des liechten meien."<sup>21</sup>  
 Translation mine.

<sup>21</sup> Among the many songs that reference this matrix of themes including May, summertime, dance, and nature are compositions by Neidhart (Edmund Wiessner, *Die Lieder Neidharts* [Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1955], 16, 18, 19, 21, 27, 29, 33, 34, 36, 42, 45, 46); Tannhäuser (J.W. Thomas, *Tannhäuser: Poet and Legend* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974], 94-129); Der Wilde Alexander (Carl von Kraus, *Deutsche liederdichter des 13. Jahrhunderts* [Tübingen: Max Nieweyer Verlag, 1952], 12); Burkart von Hohenvels (Kraus, 39-40), and Konrad von Kilchberg (Kraus, 235-36).

<sup>22</sup> Wiessner, 59.

<sup>23</sup> Wiessner, 37; Thomas, 156.

much resemblance to actual events as song lyrics do today. A researcher of the future could gain a certain sense of the early twenty-first century club scene through today's song lyrics. It may not be possible to trust the thoughts and motivations these thirteenth-century poets of love attributed to their fictional dancers, but the settings in which these characters are placed and the occasions on which they dance probably contain some degree of verisimilitude.

Dancing—along with other festive activities such as processing, eating and drinking, wearing fine clothes, creating dramatic tableaux, being entertained by minstrels, and jousting—was also part of the great civic spectacles held in medieval towns and cities. Occasions for such festivities included the weddings or funerals of the well-to-do, the entry of a ruler into the city, a coronation, or a knighting. Elizabeth Brown and Nancy Freeman Regalado have written about the French King Philip the Fair's knighting celebration for his three sons, in Paris in 1313, which involved nine days of festival and ceremony in which dancing by minstrels and by the Parisian populace played a part. Secular and religious themes intermingled in this celebration. The knighting took place on the religious holiday of Pentecost (a traditional day for knightings) and many of the assembled nobles "took up the Cross," promising to go on a crusade to the Holy Land. The feasting that followed involved stunning displays of royal finery, songs by minstrels, and entertainments involving a "castle of love." When the Parisians presented street tableaux, the subjects included the Virgin Mary, heaven and hell, Renart the Fox, comic "bean kings" and wild men, and boys and ladies dancing.<sup>24</sup> Although the knighting on Pentecost was the ostensible reason for the celebration, the citizens of Paris certainly did not confine themselves to

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<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth A. R. Brown and Nancy Freeman Regalado, "La grant feste: Philip the Fair's Celebration of the Knighting of his Sons in Paris at Pentecost of 1313," in *City and Spectacle in Medieval Europe*, eds. Barbara A. Hanawalt and Kathryn L. Reyerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 56-86.

religious themes in their festivities, instead showing what seems a typical medieval willingness to combine the sacred with the more ordinary parts of life and to set solemnity and festivity side by side.

The calendar of the Christian church offered many occasions for celebration in its great number of feast days, including well-known feasts like Christmas that were celebrated throughout the Christian world and lesser-known feasts for local saints that were only celebrated in specific areas. While dancing was a part of many medieval Europeans' celebrations of these feast days, some church authorities disapproved, decrying the way such festivities distracted from pious, proper behavior and worrying that dance might be a work of the devil or an indication of paganism.<sup>25</sup> Some religious writers primarily showed concern over dancing and excessive festivity by the clergy themselves, others disapproved of anyone, even laypeople, dancing on saints' days and still others (mostly later sources) condemned dancing entirely.<sup>26</sup> The most frequent prohibitions, however, seem to have been against dancing in churches or churchyards during saints' days, during death watches, or on the Feast of Fools or the Feast of Holy Innocents, two feasts near Christmas often associated, as I show below, with festive dancing by both laypeople and clergy.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Backman, 154-61.

<sup>26</sup> Dobozy discusses the attitude of church authorities toward clergy taking part in performances of song, dance, or drama or associating with minstrels who engaged in such performance (61-68). Harding discusses sermons against dancing that condemn all dancing entirely; her most frequently referenced primary source document dates from the fifteenth century (70-82).

<sup>27</sup> Backman, 156-58. One of the primary sources for such prohibitions is Eudes of Rouen, 325, 407, 441, 550.

Despite disapproval by some members of the church hierarchy, there is a good deal of evidence that both ordinary clergy (priests, bishops, etc.) and those in religious orders (monks and nuns) did engage in festivity and dancing. Some of the evidence comes from the prohibitions themselves; if something is prohibited, the reasoning goes, it must have existed in the first place. But not all the evidence for medieval clerical dancing is negative. In a document from the cathedral in Le Puy in northern France which, according to Wulf Arlt, documents performance practices that date back at least to the fourteenth century, there is evidence of clerical dancing at the Feast of the Circumcision, one of the many church holidays surrounding Christmas.<sup>28</sup> From the tenth century onward, the days after Christmas were special feasts for different groups of clerics. St. Stephen's day, December 26, was for the deacons; the Feast of St. John the Evangelist, December 27, was for the priests; the Feast of Holy Innocents, December 28, was for the acolytes; and the Feast of the Circumcision, January 1, was for the subdeacons.<sup>29</sup> The Feast of the Circumcision, also called the Feast of Fools, often had extra non-liturgical aspects added after the liturgical church service. These non-liturgical celebrations were sometimes known for their rowdiness and were condemned by some church authorities beginning in the twelfth century.<sup>30</sup> The Le Puy manuscript details the divine office for the Feast of the Circumcision, giving words, musical notation, and sometimes performance notes. After the second compline, at the end of the entire liturgy, the final procession closed with a song

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<sup>28</sup> Wulf Arlt, "The Office for the Feast of the Circumcision from Le Puy," in *The Divine Office in the Latin Middle Ages*, eds. Margot E. Fassler and Rebecca A. Baltzer (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 324-25, 331.

<sup>29</sup> Arlt, 326.

<sup>30</sup> Arlt, 329.

about the new year. Arlt points out that beside the musical notation of this chant there is a marginal note stating *clericuli tripudiant firmiter* (the young clerics dance vigorously).<sup>31</sup> The festive song celebrating the new year was accompanied by festive dancing, at least for those among the cathedral's clerics who were young enough to manage such vigorous activity.

The New Year dances at Le Puy are only one example of clerics who enjoyed festive dance. Dobozy has used a number of sources to show convincingly that despite the prohibitions against clerics taking part in various forms of entertainment, "members of the religious orders and other ecclesiastics continued to exhibit an unabated fondness for entertainments," both those offered by professional minstrels and those performed by the clergy themselves.<sup>32</sup> Several vivid accounts of festive clerical dances can be found in the register of Eudes of Rouen. Eudes, a thirteenth-century Franciscan, was tasked with visiting various religious houses, correcting errors in their practices, and looking over their account books. Many of the erroneous practices Eudes recorded involved monks and nuns eating meat, sleeping on feather beds, or having illicit affairs, but he also listed several instances of religious people taking part in festive dance. While the accounts are written from the point of view of a man who clearly considered such dances incompatible with a religious lifestyle, the opinions of the dancers sometimes leak through Eudes' stiff lists, and the actions of the dancers certainly speak for themselves.

On feast days, according to Eudes' report, the clerks, vicars, and chaplains of the church of St. Hildevert in Gournay "conducted themselves in a dissolute and scurrilous manner, dancing

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<sup>31</sup> Arlt, 339.

<sup>32</sup> Dobozy, 62.

through the town and singing *virelais*.<sup>33</sup> Clerks, vicars, and chaplains were not cloistered, so going about the streets of the town was not proscribed for them as it would have been for monks or nuns, but Eudes clearly thought that dancing and singing *virelais* (a popular form of medieval song often associated with dancing) was inappropriate behavior. Specifically, he suspected that dancing publicly, in the company of laypeople, would cause scandal. The clerics of St. Hildevert were evidently quite attached to their festive dancing, however, for when Eudes returned several months later he found that the feast day celebrations still went on, and he then issued an official prohibition against dancing on the feast of St. Nicholas (a pre-Christmas December feast), or on the day of St. Hildevert (the patron saint of that particular church), or on any feast day whatsoever.<sup>34</sup> Since Eudes did not mention St. Hildevert again in his register, the ultimate fate of these clerics' dances and *virelais* remains unknown. Perhaps the clerks, vicars, and chaplains stopped dancing with the townspeople, or perhaps Eudes' path simply never brought him back to St. Hildevert again. It is unlikely that these clerics were the only ones singing and dancing on the day of St. Nicholas, however. John Stevens references a manuscript containing *virelais* written by a thirteenth-century clerk; one such *virelai* has a Latin stanza honoring St. Nicholas and a French refrain mentioning blossoming trees and singing nightingales, imagery highly suggestive of dancing.<sup>35</sup> These two sources, Eudes' prohibition and the unnamed clerk's *virelai* for St. Nicholas, both come from thirteenth-century France, and are thus likely to be remnants of the same culture of clerical dance.

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<sup>33</sup> Eudes of Rouen, 530-31.

<sup>34</sup> Eudes of Rouen, 536.

<sup>35</sup> Stevens, 181.

It was not just male clergy who danced festively. Finding many things not to his liking at the convent of Villarceaux (including drunkenness and pregnancy), Eudes wrote a long and detailed letter to the nuns there, which he insisted must be read out loud to them every month. One of his many complaints concerned dancing: “Item, we forbid you to continue the farcical performances which have been your practice at the feast of the Innocents and of the Blessed Mary Magdalene, to dress up in worldly costumes, or to dance with each other or with lay folk.”<sup>36</sup> Like the clerics of Le Puy who celebrated with dancing on the post-Christmas Feast of the Circumcision, the nuns of Villarceaux celebrated the post-Christmas Feast of Holy Innocents with festivities that included inviting laypeople into the convent, performing farces, wearing fine clothes, and of course, dancing. They did the same thing on the feast of Mary Magdalene, which fell in July, a good half year away from the Feast of the Innocents, and celebrated a popular figure in medieval women’s piety. Despite Eudes’ outrage, the nuns did not give up their festive performances. When he returned for another visit four years later, he found that the nuns were not reading his letter out loud as he had instructed, and that they still sang “vulgar songs” at the Feast of Holy Innocents.<sup>37</sup>

Other convents also celebrated the Feast of Holy Innocents with performances. Over a series of visits to the convent of Montivilliers, Eudes found occasion to complain about the games, farces, processions, and “scurrilous songs such as burlesques, canticles, and cantatas,” with which the nuns celebrated this feast day.<sup>38</sup> Dancing is not mentioned by name, but since

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<sup>36</sup> Eudes of Rouen, 50.

<sup>37</sup> Eudes of Rouen, 182.

<sup>38</sup> Eudes of Rouen, 436, 490, 538, 591.

dances accompanied the farces and vulgar songs at Villarceaux, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the games and processions at Montivilliers may have included dancing as well. Although Eudes chastised the nuns for their overly festive performances each time he visited Montivilliers, whenever he returned he found them still celebrating the Feast of Holy Innocents. His complaints seem to have made little headway against an entrenched festive holiday. The nuns of St. Léger des Préaux, La Trinité de Caen, and St. Amand de Rouen also came under Eudes' censure for inappropriate celebrations of the Feast of Holy Innocents.<sup>39</sup> Eudes' instructions to the nuns at St. Amand de Rouen are particularly telling: "We ordered that the juniors no longer remain in the choir on the Feast of the Innocents, as they had done before, chanting the Office and the Sequences suited to that day, when the seniors had retired and the juniors remained behind."<sup>40</sup> At Le Puy, the youngest clerics celebrated the Feast of the Circumcision by dancing at the end of the day, when the office was finally coming to a close. It seems possible that the nuns of St. Amand de Rouen celebrated their post-Christmas feast, the Feast of Holy Innocents, in a similar way, the junior nuns remaining to sing, celebrate, and perhaps dance late into the night after their seniors had gone to bed.

Communal celebrations that included dance, then, did seem to occur among clergy and even among the cloistered religious. It is impossible to say how frequently such celebrations occurred, although Christmas and the feast days surrounding it seem to have been popular times for festivity and dance. It is also impossible to know with any certainty whether such dances were more often performed by laypeople, clergy, or both together. Although Eudes'

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<sup>39</sup> Eudes of Rouen, 212, 293, 554.

<sup>40</sup> Eudes of Rouen, 554.

chastisement seems to have fallen heavily on clergy who danced with laypeople, that does not necessarily mean that such dances were the exception rather than the rule.

It is not entirely clear why a church authority like Eudes disapproved of celebratory dance even when such dance occurred in the context of the liturgy. Dobozy suggests one possible reason: some clergy thought that all forms of aesthetic beauty, whether song, dance, or visual splendor, detracted from the serious nature of Christian worship. Such clergy did not want performative aspects added to the liturgy.<sup>41</sup> It is not surprising, then, that clergy who loved aesthetic beauty took a more positive view of dance. Suger, a twelfth-century abbot and contemporary of Bernard of Clairvaux, is best known for the treatise he wrote on the expansion and beautification of his abbey of St. Denis, the church where the French kings were buried. Unlike the austere and mystical Bernard, Suger was no ascetic. He took obvious delight in describing the various treasures of gold and jewels that he acquired for his church. The purpose of those treasures, according to Suger, was to do appropriate honor to the relics housed at St. Denis so that laypeople who came to see the relics would be impressed and glorify God. In a similar vein, Suger praised the blessing of a new baptismal font in his church by a number of visiting bishops:

You might have seen—and those present did see not without great devotion—how so great a dance of such great pontiffs, decorous in white vestments, splendidly arrayed in pontifical miters and precious orphreys embellished by circular ornaments, held the crosiers in their hands, walked round and round the vessel and invoked the name of God by way of exorcism; how so glorious and admirable men celebrated the wedding of the Eternal Bridegroom so piously that the King and the attending nobility believed themselves to behold a chorus celestial rather than terrestrial, a ceremony divine rather than human.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Dobozy, 115-42.

<sup>42</sup> Suger, Abbot of St.-Denis, *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and its Art Treasures*, ed. and trans. Erwin Panofsky (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press,

Suger describes not only the splendid costumes and the circular procession, but also the purpose of this dance: it is a wedding celebration for God, performed by important leaders of the church. It is possible that Suger might have been using the term “dance” metaphorically here, implying that this great celebration was like a dance. It is telling, however, that unlike Agnes’ scribe Suger does not use the word *quasi* (as if). He says that the bishops circled the font in a dance, and there is no good reason why he should not be taken at his word. That Suger compares this blessing to a wedding celebration only intensifies its association with dance, as dance was a common feature of medieval weddings. By saying that the ceremony appeared divine rather than human, Suger distances it from any of the wrong sorts of dance that other church authorities might have seen as inappropriate.

The blessing of the font was clearly an important event of communal celebration. Many people, including the French king and a great crowd of nobles, were gathered together, much as they might have been for a royal wedding, a knighting, or a coronation. It was also an important event of sacred performance; once the font was properly blessed it could be used for baptisms, initiating people into the Christian faith. As the bishops performed their dance and invoked the name of God, their actions quite literally changed the font from an ordinary object into a holy one.

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1946), 115. I have slightly altered Panofsky’s translation, rendering the Latin word *choream* in the first sentence as “dance” rather than “chorus.” While *tripudium* does not always refer to dance but sometimes to jubilation, *chorea* usually means literal dance. “Videres, et qui aderant non sine devotione magna videbant, tot tantorum choream pontificum vestibibus albis decoram, mitris pontificalibus et circinatis aurifrisiis pretiosis admodum comatam, pastorales virgas manibus tenere, circumcirca dolium ambire, nomen Domini exorcizando invocare; tam gloriosos et admirabilis viros æterni sponsi nuptias tam pie celebrare, ut potius chorus cœlestis quam terrenus, opus divinum quam humanum, tam regi quam assistenti nobilitati videretur apparere.”

The blessing of the font was not the only time Suger described a religious celebration in terms of dance. At the dedication of the chapel of St. Romanus, three important church officials processed through a crowd of people. Suger says that the clergy in the crowd were *decantantis* (chanting) and the rest of the populace were *tripudiantis* (rejoicing or dancing).<sup>43</sup> The purpose of this celebratory procession was the consecration of the new chapel. Processions through the streets, like the one during the 1313 knighting in Paris, could easily be accompanied with both religious pageantry and dancing. Whether or not the crowd was precisely dancing or merely moving about excitedly with joy, the association of celebration, song, and joyful movement suggests a communal danced celebration.

To return to the texts of the beguines, might these women have experienced festive communal dance and used such experiences to inform their writings about dance? This seems not only likely but almost inevitable. None of the beguines began their lives cloistered away from the world and its various festivities that so often involved dance. Whether or not these women actively danced in the celebrations around them, they must certainly have witnessed such festivities. Even within beguinages and convents they might have taken part in feast-day processions and dances. When the beguines wrote about the delights of heaven and the endless joys of the blessed souls, it probably seemed only natural to include dance. The image of earthly dances would have served as precursor and model for the envisioned bliss of the endless heavenly dance.

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<sup>43</sup> Suger, 44.

*Joy*

In addition to festivity, joy was a common theme in passages about dance in the beguine texts. Mechthild reported a group of heavenly dancers performing a ring dance “merrily” while they sang “effortlessly with joy.”<sup>44</sup> When Agnes saw Friar Erlolf holding hands and dancing with a crowd of virgins, she felt her heart fill with “great happiness, propriety, and joy.”<sup>45</sup> In Hadewijch’s poem “School of Love,” the students danced “with feelings of delight.”<sup>46</sup> Even though Elisabeth’s Passion dances often displayed suffering, they also involved moments of joy. After Elisabeth kissed the tablet painted with Christ’s image, she went into an ecstasy in which she was completely still. Philip tells that after this ecstasy, “her spirit, returning from the homeland of spiritual joys, enlivens her body, gladdens her mind, and makes her face cheerful and illumines it with beloved brightness.”<sup>47</sup> Elisabeth, too, experienced moments of joy through dance.

In two of the beguine texts the authors state outright that the meaning of dance is joy. Agnes’ scribe, relating her words about the symbolic meaning of Christ’s wounds, says that one of the wounds “signifies the possession of joy and happiness, what we call dance.”<sup>48</sup> Philip, too,

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<sup>44</sup> *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 104.

<sup>45</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 157.

<sup>46</sup> Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: the Complete Works*, trans. Mother Columba Hart, (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 164.

<sup>47</sup> *Catalogus codicum hagiographicorum bibliothecae Regiae Bruxellensis*, vol. 1 (Brussels: 1886), 368. “. . . revertens spiritus de patria spiritualium gaudiorum corpus vivificat, mentem laetificat, vultum exhilarat et gratiosa claritate perlustrat.” This translation, and all subsequent translations from Elisabeth’s *vita*, are my own.

<sup>48</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 19. I have altered the translation slightly, giving *tripudium* its usual meaning of “dance” rather than the translator’s slightly odd “the three-step.” The original

musings on the allegorical meaning of a passage from Song of Songs containing the phrase “dances of camps,” asserts, “For it is certain that the camp relates to battle; but dances represent gladness.”<sup>49</sup> Even the medieval terminology for dance betrays its connection with joy. Harding asserts that the Middle High German words for dance imply “most basic of all, a feeling of happiness.”<sup>50</sup> The Latin word *tripudio* carried a dual meaning, throughout much of the medieval period, and can be translated either as “dance” or as “jubilation.” This suggests that dance and joy might have been almost indistinguishable from each other and that speaking of jubilation would necessarily carry connotations of dance.

The songs of the minnesingers link dance closely with joy; the characters dance because they are happy, or to throw aside sorrow. The minnesinger Neidhart, in one of his summer songs, puts it succinctly: “Children, let yourselves be radiant in the dance, / release your hearts from their bonds, / make a ring with quick steps!”<sup>51</sup> Dance was a form of release from sorrow. Neidhart’s summer songs often spoke of the winter passing, the snow melting, and young people dancing in the meadow. Winter represented sorrow, and summer with its dancing represented joy, love, and companionship. The minnesinger Tannhäuser also linked dance with joy, and even implied that this joy was ordained by God: “Come on, young people, taste life to its fullest.

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Latin source is Agnes Blannbekin, *Leben und Offenbarungen der Wiener Begine Agnes Blannbekin (1315)*, eds. Peter Dinzelsbacher and Renate Vogeler (Göppingen: Künnerle, 1994), 72. “. . . significatur haberi gaudium et laetitiam, quod nos vocamus tripudium.”

<sup>49</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 371-72. “Certum est enim quod castrum ad pugnam pertinet; sed chori laetitiam repraesentant.”

<sup>50</sup> Harding, 14.

<sup>51</sup> Weissner, 27. “Kint, lāt iu den reien wol enblanden, / loeset iuwer herze ūz senden banden / mit snellen sprängen ringen!” Translation mine.

/ Since God has given us bodies / we should sing / and dance joyfully.”<sup>52</sup> Tannhäuser is saying that joyful song and dance is a way to honor God for the gift of a body able to do such things.

Enjoying life, according to Tannhäuser, is not a sin. People are alive and they ought to taste and enjoy what life has to offer, including the joy that comes through dance. The association of dance with joy in minnesong, like the association of dance with summertime and a beautiful nature setting, is hard to overemphasize.<sup>53</sup>

While dance in minnesong displayed the joys of love and youth on this earth, dance in religious writings often represented the joy of heaven. Dancing angels and dancing blessed souls appeared in the works of many religious authors. In Henry Suso’s autobiography, *The Life of the Servant*, a group of angels arrived to comfort him when he was suffering. The foremost of the angels appeared as “a youth, who seemed to be a heavenly minstrel.”<sup>54</sup> The youth told Suso that he and his companions had been sent by God to bring him heavenly joy and to dance with him:

They led the Servant by the hand to the dance, and the youth struck up the joyous little hymn *In dulci jubilo*. When the Servant heard the beloved name of Jesus so sweetly resound, his heart and soul were so cheerful that all thought of suffering disappeared. He looked on with joy while they made the highest wildest leaps and bounds. The precentor knew quite well how to lead the dance; he sang first and they followed. They sang and danced with jubilant hearts.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Thomas, 102. “vf vf kint pruet dc leben / sit vns got den lib hat gegeben / So svln wir singen / froliche springen.” Translation mine.

<sup>53</sup> The theme of joy appears associated with dance in many songs including some by Neidhart (Weissner, 16, 19-20, 27, 29, 33, 37-38, 41-43, 46-49, 56-57, 59, 86, 105, 118); Tannhäuser (Thomas, 102, 108, 110, 116, 126, 136, 146, 148, 156); Der Wilde Alexander (Kraus, 12); Burkhart von Hohenfels (Kraus, 33, 39); Conrad von Kilchberg (Kraus, 235-37); Ulrich von Lichtenstein (Kraus, 434, 480); and Ulrich von Wintersetten (Kraus, 499).

<sup>54</sup> Henry Suso, *The Life of the Servant*, trans. James M. Clark (London: Camelot Press, 1952), 29.

<sup>55</sup> Suso, *Life of the Servant*, 29-30.

The emotion of overwhelming joy pervades this entire passage. The angels are bringers of joy through their heavenly dance. Perhaps Suso ascended briefly to heaven in order to take part in the angelic celebration, or perhaps the angels came to dance with him on earth. Whatever the case, Suso felt the need to point out that the angelic dance “was not like those that are danced in this world.”<sup>56</sup> Although sharing in the joyful quality common to most medieval dances, this dance had particular heavenly qualities of “flowing” and “divine mystery” that set it apart from earthly festivities.

Another example of dancing angels is found in the *vita* of Beatrice of Nazareth, a thirteenth-century Cistercian nun. At the moment of Beatrice’s death she ascended to God “in the midst of the maidens sounding their timbrels, with the rejoicing angels and the holy throngs of the blessed . . . . Thus happily she migrated with hymns, canticles and dancing into the choir of Seraphs where her place of perpetual rest had previously been assigned to her, there to enjoy without end the consolation of Christ.”<sup>57</sup> Having died, Beatrice was able to join in the song and dance of the angels and to rejoice forever with them and with the blessed souls of those who had died before her.

The joyful dance of a blessed soul did not necessarily have to involve angelic assistance or take place after death. Mechthild’s passage “And still the young man did not come” suggests that the soul is dancing with Christ in the current life rather than in the one to come. Henry Suso also described the journey of life as a dance with God: “Blessed be he who dances the dance of

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<sup>56</sup> Suso, *Life of the Servant*, 30.

<sup>57</sup> *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth, 1200-1268*, trans. Roger De Ganck (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1991), 341.

joy and heavenly bliss by My side, who in complete security will pace, holding My fair hand, for all eternity!”<sup>58</sup> While the bliss of this dancing soul might have been heavenly, Suso was not describing a dance that took place only in the afterlife. He went on to speak about God being present “at table, in bed, in the path and on the road.”<sup>59</sup> In other words, Suso was saying that a Christian could hold God’s hand and dance safely and joyfully through all aspects of life.

According to Galatians 5:22-23, joy was one of the fruits of the Spirit that were displayed in the lives of Christians. Since dance represented joy in so many medieval sources and joy was one of the traits of a holy life, it seems somewhat contradictory that certain church authorities and moralists disapproved of dancing. Such moralists did not disapprove of joy itself or think that dance and joy were unrelated. Rather, they drew distinctions between a right and a wrong sort of joy, calling the first “spiritual joy” and the second “frivolity.” Frivolous matters such as games, dances, light conversation, and other such amusements were commonly considered antithetical to the serious quality of the spiritual life. In the *vitae* of holy people, their biographers often pointed out how serious-minded the aspiring saint had been even as a child. For example, Agnes’ scribe described her early life in this manner: “When she was still a young girl, she never mingled with those who played games, but, while the other girls gathered for childish pleasures, she remained at home and worshipped God the Father in secret.”<sup>60</sup> Beatrice of Nazareth also kept silent and avoided idle games as a girl, and the young Marie d’ Oignies,

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<sup>58</sup> Suso, *Little Book*, 72-73.

<sup>59</sup> Suso, *Little Book*, 73.

<sup>60</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 37; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 122. “Cum adhuc juvencula esset, nunquam cum ludentibus se conmiscuit, sed, aliis puellis ad solatia puerilia convenientibus, ipsa domi remanens patrem deum exorabat in abscondito.”

who already knew she wanted to pursue an ascetic lifestyle, read books and refused to play.<sup>61</sup>

The authors of these lives clearly wanted to emphasize that their subjects were not light-hearted.

None of these holy women would have been found, as girls, running off to dance with young men or to weave themselves flower garlands to attract lovers.

In a vision of Christ, the angels, and the blessed souls ascending into heaven, Agnes saw something that seemed a sharp condemnation of happiness:

While all truly rejoiced together in song, the Lord remained silent as long as he ascended through the lower [sphere of] air, and then for the first time began to sing with the others. She also understood that the Lord did this because He never wished to have fun or show signs of exterior gaiety as long as He was in this world.<sup>62</sup>

Christ did not sing while in the world, but waited until ascending to heaven to show signs of happiness. This song was a song of rejoicing, and although dance is not mentioned here, it is safe to assume that if Agnes had seen Christ dancing instead of singing, he would not have done that until he was in heaven either. Unbridled joy seems to be pushed away into the afterlife, rather than existing as a positive force in the present world.

What precisely was wrong with gaiety, fun, and merriment in the minds of so many religious people? In one of his sermons for German monks and nuns, John Tauler, a fourteenth-century Dominican mystic, spoke of “pastimes and trifles, gossip, entertainments and worldly conversation” as small sins, not as terrible as the deadly sins but still dangerous. He characterized these amusements as small hounds that “take little bites at us, distracting our hearts

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<sup>61</sup> *Beatrice of Nazareth*, 23; Jacques de Vitry, *The Life of Marie d’Oignies*, trans. Margot H. King (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing, 1987), 27.

<sup>62</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 72; *Leben und Offenbarungen*, 234. “Illis vero omnibus simul jubilantibus, dominus tacuit, quousque ascendisset aerem istum inferiorem, et tunc primo coepit ceteris psallere. Ipsa quoque intellexit hoc ideo dominum fecisse, quia nunquam gaudere vel signa laetitiae exterioris voluit ostendere, quamdiu esset in hoc mundo.”

and weakening the spiritual aspirations which are necessary for godly living, grace and devotion.”<sup>63</sup> Hadewijch expressed similar sentiments more poetically: “By the emotional attraction of worldly joy one forgets the narrow ways that belong to high Love, and the beautiful behavior, the gracious bearing, and the well-ordered service that belong to sublime Love.”<sup>64</sup> Both of these statements characterize worldly entertainments and happy emotions not as wrong in and of themselves, but as a distraction that can cause a religious person to forget the devotions and gracious service that will lead deeper into the godly life.

Within a medieval Christian worldview, then, there existed both positive and negative sorts of joy, and appropriate and inappropriate ways to express that joy. Mechthild gave an interesting illustration of this when she reported a revelation she had about Dominic, the founder of the Dominican order. God told her that “whenever Dominic laughed, he did so with the true delight of the Holy Spirit.” Pondering this idea of a holy saint laughing, Mechthild remarked, “Before this I did not know that any laughing could be free of frivolity and not wrong.”<sup>65</sup> It was the frivolity in laughter and not the laughter itself that was wrong. Following this logic, if a dance were free of frivolity it too could have been considered “true delight.”

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<sup>63</sup> John Tauler, *Spiritual Conferences*, trans. Eric Colledge and Sister M. Jane, O.P. (St. Louis and London: B. Herder Book Co., 1961), 174.

<sup>64</sup> *Hadewijch: the Complete Works*, 72; Hadewijch, *De brieven van Hadewijch*, trans. Paul Mommaers (Averbode: Altiora, 1990), 94. “Bi affectien van bliscapen verghet men der nauwer weghe die ter hogher Minnen behoren ende der scoenre seden ende dies suets ghelaets Ende der wel gheordender dienste die ter hoechster Minnen behoren.”

<sup>65</sup> *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 165. *Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, 137. “. . . swenne Dominicus lachete, so lachete er mit warer suessekeit des heligen geistes. . . . Das einig lachen sunder italkheit nit mag boese sin, des wiste ich e des nit.”

One instance of just such a dance of holy joy comes from the *vita* of Beatrice of Nazareth. Her biographer reported that she would often become “so filled with spiritual joy and gratitude” that she was incapable of holding her feelings in. “Therefore it frequently happened that, whether she willed it or not, her interior jubilation of mind would break out in some manifestation, and the mind’s inner jubilation would betray itself outwardly either in laughing or dancing, a gesture or some other sign.”<sup>66</sup> It was joy that drove Beatrice to dance or to burst out into what her biographer calls “happy gestures” or “immoderate laughter.”<sup>67</sup> Although it is implied that Beatrice tried not to outwardly display her joy, the delight of her spirit spilled over into the motions of her body. The way her joy made her move is even clearer in another example, in which Beatrice’s biographer explains how greatly Beatrice desired the eucharist: “When time for Communion came, not only was her mind filled with inner spiritual sweetness, but the delight breaking out in all the members of her body, like an inebriating nectar, made her move excitedly in a kind of spiritual dance.”<sup>68</sup> Beatrice’s motions were excited and even seemed drunken. She moved many different parts of her body, though her biographer does not clearly describe the ways in which she moved them. Later, however, in explaining a similar “spiritual dance” that would sometimes occur after Beatrice had been engaged in contemplative meditation, the biographer says that while dancing, Beatrice would “excitedly strike parts of her body.”<sup>69</sup> This brings to mind Elisabeth’s dances of Christ’s Passion in which she would strike her cheeks and

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<sup>66</sup> *Beatrice of Nazareth*, 95, 97.

<sup>67</sup> *Beatrice of Nazareth*, 57, 73.

<sup>68</sup> *Beatrice of Nazareth*, 103.

<sup>69</sup> *Beatrice of Nazareth*, 233.

various parts of her body. What is most intriguing is that Beatrice's biographer does not hesitate to call Beatrice's performance a dance, while Philip calls Elisabeth's performances *modo repraesentationem* (a manner of representation) or *gestu corporis* (bodily gestures). The word that Beatrice's biographer uses, *tripudio*, was a common enough Latin word and it should have been available to Philip had he chosen to use it. That he did not only cements the link between dance and joy. When Beatrice struck parts of her body out of joy, she performed a spiritual dance. When Elisabeth struck parts of her body out of devotion, to display the sufferings of Christ, she performed a representation through bodily gestures. It seems, perhaps, that it was not the movements themselves but the joy involved that made Beatrice's dance a dance.

Beatrice's joyful, almost drunken dances are reminiscent of the state of jubilation described by Tauler. This state is possible, Tauler says, only for those who have overcome sins both great and small and who then seek to become filled with God's spirit:

We draw in as much as we can, we drink greedily, we become drunk, and so filled with God that we forget ourselves in our overflowing joy. We feel that we are capable of doing wonders, that we could gladly go through fire and water, that we could bear to be slain by a thousand swords, and even run to meet them willingly. Nothing, we feel, could frighten us now; neither life nor death, joy nor sorrow. This is all because we are drunk with God, in the state known as "jubilation." Sometimes people in this state cry aloud, or sing or laugh.<sup>70</sup>

Although Tauler does not mention dance in his list of things that people do when drunk with God, Beatrice's dance as described by her biographer seems to coincide with this state of ecstatic jubilation. Tauler goes on to point out that some people might criticize those who perform strange and unrestrained actions under the influence of God's spirit: "Then along come reasonable people, knowing nothing of the wonderful operation of the Holy Ghost in those who

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<sup>70</sup> Tauler, 174.

love Him, and ignorant of everything outside the natural order; and they exclaim, ‘Bless my soul, why are you carrying on in this ridiculous way?’ ”<sup>71</sup> Read in connection with jubilant, ecstatic dance, this passage helps explain the demurrals of those who denied joyful dance, even the dances of holy joy. Such “reasonable people” either did not understand something that went beyond the ordinary or did not accept that the ecstatic came from God. From the late thirteenth century through the fourteenth century, when Tauler lived and preached, beguines and other groups who practiced ecstasy and union with God became increasingly suspect and insecure. Church authorities accused them of heresy or corrupt lifestyles and in 1311 the Council of Vienne issued a general condemnation of all beguines.<sup>72</sup> In this context, Tauler’s words sound like a defense of holy joy against those who would suppress it. There was clearly something of a controversy over the extent to which Christians ought to display joy. While Tauler listed jubilation as the first stage of the spiritual life—a stage which it was possible to grow beyond—he did not condemn the expression of ecstatic joy. Although Tauler was not a contemporary of Beatrice of Nazareth, it seems likely that he would have approved of her spiritual dances.

Whether spiritual or secular, heavenly or earthly, medieval dance was so closely linked with joy that the two became almost synonymous. Joy, however, like dance itself, was not a concept that medieval writers embraced without reservation. Joy in heaven does not seem to have been controversial; no one objected to the angels or the blessed souls dancing in delight. Expressing joy on earth was another matter. Various writers had widely differing views on how

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<sup>71</sup> Tauler, 174-75.

<sup>72</sup> Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements of the Middle Ages: the Historical Links between Heresy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Women's Religious Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century, with the Historical Foundations of German Mysticism*, trans. Steven Rowan (1935; reprint and translation, Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 153-86.

much and what sort of joy was appropriate. The minnesingers lauded dance as a healthy expression of delight that could both honor God and bring about human joy. Many religious writers, however, found such lightheartedness to be mere frivolity that distracted from the pursuit of a holy life. Beatrice of Nazareth expressed her spiritual joy through dance, but even joy in service of God could be suspect if it was not restrained. Tauler's words about "jubilation" suggest that, while later medieval Christianity may have contained a strong current of ecstatic joy expressed in many ways, including dance, there was also a more conservative element that questioned the propriety of such unbridled joy.

If joy, a widely-acknowledged component of a virtuous Christian life, had such an element of controversy about it, it will not be surprising to find that an even deeper controversy surrounded the other element that was usually associated with dance in medieval sources—sensuality.

### *Sensuality and Sexuality*

The connection between dance and sexuality is age-old and continues to this day. In the twelfth through fourteenth centuries, dance was already associated with sex and sensuality—or, depending on how one looked at it, with the temptation to sin. The biblical story of Salome, a popular tale in medieval times, told of the prototypical temptress who danced before King Herod in order to induce him to kill John the Baptist. This story clearly linked dance with sensuality. In the art of this era, Salome was usually depicted as an acrobatic dancer, doing backbends or flips of the sort performed by professional minstrels and tumblers.<sup>73</sup> The often-repeated story of

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<sup>73</sup> Hausamann, 340-47.

Salome cast a long shadow on medieval female entertainers who sang and danced. While all professional entertainers suffered under a certain moral stigma because they used their bodies to get money, female entertainers were often considered (rightly or wrongly) to be prostitutes.<sup>74</sup> When Eudes described the priest Walter leading the dancing at the wedding of a prostitute with whom a number of priests had previously had sex, he was simply reinforcing a stereotype that many medieval moralists considered a truism, that dancing and illicit sexuality went hand in hand.<sup>75</sup>

The minnesingers also linked dance with sensuality and sex, although unlike the church moralists, the singers of courtly love celebrated such a connection. To the minnesingers, the romantic attraction between a man and a woman was worthy of the highest praise. In their dancing-songs they often urged listeners to pair up for the dance, seeking out a partner of the opposite sex who was young and beautiful. The minnesinger Neidhart had the female characters in his songs express the desire to go to dances specifically to meet eligible young men.<sup>76</sup> The male/female couples described in minnesong hold hands while dancing, perform lively leaps and turns together, and sometimes go off together after the dance is over.

While certain minnesingers wrote lofty poems to ladies whom they loved from afar, the minnesingers who wrote dancing-songs tended toward a more physical sensuality. In one of Tannhäuser's songs, the narrator watches a woman dance and describes her beautiful body. He

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<sup>74</sup> Dobozy, 43, 180-81.

<sup>75</sup> Eudes of Rouen, 429.

<sup>76</sup> Songs by both Neidhart and Tannhäuser contain explicit calls for dancers to pair up (Wiessner 27, 29, 44; Thomas, 134). In several of Neidhart's summer songs the female character wants to go to the dance to meet young men (Wiessner 16, 33, 36, 43-44).

begins with the traditional beautiful body parts and continues on to the less polite: “Her legs are white, / her thighs soft and smooth, and her pubic hair is brown. / Her bottom is nicely curved.”<sup>77</sup>

Neidhart also refers to women’s private parts in his songs, having his narrator complain that while dancing, boorish men were grabbing his beloved in inappropriate places.<sup>78</sup> These lyrics, although set in a fictional dance-song, show that participating in dance could be a sexualized encounter, at least for a male viewer or dancer who was very aware of his female partner’s moving body.

Sensual dance encounters could certainly escalate to something more, and the theme of dance leading to sex and then pregnancy figures in several songs. In one of Neidhart’s songs a mother warns her daughter against going to the dance, citing what happened to one of her friends who danced with a man the previous year: “From his dancing her belly grew big / and she had a baby whom she called lambkin.”<sup>79</sup> Tannhäuser, too, links dance with pregnancy in a song in which the narrator suggests that some women are absent from the dance because they have become pregnant.<sup>80</sup>

The minnesingers were not the only ones to celebrate the joys of dance, love, and sex. While the troubadours and minnesingers were composing love-songs in the vernacular languages of Europe, learned clergy were writing similar love-songs in Latin. Many of these songs

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<sup>77</sup> Thomas, 158. “wis sint ir beinel / lindu diehel reit brun ist ir meinel / ir sizzel gedrolle” Translation mine.

<sup>78</sup> Wiessner, 88.

<sup>79</sup> Wiessner, 36. “der wuohs von sīnem reien ūf ir wempel / und gewan ein kint, daz hiez si lempel” Translation mine.

<sup>80</sup> Thomas, 116.

featured erotic lyrics and references to Venus or the fire of passion.<sup>81</sup> One example, from a thirteenth-century Oxford manuscript, contains a clear reference to sex: “When the body’s movement feels the transport of love, and the act grows serene at last, I fall back into my beloved’s arms—till I revive in love.”<sup>82</sup> While this particular song does not mention dance, a number of the Latin songs from the *Codex Buranus* (the Carmina Burana manuscript) are dancing-songs with themes of springtime and love.<sup>83</sup> The *Codex Buranus*, an early thirteenth-century manuscript, was written mostly in Latin but partly in German. It contains drinking songs, religious dramas, satirical poetry, and also one of the largest collections of Latin love-songs in any medieval manuscript. This material shows a wide variety of subject matter from the religious to the secular and even the extremely bawdy.<sup>84</sup> Some of these songs have become familiar to modern audiences through the twentieth-century composer Carl Orff, who wrote a cantata based on some of the songs from the Carmina Burana. Viewing the Latin love-songs of the *Codex Buranus* in connection with other Latin love-songs of the time, it appears that on the whole, medieval Latin love-songs also reinforce the connection between dance, love, and sensuality.

It may initially seem strange that compositions in Latin, the language of the church, would celebrate romantic love and even praise sex. To be literate in Latin meant, with very few

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<sup>81</sup> Peter Dronke’s chapter on medieval Latin love-lyrics analyzes the various themes found in these songs written by learned clergy and gives many examples. Peter Dronke, *Medieval Latin and the Rise of the European Love-Lyric*, 2 vols. (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1965), 264-331.

<sup>82</sup> Dronke, *Medieval Latin*, 376.

<sup>83</sup> Dronke, *Medieval Latin*, 300-18.

<sup>84</sup> Dronke, *Medieval Latin*, 300-318; Sayce, 234-264.

exceptions, to be a cleric, and beginning in the twelfth century clerics were required to be celibate. However, with the rise of the universities came many young, urbane scholars who were clerics only in name and were not required to take a vow of celibacy.<sup>85</sup> Even priests and monks often broke their vows, and while they could not technically marry they often enough engaged in what Eudes termed “incontinence,” taking concubines and producing children out of wedlock.<sup>86</sup> There were clearly several different sets of values at play in medieval Europe, with some people valuing romantic love and sensual experiences while others valued celibacy and chastity. While this was partially a lay/clergy divide, it is important to note that the issue was more complex than that. Certain laypeople like beguines sought chastity and the divine love of God, while quite a number of the clergy praised human, romantic love. In addition, these two value systems were not always set at odds with each other. In his study of medieval love-lyrics, Peter Dronke finds that often “human and divine love are not in conflict with each other, but on the contrary can become identified.”<sup>87</sup> In other words, the writers of such songs believed that God approved of love and saw romance as holy. Openly celebrating sensuality, the clerics and lay poets who used religious imagery to describe their beloveds and who prayed that God would help them consummate their passions were not necessarily less Christian or less spiritual than those who believed celibacy was the highest path. Alongside the current of chastity and physical enclosure

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<sup>85</sup> Joseph H. Lynch, *The Medieval Church: a Brief History* (London and New York: Longman Group Limited, 1992), 248-55.

<sup>86</sup> Bernard Hamilton, *Religion in the Medieval West*, 2nd ed. (London: Hodder Arnold, 2003), 34-35; Eudes has too many examples to list (33 ff).

<sup>87</sup> Dronke, *Medieval Latin*, 5.

in Christian thought there flowed an alternative current, perhaps less acknowledged by the church authorities, of the celebration of love.

Even those who maintained celibacy or chastity did not always deny themselves sensual experiences. Mystics often ascribed an incredible sensuality to the relationship between the soul and God. During services at the feast of Pentecost, Hadewijch saw Christ as a beautiful man who offered her the eucharist from his own hands and then embraced her as a lover: “After that he came himself to me, took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him; and all my members felt his in full felicity, in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity.”<sup>88</sup> Even though this sensual encounter took place in a vision, Hadewijch saw, felt, and fully experienced the love of God in a way that sounds both physical and spiritual at once. Similarly, in Mechthild’s passage, “And still the young man did not come,” after the soul takes part in a dance of praise the young man (who represents Christ) tells her to “come at noontime to the shade of the spring, into the bed of love” where “you shall have your way with the Son of the virgin.”<sup>89</sup> Both Agnes and Elisabeth gave outward demonstrations of love; Agnes repeatedly kissed the

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<sup>88</sup> *Hadewijch: the Complete Works*, 281; Hadewijch, *Het visioenenboek van Hadewijch: uitg. naar handschrift 941 van de Bibliotheek der Rijksuniversiteit te Gent*, ed. H. W. J. Vekeman (Nijmegen: Dekker & Van de Vegt, 1980), 97. “Daer na quam hi selue te mi ende nam mi alte male in sine arme / ende dwanc mi ane heme / ende alle die lede die ic hadde gheuoelden der siere in alle hare ghenoeghen / na miere herten begherten / na miere menscheit.”

<sup>89</sup> *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 59-60; Mechthild von Magdeburg, *Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit: nach der Einsiedler Handschrift in kritischem Vergleich mit der gesamten Überlieferung*, eds. Hans Neumann and Gisela Vollman-Profe (Munich: Artemis Verlag, 1990), 28-29. “Kument ze mitten tage zuo dem brunnenschatten in das bette der minne . . . ir súllent mit der megde sun úwern willen han.”

altar and Elisabeth kissed and crooned over a painted image of Christ in a way that could certainly have been seen as sensual.<sup>90</sup>

In contrast to those who accepted sensual experiences and dance there were some among the clergy who strongly disapproved of dance. They displayed their disapproval through sermons, confession manuals, official prohibitions, and written collections of *exempla*, brief stories for the use of preachers.<sup>91</sup> It was probably because of such prohibitions and sermons that both Philip of Clairvaux and Agnes' scribe hesitated to use the word "dance" when describing Elisabeth and Agnes' ecstatic movements. While Agnes, with less of a place within the official hierarchy of the church, might have been perfectly comfortable with visions of dancing preachers and with comparing Christ's wounds to a dance, her scribe was a trained clergyman and was likely aware of the official prohibitions against dance. Couching Agnes' words with qualifiers like *quasi* probably helped him avoid undue scandal.

One of the most well-known *exempla* condemning dance is the tale of the dancers of Kölbick. In this story, a group of dancers disrupted a Christmas Eve service by dancing in the churchyard and the priest called down a curse upon them. They proceeded to dance for an entire year without stopping, working themselves hip-deep into the earth. At the end of the year the dancers fell into a coma from which some later woke, while others died.<sup>92</sup> Two things are notable about this story. First, dancing was once again associated with the Christmas season, a

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<sup>90</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 117; *Catalogus codicum*, 367.

<sup>91</sup> Backman 154-61; Alessandro Arcangeli, "Dance and Punishment," in *Dance Research* 10, no. 2 (Autumn 1992): 30-42; Eudes of Rouen, 325, 407, 441, 550; Anne Louise Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance: from the Puritans to the Present* (University of Illinois Press, 1997), 6-7.

<sup>92</sup> Arcangeli gives this story among many others in "Dance and Punishment." Backman interprets the Kölbick dancers as an early dance epidemic (172-177).

time when other sources have both clergy and laity dancing. Second, it was not the dance itself or sexuality in the dance that brought down the wrath of the priest but rather the inappropriate time and place in which the dance was performed and the way in which it disrupted the mass.

Dancers today commonly assume that conservative moralists throughout history have opposed dance primarily because of its association with sexuality. To make such assumptions, however, is to project the morals of later eras onto the Middle Ages. The most vociferous opponents of dance who vividly condemned lascivious dancers to hell did not appear until the advent of “sixteenth-century Reformation fervor.”<sup>93</sup> While some medieval confession manuals associated dancing with the sin of lust, and devils caused dancers to commit fornication in a thirteenth-century *exemplum*, sexuality was not the only or even the primary sin committed by dancers in most prohibitions and *exempla* from the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries.<sup>94</sup> As in the story of the dancers of Kölbigk, it seems to be dancing on holy days, in churchyards, or against the orders of a priest that was most often condemned.<sup>95</sup> Dance was associated both with the sin of gluttony and with pride and luxury, because dancing often involved feasting and wearing fine clothes.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Wagner, xiv. Wagner’s book is primarily about American opposition to dance, but she does trace the pre-Reformation European background of dance opposition (3-18).

<sup>94</sup> For confession manuals, see Wagner, 6-7; for this particular *exemplum*, see Arcangeli, “Dance and Punishment,” 37.

<sup>95</sup> Backman, 154-61; Eudes of Rouen, 325, 407, 441, 550; Arcangeli, “Dance and Punishment,” 32.

<sup>96</sup> Arcangeli, “Dance and Punishment,” 33; Alessandro Arcangeli, “Dance Under Trial,” in *Dance Research* 12, no. 2 (Autumn 1994): 4.

Just because medieval moralists did not focus solely on the lustful nature of dance does not mean that they approved of dancers showing off their sexual attractiveness. There were simply other things about dance they found more objectionable than its sensuality. Given the strong thread of affirmation for human love and sensuality in certain parts of medieval society and the lack of single-minded focus on sensuality among those who condemned dance, it seems likely that the extreme paranoia about the sexual connotations of the dancing body that appeared among the moralists of later centuries had not yet developed. Medieval writers seemed to agree that dance could be a sensual affair even as they disagreed about whether this sensuality was positive or negative and to what extent it needed to be regulated. Even more so than unbridled joy, sensuality was a controversial subject that was, to medieval people, inextricably linked with dance.

### *Conclusion*

Although medieval dance carried similar connotations in multiple sources of the period, suggesting fairly stable and consistent concepts of dance, when dances were actually performed they still embodied great contradictions. Medieval dance was festive, joyful, and sensual, but those qualities could manifest as anything from productive communal joy to an erotic invitation to sin. This dual nature of dance, as both positive joy and negative sexuality, has been remarked on by many previous authors in multiple disciplines.<sup>97</sup> It seems necessary to add, however, that

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<sup>97</sup> Alexander; Ingrid Brainard, "Dance," in *A Companion to the Medieval Theater*, ed. Ronald W. Vince (New York and London: Greenwood Press, 1989), 89; Harding; Hausamann; Maynard; Robert L. McGrath, "The Dance as Pictorial Metaphor," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (Mar 1977): 81-92; Barbara Ehrenreich, *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007).

dance as joy was not always positive and could sometimes display sinful frivolity. Conversely, sensuality in dance could be seen as a sacred encounter between God and the soul, and even human sexuality was positively associated with divine love by some authors. Medieval authors certainly placed various moral judgments on different kinds of dance, but these judgments seem to have been less based on the presence of sensuality than previous authors have claimed.

The relative prevalence of dance among the medieval clergy is another important finding of this research. No one doubts that laypeople enjoyed festive dance, but the evidence suggests that priests, monks, nun, beguines, and other religious people often did so as well. While some religious authorities looked down on such dances and tried to ban them, others clearly considered festive dancing to be an appropriate way to celebrate the feast days of the church. Despite condemnation, dance often prevailed. Seen in this light, the beguines who danced were probably not isolated cases, but rather particularly memorable or prolific performers who came to the positive attention of church authorities and whose performances were therefore preserved in text.

### Sacred Performance in Medieval Europe

Specific words to indicate the action called “dance” existed both in Latin and in the various vernacular languages of medieval Europe, and this terminology helped define what dance was and what it was not. “Sacred performance,” however, is a term used by modern scholars to indicate a number of different medieval practices that can fruitfully be examined as a group. Medieval people did not speak of sacred performance, but instead of singing, processing, rejoicing, dancing, suffering, representing Christ, praying, and so on. These various modes of performance were enacted not only by clergy, but by laypeople as well. Reiterating Mary Suydam’s definition of sacred performance may be useful at this point: “any action, done in

public before an audience, that in some way is transformative for both actor and audience.”<sup>98</sup>

Actor, in this case, does not necessarily mean a performer of a theater scene but rather any person who takes action.

The actions that made up medieval sacred performance included monks and nuns chanting the daily divine office; processions that carried relics or images of saints in and out of churches and around cities; dramas that took place in the context of the liturgy; the ritual of the mass itself; the spiritual dances of people like Elisabeth and Beatrice; and physical mortifications such as fasting and flagellation.<sup>99</sup> Although these various facets of sacred performance have been studied by scholars from different fields such as drama, music, and dance, the medieval performers themselves did not create correspondingly neat categories. I view the physical actions of sacred performers from a dance scholar’s perspective and am therefore inclined to find dance in actions that scholars of medieval drama or musicology might categorize as either theatrical or musical performance, but acknowledging the arbitrary nature of such categories, I

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<sup>98</sup> Mary A. Suydam, “Begune Textuality: Sacred Performances,” in *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality*, ed. Mary A. Suydam and Joanna E. Ziegler (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 173.

<sup>99</sup> For the divine office, see Rebecca A. Baltzer and Margot E. Fassler, eds, *The Divine Office in the Latin Middle Ages: Methodology and Source Studies, Regional Developments, Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); another source for liturgical music is John Stevens; for some examples of city processions see Barbara A. Hanawalt and Kathryn L. Reyerson, eds, *City and Spectacle in Medieval Europe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); for liturgical drama and the mass an important source is Karl Young’s *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, 2 vols. (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1933) while Michal Kobialka, *This is My Body: Representational Practices in the Early Middle Ages* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999) offers a more current reading of such practices; for ascetic physical practices, particularly of women, a major source is Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

seek a broad view of the bodily performances of medieval Christian faith, whatever such performances may be called.

In chapter five, through thematic textual analysis, I uncovered criteria for what made a performance sacred in the four beguine texts. To recapitulate those themes, for medieval European Christians, sacred dance and performance were not strictly determined by the identity of the performer, the place of performance, or the specific movements displayed. Rather, sacred performance demonstrated a dynamic tension between order and ecstasy; went beyond the bounds of the ordinary; required the achievement of a correct inner state; and edified performer and audience, increasing faith and devotion.

### *Order and Ecstasy*

Much of the sacred performance in the four beguine texts was unplanned and spontaneous, with the performer suddenly caught up in an ecstasy, moving her body without conscious control. Even those beguine performances that were planned beforehand, such as Agnes' thousand blows, contained an element of ecstasy because she performed the blows in order to achieve an altered trance state. This emphasis on ecstasy and spontaneity does not hold true across all medieval sacred performance, however. Many sacred performances were planned in advance, executed according to specific written directions, and contained few if any ecstatic elements.

Group performances tend to be, by necessity, pre-planned. All the participants need to know where and when the performance is starting; who (if anyone) is leading; what sorts of motions, words, and music are to be performed; and where and when the performance is going to end. Group performances in front of large, important audiences such as Suger's bishops circling

the font before the assembled nobles, must plan well in advance and perhaps rehearse beforehand, much as wedding parties today rehearse their movements and lines. The processions that moved through medieval churches and streets on holy days were certainly planned out and performed in a similar manner year after year. In fact, the directions for these processions were often recorded in print. Anne Yardley, in her study of musical performance in medieval English nunneries, devotes an entire chapter to the processions for various feasts. The written directions for such events clearly dictated where the processions were to originate and end, in what order the nuns should march, which chants they should sing, what they should wear, and what they should carry.<sup>100</sup> The impression is one of orderliness and adherence to tradition.

On the other hand, solo performances can easily be spontaneous because there is no one else with whom one needs to coordinate one's actions. The beguine performances in the four core texts tend to fall into this category. A sacred performance that swung even further toward the ecstatic and the unruly was that of Christina the Astonishing, a woman of the late twelfth and early thirteenth century. The people of Christina's town considered her insane or demon-possessed because she climbed trees and buildings to pray, beat herself with thorns, crawled into tombs and ovens, and immersed herself in icy rivers. At times, in a state of "spiritual inebriation" she performed odd bodily contortions, perhaps like those of an acrobatic dancer. Her biographer, Thomas de Cantimpré, reported that "all her limbs were gathered together into a ball as if they were hot wax and all that could be perceived of her was a round mass" until she finished praying, whereupon "like a hedgehog her rolled up body returned to its proper shape and

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<sup>100</sup> Yardley, 113-58.

the limbs which had been bent formlessly were once again extended out.”<sup>101</sup> Christina’s solo performances were spontaneous and ecstatic, breaking the rules of her society so sharply that she was chained up as a madwoman.

Group performances were not always orderly, however, and solo performances were not always ecstatic. In fact, large ecstatic groups frightened medieval authorities a great deal. During the so-called “dance epidemic” of 1374, large groups of itinerate people came dancing and leaping into churches, perhaps seeking to cure disease, but the chroniclers who recorded the story assumed the dancers were either possessed by devils or engaging in debauchery.<sup>102</sup> Conversely, the solo performance at the heart of Christian worship, the priest’s performance of the mass, followed very strict rules and was enacted in nearly the same way again and again in churches throughout Europe.

Nor were orderly performances always approved and ecstatic performances always condemned. The flagellants of 1349, who performed very orderly ceremonies of processing, chanting, and scourging were still outlawed by the pope and vigorously suppressed.<sup>103</sup> As for ecstatic performance, King David’s vigorous and half-naked dance before the ark of the covenant in 2 Samuel 6:14-16 provided a positive biblical example, one which Francis of Assisi echoed when he performed actions like stripping himself naked or sitting on the floor in ashes. While some of Francis’s contemporaries disapproved, his performances and the new order of

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<sup>101</sup> Thomas de Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina the Astonishing*, trans. Margot H. King (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing, 1999), 24.

<sup>102</sup> Backman, 190-216; Robert E. Bartholomew, “Rethinking the Dancing Mania,” *Skeptical Inquirer* 24 (July/August 2000): 42-47.

<sup>103</sup> Backman, 161-70.

mendicants he founded were sanctioned by the pope.<sup>104</sup> Even Christina eventually found official approval. Religious men and women who came to see her determined that she was inspired by God rather than demons, and that her performances were meant to show the horrors of purgatory and induce sinners to seek salvation.<sup>105</sup> While both Christina's and Francis' performances initially met with misunderstanding from those around them, both were eventually vindicated as holy.

Both the orderly and the ecstatic had a place in Christian belief in the later medieval era. Ecstatic speech, prophecy, and visionary experiences had been part of Christian tradition since the days of the early church.<sup>106</sup> Medieval Christians expected that holy people could have experiences beyond human control that came suddenly from God and could involve extravagant and involuntary physical motion.<sup>107</sup> On the other hand, a strong theme of order and moderation in all things ran through medieval moral literature. Orderly movements, modest glances, and gentle speech were considered appropriate not just for those in religious orders, but also for secular nobility who wanted to behave well.<sup>108</sup> As the examples of Christina and Francis show, the religious authorities could be initially suspicious of ecstatic performance. I would argue that

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<sup>104</sup> Antonio Attisani, "Franciscan Performance: a Theatre Lost and Found Again," trans. Jane House, *PAJ: a Journal of Performance and Art* 25, no. 1 (Jan. 2003): 48-60.

<sup>105</sup> Cantimpré, 26-27.

<sup>106</sup> Acts 2; 1 Cor. 12-14.

<sup>107</sup> Barbara Newman, "What Did it Mean to Say 'I saw'? : the Clash between Theory and Practice in Medieval Visionary Culture." *Speculum* 80 (2005): 3-5; Walter Simons, "Reading a Saint's Body: Rapture and Bodily Movement in the *Vitae* of Thirteenth-Century Beguines," in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, eds. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester and New York: Manchester University, 1994), 16-19.

<sup>108</sup> Dobozy, 92-108; Simons, "Reading a Saint's Body," 14-16.

this suspicion rose out of the medieval church's strong emphasis on moderation. As Walter Simons points out, extraordinary, ecstatic movement was harder for medieval observers to "read" than moderate movement was, and thus might more easily come under censure.<sup>109</sup> Like medieval concepts of the body and soul, medieval notions of ecstasy and order tended to rest uneasily together.

Maria Dobozy gives an example of such tensions in her discussion of German minstrels. Using concepts from performance theory, she points out that the medieval ideal of moderate, orderly movement is incompatible with the actions of performance which must be exaggerated in order to effectively reach an audience. This need to step beyond order to sway people's hearts and minds would have been as true for preachers as it was for minstrels. Despite lip service to moderation, popular medieval preachers probably used performance techniques of less than moderate movement and speech.<sup>110</sup> Even if they did not wish to, such preachers had to strike a balance between order and spontaneity in order to create moving performances.

Similarly, the biographers of the beguines tried to reconcile the notion of modest humility (especially important for female saints) with the intense emotions and dramatic movements these women displayed. The vita of Marie d' Oignies contains an interesting paragraph in which Marie's biographer, Jacques de Vitry, attempts to describe the modesty inherent in her overflowing joy:

We never or rarely were able to notice in her any idle word, any disordered mannerism, any dishonourable habit of body, or any immoderate look. She did not manifest any indecorous or disordered movement of the body, even though often she could scarcely contain herself from the immense joy of her heart. Sometimes she was so exhilarated that

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<sup>109</sup> Simons, "Reading a Saint's Body," 14-20.

<sup>110</sup> Dobozy, 96-98, 115, 120-42.

she was forced to show with a little excess the jubilation of her heart on her face and in the external movement of her body and sometimes she would burst forth into modest smilings from the serenity of her heart. Sometimes she would even receive some of her friends who had come to her with a small shamefaced embrace or would kiss the hands and feet of certain priests out of her intense devotion.<sup>111</sup>

The translator of this *vita*, Margot King, notes that Jacques forced himself into a bind by trying to emphasizing both Marie's orderliness and her ecstasy, since ecstasy by its very nature goes out of bounds.<sup>112</sup> Jacques' description, therefore, reads like a list of qualifiers: Marie showed her excess of joy through her face and her body, but only a little; she smiled, but her smiles were modest; she embraced people, but only shamefacedly; she kissed the hands and feet of priests, certainly an out-of-bounds sort of behavior, but she only did so out of "intense devotion." These verbal gymnastics do not seem entirely successful, as it is difficult to imagine a modest smile bursting forth. I read this paragraph as a description of a spontaneous woman by an over-careful biographer.

In certain types of medieval sacred performance the tension between order and ecstasy was particularly strong. The liturgical dramas that commemorated Christ's nativity, passion, and resurrection as well as other stories of the Christian faith involved song, gesture, costume, and movement through the church to various altars or stations where specific scenes took place.<sup>113</sup> The lyrics, musical notation, and performance notes for such dramas were recorded, allowing them to be performed in similar fashion year after year. The detailed descriptions of how

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<sup>111</sup> Vitry, 35.

<sup>112</sup> Margot H. King, trans., *The life of Marie d'Oignies* (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing, 1987), 35.

<sup>113</sup> A good source for the performance details of such plays is Dunbar H. Ogden, *The Staging of Drama in the Medieval Church* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002).

liturgical dramas ought to be performed, like the specific rules for the nuns' processions, did not seem to allow for much spontaneity. However, when Eudes described the performances taking place on various feast days, he found the acting, singing, processing, and dancing far too unruly, too full of hilarity and improvisation.<sup>114</sup> It is possible, of course, that the convents and monasteries Eudes complained about might have been particularly uncontrolled, but it seems more likely that when dramas were actually performed rather than just being written down, the ecstasy of movement often broke through the orderliness of the page.

Another instance in which order and disorder coexisted within the same sacred dance occurred in fourteenth-century Spain, at the monastery of Montserrat. The shrine of the Virgin Mary at the monastery was a popular destination for pilgrims, who held vigils featuring songs and dances, perhaps the same sorts of dances that church councils so frequently forbade people from performing in churchyards. The monks found the pilgrims' songs to be inappropriate for the holy location so they composed new, sacred songs for the pilgrims to use.<sup>115</sup> It is notable that the monks did not ask the pilgrims to cease dancing or even to change their dances, only to moderate their lyrics. Perhaps the monks understood that the pilgrims needed the release that dance could bring and chose merely to channel such release into a more orderly form, or perhaps they felt that it was beyond their abilities to stop the dancing.

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<sup>114</sup> Eudes of Rouen, 50, 293, 436, 490, 530-31, 538.

<sup>115</sup> These songs were recorded in the *Llibre Vermell de Montserrat* (Red Book of Montserrat). I could not discover a full English translation, but Diana Webb gives the basic story of the singing and dancing pilgrims in *Medieval European Pilgrimage* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 157. Also, John Crosbie has a scholarly discussion of the *Llibre Vermell* in his article "Medieval 'Contrafacta': a Spanish Anomaly Reconsidered," *The Modern Language Review* 78, no. 1 (January 1983): 61-67.

The most dramatic example of the meeting of order and ecstasy in sacred dance was certainly Elisabeth's Passion dances. Philip refers to Elisabeth's immobile trance states as either *raptus* (being raptured or carried away) or *exstasis* (ecstasy). He believed that her performances were directly influenced by God or by angels who led her by the hand.<sup>116</sup> Philip often reminds his readers of Elisabeth's frail health and inability to perform such incredible movements without God's help, making it clear that he wanted to emphasize the ecstatic, divinely inspired nature of her performances.

On the other hand, Philip also focuses on the orderliness of Elisabeth's dances, showing how her performances were structured to fit the shape of the divine office. Philip fully describes her performance for matins, the first of the hours, but for later hours he shorthands his narrative "because much of what was stated above applies to the other hours."<sup>117</sup> In other words, Elisabeth repeated certain sections of her dance at each hour, and Philip did not feel the need to repeat his description. Rodgers and Ziegler point out that Elisabeth's dances, with their pattern of following the hours, were shaped by "ritual routine and standardized mythic frameworks of expectation."<sup>118</sup> While Elisabeth might certainly have used elements of ecstatic spontaneity, she did not simply dance in whatever fashion she desired. She acted within clear boundaries of time, space, and pre-determined structure. I am reminded of structured improvisations, dances in

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<sup>116</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 364, 369.

<sup>117</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 368. ". . . quoniam plura superius exposita aliis conveniunt horis."

<sup>118</sup> Susan Rodgers and Joanna E. Ziegler, "Elisabeth 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 Joanna E. Ziegler, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 324. These authors also discuss the disciplined nature of Elisabeth's dances (336).

which the performer determines the order, length, and general content of certain sections in advance but improvises the specific sequence and layering of movements differently with each performance. Such a framework allows a true mingling of orderliness and spontaneity. Since medieval Christianity valued both of those qualities in a mystic's performance, it would have made sense for Elisabeth to have created her dances using methods similar to those of a structured improvisation, though of course her resulting movements were quite different in intent from modern-day structured improvisations.

Like Jacques de Vitry in his descriptions of Marie d'Oignies, Philip went to great lengths to describe the modesty of Elisabeth's dramatic movements:

It should be known that the virgin's bodily movements and gestures display nothing indecent, nothing that offends the eyes. When she walks through her room, although she can see nothing and her garments flow along the ground, at no time do her feet stumble, at no time does she trip or stagger. Similarly, while she lays herself down on the ground or rises up, or while she prostrates herself and shifts her entire body by rolling, she is always clothed and covered in her own garments and nothing disorganized, nothing even remotely shameful is shown.<sup>119</sup>

Philip clearly felt the need to reassure his readers that there was nothing offensive in Elisabeth's performance. She moved gracefully and modestly and no matter how violent her motions, she always kept properly covered. As in Jacques's account, this description creates an odd contrast: Elisabeth was modest and moderate even when she thrashed on the floor. Perhaps present-day notions of modesty do not stretch far enough to reach Elisabeth's performances, or maybe the language Philip had at his disposal was insufficient to his need. What Philip saw in Elisabeth

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<sup>119</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 373. "Illud etiam sciendum, quod in praedictae virginis corporeis motibus et gestibus suprascriptis nihil indecens, nihil quod intuentium oculos offendere possit occurrit. Incedendo enim per cameram, quamvis nihil videat et vestes ejus defluant super terram, nunquam offendit pedibus, nunquam cespitat aut vacillat. Item deponendo se ad terram, aut surgendo, aut dum jacet seipsam totius corporis volutione localiter transferendo, ita semper proprio vestimento obvolvitur et velatur, ut nihil incompositum, nihil prorsus appareat inhonestum."

may have been closer to what I would call a practiced performer's grace and economy of movement. While watching certain compelling dancers I have been struck by the way that every motion, no matter how small, has purpose and intent. Nothing seems out of place or detracts from the performance. Even when such a dancer suddenly quivers or leaps there is a sense of control, of boundless energy within precise bounds. Perhaps this quality of simmering intensity is what impressed Philip when he viewed Elisabeth's performances.

Like the dynamic tension between the body and the soul in the writings of the beguines, sometimes at odds with each other, sometimes fully integrated, the tension between order and ecstasy in medieval sacred performance seems to have added to its depth and complexity. Organized dramatic performances could have unruly elements of spontaneity, outbursts of devotional fervor could be channeled in orderly ways, and even ecstatic dances could occur within a ritual structure. Bringing this concept of order within ecstasy from the analysis of Elisabeth's dances helps make sense of Christina's unruly actions: even a holy madwoman performed within the constraints of order. If Christina had never tempered her ecstasy she probably would not have been remembered as a holy woman. But partway through her life, upon the prayers of her friends, she immersed herself in a baptismal font and when she emerged "her manner of life was more moderate with regard to society and she behaved more calmly."<sup>120</sup> By finding her own tenuous balance between order and ecstasy, even Christina was able to fit herself into the tapestry of medieval Christian sacred performance.

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<sup>120</sup> Cantimpré, 27.

*Beyond the Ordinary*

The writings of the beguines show sacred performance as an activity that reached beyond the everyday through extraordinary movement, repeated movement that created intensity, or movement transplanted from its ordinary place. A wider view of sacred performance in medieval Europe shows similar tendencies. This may have been because of the nature of performance itself; as Dobozy states, drawing on modern-day performance theory, movements used in performance tend to be heightened or exaggerated.<sup>121</sup> However, other aspects besides movement could also have been heightened in medieval sacred performance. Different performances stretched beyond the ordinary in different ways.

Going beyond the ordinary might have meant traveling, making a pilgrimage to a shrine or holy site. A dance that served for everyday entertainment when done in the village square could have become sacred when transplanted to a holy place. Pilgrims' experiences of the sacred sometimes involved performing songs and dances at the holy sites they visited.<sup>122</sup> Since the songs the pilgrims to Montserrat sang were not religious in nature (until the monks wrote them new ones), it seems likely that their dances were also of the everyday, secular variety, the kinds of dances they might have performed at home. In the new, sacred setting, however, such songs and dances became transformed into acts of devotion. The pilgrims' songs and dances were devotional even before the monks changed the lyrics; if the songs had not been meant for a sacred purpose and performed in a sacred place, the monks would probably not have cared so deeply about them.

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<sup>121</sup> Dobozy, 96-98.

<sup>122</sup> Webb, 155-58.

Another group of traveling dancers were the performers of what Backman names a “dance epidemic” who appeared in Liège and other cities along the Rhine in 1374. They may have been pilgrims. They were clearly not from the Rhine area because they used strange, foreign words in their songs; the locals believed they were calling out the names of devils. The dancers performed in the streets and in churches, especially before altars. They wore wreaths on their heads, tied cloths tightly around their waists and performed vigorous movements such as leaping, rolling, and falling to the ground. Sometimes they cried out as if in pain. These dancers attracted a following, with people joining their ranks wherever they went. The church authorities pronounced them to be demon-possessed and tried to exorcise them.<sup>123</sup> Many twentieth-century scholars, including Backman, have assumed that the dancers were suffering from an illness, hence the term “dance epidemic.” Whatever prompted their actions, these dancers can be seen as sacred performers. They danced before an audience, and although the exact purpose of their dances is unclear since the only records that remain were written by those who disapproved, it seems that they sought some sort of transformation, whether from sickness into health or from one spiritual state to another. Robert Bartholomew suggests that the dancers of 1374 were a traveling religious group, and I am inclined to agree.<sup>124</sup> What probably made their performances so controversial was that they combined two social stigmas: the out-of-bounds state of being itinerate and the performance of extraordinary, shocking movements. If they had performed

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<sup>123</sup> Backman discusses this “dance epidemic” at some length, with thorough and fascinating details (190-216). I draw my information from his account, though I do not agree with his conclusions.

<sup>124</sup> Bartholomew, 42-47.

such dances at home, fewer people would have been shocked, but it is very likely that taking the dances into churches was a necessary part of these dancers' sacred transformations.

Another group of pilgrims who performed were the flagellants. As Backman tells the tale, processions of penitents who whipped themselves in order to atone for the world's sins traveled through various European countries in the late thirteenth through the fourteenth centuries. In the cities they visited they sang, processed in circles, and performed their flagellation rituals.<sup>125</sup> It seems evident that they intended their performances to be sacred, transforming both themselves and the world around them. While ascetic practices were acceptable for individual saints, evidently hundreds and thousands of pilgrim penitents went too far beyond the ordinary for the church authorities to allow. Several flagellant movements came and went without incident, but when the largest flagellant groups yet swept through Europe in 1349 the pope denounced them and they were sent to prison or disbanded.<sup>126</sup>

Sacred performance could reach beyond the ordinary without the participants going on pilgrimage. For laypeople, the holy space of the altar was out-of-bounds, a place where only a priest could go to celebrate the sacred performance of the mass. As mentioned in chapter five, Agnes Blannbekin usurped this sacred space with her frequent altar-kissing.<sup>127</sup> She was not the only woman to do so. Ida of Louvain, a thirteenth-century Cistercian nun, wanted to physically embrace Christ, so she waited until no one was watching her and approached the altar to repeatedly embrace the pyx (a ceremonial receptacle for holding the eucharist). Ida's biographer

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<sup>125</sup> Backman, 161-69.

<sup>126</sup> Backman, 163.

<sup>127</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 117.

noted how daring it was for a woman to touch the altar, but while he acknowledged that some might condemn her he called her embraces a “praiseworthy miracle of affection.”<sup>128</sup> Christina, too, stepped out of bounds when she crept into church at night when no one else was there and threw herself down before the altar. The abbot and another priest, who followed her secretly to watch what she would do, saw her create a very private performance before God, praying aloud, wailing, and first striking and then kissing various parts of her body.<sup>129</sup> While Christina clearly did not intend these actions to be witnessed by any earthly audience, they may still be considered as performance because Christina believed herself to be performing before a heavenly audience. In all these cases, the women went beyond the ordinary by stepping into sacred places they were not supposed to enter. In these extraordinary spaces they created their own private rituals of sacred performance which, even though performed only for themselves and for God, nevertheless were seen and reported by those around them.

Sometimes the movements themselves could make a sacred performance extraordinary: Elisabeth’s difficult poses, Christina’s dangerous climbing into ovens and icy waters, or the flagellants’ repeated self-scourging. One particular form of extraordinary movement, beating the breast and twisting the limbs, appears in multiple accounts of sacred performances. In each case the movements, though similar, are given a different interpretation by the authors.

When Marie d’Oignies struck herself her biographer assumed it was an involuntary movement caused by her illness: “Then the good Father subdued his daughter whom he loved with the whip of discipline so that the limbs of her body were wondrously twisted. Sometimes it

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<sup>128</sup> *Ida of Louvain: Medieval Cistercian Nun* (Lafayette, Oregon: Guadalupe Translations, 1990), 53-54.

<sup>129</sup> Cantimpré, 42-44.

was as though from her pain her arms moved in circles and she was forced to beat her breast with her hands.”<sup>130</sup> Beatrice of Nazareth beat her breast because her joy was overflowing. While she meditated, God’s grace would come upon her and “refresh her inwardly with much delight, but, also outwardly effervescing into bodily form, it would stir her up to a spiritual dance, in which she would excitedly strike parts of her body.”<sup>131</sup> Elisabeth of Spalbeek portrayed Christ’s passion and edified people through her performance in which she struck herself “now on the jaw, now on the back of the head, now between the shoulder blades, now on the neck.”<sup>132</sup> While Christina did not precisely strike herself, she *bent* herself, and the purpose was prophecy. When someone in her town died and was damned, she publicly “wept and twisted herself and bent herself backwards and bent and rebent her arms and fingers as if they were pliable and not made of bones.” But if the dying person was to be saved, “she leaped and jumped so high that it was a great marvel to see. From behavior like this, the people knew the power of her spirit and could easily mark by her joy or sorrow what would happen to the dying in the town.”<sup>133</sup>

In every case the striking and twisting movements these women performed were out of the ordinary. Despite the great variety of causes and purposes the authors attributed to these extraordinary movements, each performance was considered sacred by those who watched. Striking oneself might well have been a motion that had particularly strong religious connotations to medieval Christians, causing them to read its appearance as a sign of the

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<sup>130</sup> Vitry, 56.

<sup>131</sup> *Beatrice of Nazareth*, 233.

<sup>132</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 364-65. “. . . nunc . . . in maxillam . . . nunc in occipite, nunc inter scapulas, nunc in collo.”

<sup>133</sup> Cantimpré, 30-31.

sacredness of a performance. If that was the case, it helps make sense of the movements in the *Planctus Mariae* (Lament of Mary), a fourteenth-century Italian liturgical drama from the town of Cividale, in which the Virgin Mary, the two other Marys, and the Apostle John mourn the death of Christ. The written record for the performance of this drama contains a large number of stage directions telling the performers to point at each other and the audience, embrace each other, and most frequently, strike themselves. There are a total of twenty such blows.<sup>134</sup> Some theater scholars appreciate these recorded gestures, finding them useful for modern performers attempting to do reconstructions. Others have criticized the movements as excessive, wondering whether they really would have been used in a church performance and suggesting that perhaps they were added by a later scribe.<sup>135</sup> The extravagant grief and breast-beating of the performers in the play does indeed go beyond all bounds of ordinary movement. However, if striking oneself were commonly recognized as one of the exaggerated movements typical of sacred performance, the gestures in the *Planctus Mariae* would have only served to emphasize the holy nature of the subject matter. In light of the various beguines who struck themselves for joy, pain, and prophecy, it would have been surprising if the grieving Mary had not beat her breast.

The most frequent sacred performance of the Middle Ages, experienced by every practicing Christian, was the mass. The priest took the role of primary performer in this ritual with the congregation as both audience and participants. Many of the actions the priest performed during the mass seem to us fairly ordinary. He prayed, bowed, laid out the eucharistic

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<sup>134</sup> W. L., Smoldon, trans. *Planctus mariae (the Lament of Mary)* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 1-13.

<sup>135</sup> Audrey Ekdahl Davidson is one of the former, though she discusses the criticism others have leveled against the Cividale *Planctus Mariae* in her book *Aspects of Early Music and Performance* (New York: AMS Press, 2008), 38-40.

wafers, poured water and wine together, and eventually raised the consecrated host above his head.<sup>136</sup> However, even the most ordinary actions became extraordinary because of the sacred purpose of the mass—to transform the wafers and wine into the body and blood of Christ, and through them to transform the community of believers. As if to emphasize the incredible nature of these transformations, more extraordinary elements kept being added to the mass. The priest wore special garments, variously colored for the different seasons of the church year. There might be incense in the air, and there was certainly singing. In the twelfth century, when elevating the host first became standard practice, this literal high point of the mass was often accompanied by ringing a bell. Entire congregations fell to their knees when they saw the consecrated host. In this charged atmosphere, with everyone around them already participating in the most sacred of performances, the beguines frequently experienced revelations or created even more dramatic performances of their own.

Even if it is in the nature of performance itself to go beyond the ordinary, medieval sacred performances were doubly extraordinary because they were performance and because they were sacred. In Christian traditions, something sacred is by definition not entirely of this world, but contains part of the divine essence. One of the core beliefs of Christianity is the simultaneous humanity and divinity of Christ. By following Christ, medieval sacred performers took part in that divinity. As in the mass, even the most simple of sacred acts, already extraordinary through association with the divine, became more extraordinary because of the layers of performance laid about it. Prayers became repeated genuflections, penitence became public flagellation, and receiving the eucharist became a full-bodied physical act of union with

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<sup>136</sup> The medieval mass is described in Hamilton, 55-59; Lynch, 280-84.

and revelations from God. Perhaps because of these heightened, extraordinary performative qualities, many sacred performances were considered miraculous by those who watched.

Wonder at a miracle was not the only response an audience could have, however. If the extraordinary could be seen as the hand of God, it could also be seen as madness or the work of devils. Going beyond the ordinary and the everyday was an act tinged with danger and with the supernatural, and not something that medieval performers undertook lightly.

### *The Inner State*

Hadewijch, Mechthild, and even Agnes (through her scribe) more often reported what they were pondering, praying, or envisioning when they received divine revelation than the ways they outwardly performed such revelations. This focus on the inner state may partly be a matter of point of view; it is easier to describe one's own experience than to imagine what one looks like from an outside point of view. The beguines were not merely interested in having emotional inner states, however. They sought to achieve the most spiritually correct states and they did so out of a desire to approach God. Before Hadewijch's union with God, a visionary eagle told her to make herself ready.<sup>137</sup> During Lent, Agnes spent a great deal of effort—flagellating herself, genuflecting, and repeating prayers—in order to bring herself into the proper inner state for Easter.<sup>138</sup> Other mystics besides the beguines also emphasized having a proper inner state. Richard Rolle, a fourteenth-century English hermit, spoke not just of outward sins but also of

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<sup>137</sup> *Hadewijch: the Complete Works*, 281.

<sup>138</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 55, 142-43.

inner sins and how to purify oneself from them.<sup>139</sup> Mechtild of Hackeborn, a thirteenth-century Benedictine nun from the prolific community of women at Helfta, wrote that the highest form of good included both a body that performed genuflections and vigils and a heart that loved God.<sup>140</sup> For those medieval Christians who wanted to fully experience the divinity, rote performance of outward actions was not enough. The inner person also had to be properly attuned to God.

In contrast to the writings of the beguines, many other descriptions of medieval performances come from an exterior point of view and do not tell what the performers were thinking and feeling. This can make it very difficult for a modern scholar to understand the purpose of such performances. If the dancers who came to Liège in 1374 had recorded their own experiences and the meanings they attributed to their dances, for example, it might be possible to more clearly gauge their intentions. As it is, however, we have only the exterior impressions of those who assumed the dancers were possessed by demons.

Even if many chroniclers recorded the actions of performers rather than their inner states, that does not imply that inner states were unimportant. On the whole, medieval Christians were very concerned with the state of their own and other people's souls. One's inner state while taking communion was particularly important. The Bible said that one ought to examine oneself before taking communion (1 Cor. 11:28-29) and medieval Christians took this injunction seriously. When the Fourth Lateran Council decreed in 1215 that all Christians should take

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<sup>139</sup> Richard Rolle, *Richard Rolle: the English Writings*, trans. and ed. by Rosamund S. Allen (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 164.

<sup>140</sup> Mechthild of Hackeborn, *Select Revelations of S. Mechtild* (London: Thomas Richardson and Sons, 1875), 189.

communion at least once yearly, it also decreed that they should, before communicating, confess their sins to a priest in order to be in the proper state of grace.<sup>141</sup>

Priests, too, were supposed to have a correct inner state when administering the sacraments to their congregations. If a priest was in a state of sin, medieval Christians wondered, could he still consecrate the eucharist and make it holy, or would his wrong spiritual state invalidate his outward performance? This worry was not merely speculative; Agnes and Eudes both reported incidents of priests who raped women and committed other sins.<sup>142</sup> Priestly wrongdoing was a major concern for Agnes, for other holy women, and probably for laypeople in general, since those who could not perform the mass themselves had to rely on the proper performance of those who could. Agnes' revelations showed her that the eucharist consecrated by the sinning priest was still holy, a view in line with the majority consensus of church authorities.<sup>143</sup> Such consensus did not silence ordinary people's worries, however. The people of Liège, troubled by the appearance of the dancers of 1374, thought that this plague had come upon them because the priests of the city were corrupt and the baptisms they performed were therefore invalid.<sup>144</sup> There was clearly a continuing controversy over priests whose inner states did not properly match their outward performances of the sacred.

If a wrong inner state could invalidate a sacred performance, a correct inner state could prove an otherwise questionable performance to be authentically sacred. Particularly in cases

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<sup>141</sup> Hamilton, 91-93.

<sup>142</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 39; Eudes of Rouen, 33 ff.

<sup>143</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 39; Hamilton, 52-53.

<sup>144</sup> Backman, 191-92.

like Christina's and Elisabeth's, in which a woman performed extraordinary, unruly movement, a male church authority figure was called in to observe, interview, and finally pronounce whether the performance was sacred or not. As Walter Simons points out, since the same external physical motions could be read either as holy performance or as demon possession, church authorities had to consider more than just the physical when judging such performances.<sup>145</sup> The intent behind the performance and the performer's inner state might be just as important as the actual physical actions.

A particularly vivid example of a sacred performance validated by the performer's correct inner state comes from the story of *Our Lady's Tumbler* (*Le Tumbeor Nostre Dame*). This *exemplum* written in Old French probably dates from the early thirteenth or the late twelfth century.<sup>146</sup> The story tells of a minstrel who gave up his profession to join the monastery of Clairvaux. However, he felt useless in the religious life because he did not know Latin and could not chant the hours with the other monks. In a crypt below the chapel he found a statue of the Virgin Mary and, to the singing of the monks above, he performed an energetic acrobatic dance before the statue, praying that Mary might receive his humble service. He repeated this performance at every liturgical hour for a number of years, until another monk discovered him and reported him to the abbot. As the abbot secretly watched, Mary herself and a host of angels

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<sup>145</sup> Simons, "Reading a Saint's Body," 19-20.

<sup>146</sup> Jan M. Ziolkowski, "Juggling the Middle Ages: the Reception of *Our Lady's Tumbler* and *Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame*," in *Memory and Medievalism*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007), 157-59. Ziolkowski examines the many permutations the story of the tumbler has gone through since its rediscovery in 1873. It has entered the public imagination and been re-cast in many forms and mediums. The original *exemplum*, however, remains a valid historical source. One English translation is *Our Lady's Tumbler*, trans. Philip Henry Wicksteed, (n.p.: T.B. Mosher, 1904).

appeared to comfort the minstrel when he fell, exhausted, before the statue. The abbot acclaimed the dance and permitted the minstrel to keep performing it, and the minstrel was remembered after his death as a holy man.<sup>147</sup>

A number of the elements in this story are worth noting. The minstrel left his previous life as a secular performer and, while the story does not state outright that this life had been sinful, such an idea might be inferred from the minstrel's continual doubt and self-deprecation. This meshes well with Dobozy's research about the marginal status of minstrels and the moral and social stigma under which they performed.<sup>148</sup> However, the author of *Our Lady's Tumbler* gives no indication that the minstrel's actual performance of acrobatic dance was sinful. The minstrel is shown worrying that his offering may not be pleasing to God and Mary, perhaps because of its association with his former, less than holy life, but in the end his performance is vindicated by the appearance of Mary and the angels. This *exemplum* shows a minstrel who reforms his ways but does not stop being a minstrel. He is still able to practice his profession in a holy way. Certainly, there is an element of wonder and perhaps even condescension in the author's treatment of the subject; if even a minstrel can be saved, the implication still remains that a minstrel is particularly in need of salvation. Yet the dance itself is presented in a positive light and with lively, dramatic language. The anonymous medieval author seems to have been attempting to reconcile the seemingly paradoxical states of joyful dance and humble penitence.

The secrecy of the minstrel's performance is also noteworthy. It seems to bear some resemblance to Christina creeping surreptitiously into church at night or Ida embracing the pyx

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<sup>147</sup> *Our Lady's Tumbler*, 3-31.

<sup>148</sup> Dobozy, 33-84.

when no one was looking. For performers on the margins of the religious hierarchy, whose performances might not have met with approval, a private performance just for God or the saints might have been a way to avoid censure. Of course, these performances found their way into the record of history, so perhaps their secrecy was more an indication of humility than an actual desire to hide them.

The specific movements the minstrel performed were the same ones he had used before he became a monk. The author names the dance steps by geographical area: “Then he did the French vault and then the vault of Champagne, and then he did the vaults that they do in Brittany, and then the vault of Lorraine.”<sup>149</sup> The minstrel’s leaping steps were acrobatic dance movements and at one point “he tumbled with his feet up in the air, walked and went on his two hands.”<sup>150</sup> Among his acrobatics, the minstrel interspersed kneeling before the statue, weeping, and beating his breast, movements that had more sacred connotations. Interestingly enough, the minstrel was even inspired by his sacred performance to accomplish a leap he had never been able to perform before. However, even though he was moved to new feats of skill, and even though he used both conventionally sacred movements and conventionally secular ones, the specific movements of the minstrel’s dance were not what made his performance holy. The minstrel stated that he was performing his dance “in good faith, if God aid me, without guile.”<sup>151</sup> His inner state was humble; he wanted to serve God and Mary in the only way he knew how. The author of the *exemplum* makes it very clear that the minstrel’s motivations, not his movements, were what

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<sup>149</sup> *Our Lady’s Tumbler*, 10-11.

<sup>150</sup> *Our Lady’s Tumbler*, 11.

<sup>151</sup> *Our Lady’s Tumbler*, 9.

mattered: “Now, do you suppose that God would have prized his service had he not loved? Not a whit, however much he tumbled! But it was his love that he prized.”<sup>152</sup> The proper inner state won out over the questionable nature of the minstrel’s dance itself, and because of the love and devotion of the performance it was approved as sacred by the Virgin Mary herself.

The story of *Our Lady’s Tumbler* could certainly have been fictional, but given its similarities to other accounts of sacred performance from the same era, it might well have been based on the life of a real minstrel. The tale bears particularly striking similarities to Philip’s story of Elisabeth’s performance. Although the minstrel was a man and Elisabeth a woman, both originated outside the structures of clerical authority. Neither could read or write Latin, and therefore they were unable to chant the divine office. However, they both celebrated the hours physically, performing vigorous, dramatic movements. In both cases the authors emphasize the effort involved in these performances. The minstrel sweated profusely from his efforts, and Elisabeth danced in a way Philip found full of manly vigor. The minstrel swooned in exhaustion after his energetic leaps, and Elisabeth too fell into stillness after her physically taxing performances. Also, each author explicitly points out the meaning of the dance. The minstrel, humble, penitent, and full of love, offered his service to Mary. Elisabeth, virginally pure, suffering, and also full of love, portrayed and took part in Christ’s passion. Each danced as an act of devotion toward the divinity, though it is intriguing (and possibly an indication of dance’s association with sensuality and male/female pairing) that the male minstrel danced for a female saint, Mary, and the female Elisabeth danced for the male Christ.

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<sup>152</sup> *Our Lady’s Tumbler*, 15-16.

Philip of Clairvaux, in typical medieval fashion, allegorically relates Elisabeth's performances to scripture passages in order to draw out meaning from her actions. This explanation is worth quoting at some length. Philip gives a nuanced analysis that comes as close as any source I have found to stating a medieval notion of performance theory and practice or, as he would have put it, of the relation between the inner state and exterior action.

Philip begins by stating that Elisabeth "mortifies the flesh, the body being tormented and the soul being joyful: the more she endures exterior torment, the more she possesses interior light."<sup>153</sup> In this introductory statement, he has already set up a number of corresponding binaries: body/soul, torment/joy, exterior/interior. He does not place any of the terms from these binaries above the other terms, however, or create a hierarchy. Instead, he merely presents all these things as being present in Elisabeth's performance. He then gives the biblical passage upon which he is going to expound: "What do we see in this Sunamite if not dances of camps?"<sup>154</sup> This passage is from Song of Songs, a particularly popular book among medieval mystics who related the dialogues of the lovers to the love between the soul and God. Interpreting the passage now, Philip says that "it is certain that the camp relates to battle; but dances represent gladness."<sup>155</sup> Relating dance to gladness seems obvious, since dance was linked with joy for most medieval authors. Philip goes on to say that when Elisabeth worships

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<sup>153</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 371. ". . . carne vapulet, corpore crucietur et mente laetetur: exterius sustineat crucem, interius possideat lucem . . ."

<sup>154</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 371. "Quid vidimus in Sunamite hac nisi choros castrorum?"

<sup>155</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 371-72. "Certum est enim quod castrum ad pugnam pertinet; sed chori laetitiam repraesentant."

God “she truly shows in her body the battle of the flesh, and in her face the dances of the soul.”<sup>156</sup>

Philip has suddenly done something unexpected and extremely interesting. In relating dance to joy, he has made dance correspond with the second term in each of the binaries above—soul, joy, and interior. Conversely, the camps relate to battle and to the first item—body, torment, and exterior. Because of the way Philip has set up his argument, he has made dance relate not to the body, as one might expect, but instead to the soul. Philip says that in Elisabeth’s performances her body displays a battle while her soul, shining through her face, displays a dance. In all his descriptions, he has never referred to Elisabeth’s performance as a dance until this point. Now it is clear why. Dance, to Philip, is not the tormented movements of Elisabeth’s body but instead the joy of her soul.

It might seem that, by making dance a thing of the soul rather than the body, that Philip is negating physicality. But his philosophy has one more twist to it. “And truly, unless I am deceived, the dances of camps may be seen in her, who sometimes, as it is believed, accompanied by the triumphant weapons and the angelic dances of the most victorious passion of Christ, fights against the enemies of our salvation.”<sup>157</sup> In this passage, Philip reconciles his binaries by saying that the dances of camps can be seen in Elisabeth. Since it has been her physical performance that Philip has been describing throughout his entire account, one can only assume that it is Elisabeth’s moving self, body and soul, that he means. In her rendition of

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<sup>156</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 372. “. . . vere demonstrat in corpore pugnam carnis, in facie choros mentis.”

<sup>157</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 372. “Et vere ni fallor, chori castrorum videri, id est notari possunt in ea, quia victoriosissimae passionis Christi triumphalibus armis et angelicis choris interdum, ut creditur, comitata, inimicos nostrae salutis expugnat.”

Christ's passion she dances and does battle, both at the same time. Philip seems to be saying that Elisabeth's performance brings together body and soul, suffering and joy, and the exterior and interior states.

This concept that Philip expounds, that the inner self could have its own joyful dance of the soul, emphasizes the importance of the inner state to medieval sacred performance. If a performer's inner self was wrong or sinful, as in the case of corrupt priests, the effectiveness of that person's outward performance might be suspect. Conversely, an appropriate inner state of spirit could go a long way toward offsetting any questionable elements in a person's outward performance. In the ideal sacred performance, like Elisabeth's, the inner and the outer would come together and body and soul would be united in their expression of faith.

### *The Edification of Christians*

Religious belief is at the heart of sacred performance. In order to be considered sacred, a performance must express beliefs appropriate to the religion with which it is associated. In this study, whose focus is delimited to medieval European Christianity, it was Christian beliefs that were at the heart of the sacred performances discussed here. Other religions in medieval Europe, specifically Judaism and Islam, each had their own embodied beliefs and their own traditions of sacred performance. Pre-Christian religions still existed quietly alongside Christianity in parts of Europe as well. The use of dance and sacred performance in these other European religions is a fascinating topic but beyond the scope of this research. Christianity was a dominant political and spiritual force in medieval Europe, and it was Christian beliefs that the beguines and other sacred performers described in this chapter expressed with their bodies.

Medieval sacred performances displayed Christian beliefs in numerous ways, but in all their variety one thing they had in common was the edification of Christians. To return to Suydam's concept of sacred performance, these dances, dramas, songs, processions, and physical practices all transformed the performer and the audience in some way. I have identified five ways in which medieval sacred performances expressed faith, edified Christians, and transformed those involved.

Sacred performances could educate audiences by giving a visual demonstration of Christian stories and beliefs. Because ordinary laypeople did not understand Latin and could not read the Bible or theological books, they needed to learn the fundamentals of Christianity in other ways. Liturgical dramas and religious plays with their vivid songs, gestures, and other theatrical elements undoubtedly played a part in religious instruction as well as simple entertainment.<sup>158</sup> Christina's incredible performances, in which she tortured herself yet remained physically unharmed, were meant to be, according to her biographer, dramatic visual representations of the sufferings of purgatory, instructing the faithful and warning sinners to repent.<sup>159</sup> Elisabeth's dance of Christ's passion may also have instructed ordinary people about Christian beliefs. Philip claimed that even illiterate people could understand the deep mysteries of the faith by watching Elisabeth perform: "An ignorant man, just as if he were learned, is able to read, not in parchment or paper, but in the limbs and body of our girl . . . a living picture of salvation and an animated narrative of redemption."<sup>160</sup> Elisabeth was living out the Christian

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<sup>158</sup> Hamilton briefly discusses the use of liturgy, visual art, and drama as means of instruction (81-85).

<sup>159</sup> Cantimpré, 18-22.

<sup>160</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 373. "Non in membranis aut chartis, sed in membris et

stories of faith through her performance. Indeed, throughout his descriptions of her performance, Philip constantly relates Elisabeth's dances to specific verses of scripture. For example, when she rolled on the ground and struck various parts of her body against the floor, Philip says that it was as if "her head, hands and arms and also her whole body truly would tell that which is prophetically written of the Lord's sufferings: *The sorrows of death surrounded me*, etc."<sup>161</sup> It is unclear whether Philip or Elisabeth chose the verses, but he certainly seemed to believe that she was physically instructing her audience in scripture and that he was merely reporting what any viewer could have noted.

Perhaps Elisabeth's demonstration of Christian beliefs could even be termed physical preaching or exegesis of scripture. Walter Simons states that Elisabeth's role in her performance was like that of a priest even though such a role was not permitted for women, and Amy Hollywood, in a more general discussion of female mystics, points out while men's religious texts often used scripture as their foundation, women, who were not allowed to interpret scripture, tended to use visionary language instead, making their own experiences into sacred texts.<sup>162</sup> I would add that church tradition forbade women from preaching in public, especially to men, and yet Elisabeth's sacred performances created a very public physical "sermon" on the Passion of Christ, one that male monks and abbots observed, admired, and learned from. Philip rarely mentions Elisabeth speaking, but I posit that she did not need to. If her sacred performances

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corpore memoratae nostrae puellae . . . suae salvationis vivam imaginem et redemptionis animatam historiam sicut litteratus ita valeat legere idiota."

<sup>161</sup> *Catalogus codicum*, 366. ". . . caput, manus et brachia, etiam totum corpus vere diceret illud propheticum quod Domino patienti adscribitur: *Circumdederunt me dolores mortis*, etc."

<sup>162</sup> Simons, "Reading a Saint's Body," 12; Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, 98.

were as clear as Philip reports them to have been, she had found a way to expound on scripture and to preach without breaking the prohibitions about women teaching or preaching to men.

Dramatic or miraculous performances could increase a sense of devotion, wonder, or awe in those who watched. When Agnes bowed toward a basement her companions laughed at her, but when it was revealed that a eucharistic host had been hidden there her miraculous movements caused an increase in faith among those same companions, who all praised God.<sup>163</sup> Sacred performance did not have to be obviously miraculous in order to inspire awe, however. Suger, in his description of the splendidly arrayed bishops circling the font in their dance of blessing, noted that all the nobles who were present looked on with great devotion.<sup>164</sup> Suger was clearly a lover of beauty and splendor; his accounts contain many vivid descriptions of the works of art in his church, the gold, jewels and fine craftsmanship. He believed that splendor in the ornaments of the church, as well as in the garments of the priests and bishops and the solemn movements they performed, created an awe-inspiring spectacle to bring the viewers greater faith. Many medieval processions and even the liturgy itself undoubtedly had this affect on those who witnessed. People of the lower classes did not see gold, jewels, and beautiful stained glass every day. Dramatic performances, too, were an uncommon and exciting event. Merging splendor and drama together in the rituals of the church helped appeal to laypeople and increased the status of the Christian faith.

The sacred performer could sometimes be, quite simply, praising God. This was certainly the case with Elisabeth's dances in which she kissed the image of Christ and murmured

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<sup>163</sup> *Life and Revelations*, 40-41.

<sup>164</sup> Suger, 115.

words of love and praise. The minstrel in *Our Lady's Tumbler* danced to honor God and Mary. Praise of God was probably the purpose of many beguine performances, especially those done in private. If no one was present but the performer and God, then God became the audience and the purpose of the performance was to honor him. However, performances of praise were also done by large groups in public. The songs and dances of the pilgrims at Montserrat were devotional, performed in honor of Mary, whose statue at Montserrat was a center of pilgrimage for those who honored her.<sup>165</sup>

Sacred performance could also be prophetic. This does not seem to have been as common in Christianity as in religions where spirit possession was practiced and the deities spoke through their dancing worshipers. Receiving revelations from God was an important part of medieval Christian mysticism, however, and as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, beguine revelations tended to be bodily and performative. The most blatant example of performance as prophecy, however, is Christina walking through her town, either weeping, twisting and bending or leaping with joy in order to indicate whether the souls of the recently departed had gone to hell or heaven.<sup>166</sup>

The transformations brought about by sacred performance could be wholly spiritual in nature, accomplishing something that could not be felt by the senses but that had consequences in the spiritual world. Sometimes this might be an inner transformation of the performer, as when the beguines felt themselves become one with God. Sacred performance could also spiritually transform others besides the performer. Many beguines took on the task of saving

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<sup>165</sup> Webb, 28, 157.

<sup>166</sup> Cantimpré, 30-31.

souls from purgatory and sending them to heaven; the beguines accomplished this through prayers, weeping, genuflecting, and other performances.<sup>167</sup> This salvation of souls through physical actions, often through suffering, mirrored Christ's salvation of souls through his physical suffering and death. Elisabeth, too accomplished spiritual goals with her dance. Philip spoke of her fighting against "the enemies of our salvation" with her dances and with angelic weapons. Medieval Christians believed that Satan and his devils were very real and could tempt and torment the faithful, but through prayer, through incantations, or in Elisabeths' case, through dance, one could battle the devils and drive them away. While such performances accomplished spiritual goals they also took place in the physical world, and those who looked on, like Philip, could take comfort in knowing that a holy person was doing spiritual battle against the enemies of Christianity.

While the enemies of the faith that Philip spoke of may have been devils, they may have been heretics instead. It is important to remember, at this point, that medieval Christianity was not monolithic, even though certain Christians might have liked it to be and sometimes wrote as though it was. A religion that spanned languages, peoples, and geographic areas obviously had a great variety of beliefs and practices. The pope was the official head of the church, with a hierarchy of bishops who oversaw both priests and the cloistered religious.<sup>168</sup> But even with such a structured hierarchy, decrees issued by those in authority were put into practice in various ways depending on local traditions. This is probably why Eudes of Rouen had such trouble

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<sup>167</sup> Newman, *Virile Woman*, 108-36; Dyan Elliott, *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), 74-79.

<sup>168</sup> Hamilton, 33-40.

trying to stamp out what he saw as inappropriate feast-day festivities: while he had official proclamations denouncing dances in churchyards, the various convents, monasteries and cathedrals he visited had lively traditions of processions and dances that they undoubtedly saw as legitimate ways to express their faith.

Certain varieties of medieval Christian belief were denounced as heresy by church authorities. The people involved, like those who performed prohibited dances, did not think that they were heretics. They probably believed themselves to be faithful Christians speaking out against the evils of their society or interpreting scripture in a more correct fashion. The Albigensians, for example, believed that the body was evil and the soul was good, sentiments that some orthodox Christians also expressed. Jacques de Vitry, the biographer of the beguine Marie d'Oignies, was one of the men sent to preach in the crusade against the Albigensians. Dyan Elliott points out that Marie's *vita* was written partly to provide propaganda against the Albigensians by giving an example of a living saint who used her body in a holy way, negating the belief that the body was irrevocably evil.<sup>169</sup> Jo Ann McNamara, too, has spoken of the way religious women battled heretical ideas by making both their bodies and their souls sacred.<sup>170</sup> In this light, Philip may have been making the same point when he praised Elisabeth's "dances of camps." By suffering and rejoicing, by dancing and battling, she was showing the value of the body. The "enemies of our salvation" against whom she fought might very well have been heretical Christian sects.

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<sup>169</sup> Elliott, 47-70.

<sup>170</sup> Jo Ann McNamara, "The Rhetoric of Orthodoxy: Clerical Authority and Female Innovation in the Struggle with Heresy," in *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*, ed. Ulrike Wiethaus (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 13-14.

If sacred performance was about the edification of Christians, then, determining who counted as real Christians became of critical importance in evaluating the sacred nature of a performance. The odd performances of women like Christina and Elisabeth might have been accepted by church authorities not merely because they edified the faithful, but also because they could become a weapon against the *unfaithful*. What about the sacred performances of those who were branded as heretics? For the most part, those performances are difficult to uncover because those in power kept the records. The flagellants, for example, probably considered themselves good Christians who were staving off the apocalypse and bringing about a better world, but they were remembered as a heretical sect and their performances as anomalies. It is important, therefore, for those who research sacred performance to be cautious in their definitions of sacred, and to acknowledge the great diversity of medieval Christian belief, practice, and performance.

### *Conclusion*

Medieval sacred performance is not easy to discuss or to come to conclusions about, since it encompasses a broad range of actions that medieval authors did not usually consider as a unit. The scholarly examination of medieval sacred performance is a relatively new area of study that has not been neatly boxed in by previous authors. While medieval sacred performance overlapped with dance—many sacred performances of the period could clearly be labeled as dance by today's standards, and some even by medieval standards—it also reached beyond dance into music, drama, and ritual. Despite its somewhat amorphous nature, I present three observations about medieval Christian sacred performance.

It was common. Medieval texts can give the impression that Christianity was a written religion, a thinking religion, a religion of the mind rather than the body. This impression, however, comes from reading these texts as static, unchanging words rather than as scripts and instructions for performance. The central act of Christian faith, the mass, was a performative act combining spoken words and movement, and the cycle of the Christian year was marked by repeated, lively, physical performances. Mystics performed their faith in dramatic fashion but ordinary laypeople performed too, whether through receiving the eucharist, going on pilgrimage, joining in processions, or performing feast-day dances. After reviewing the evidence, I cannot help but believe that medieval Christianity was fundamentally a performed religion.

It was contested. For a number of reasons, no single, agreed-upon concept of sacred performance existed in the middle ages. Unlike the written word, performance happened in the space of a moment. Even the most scripted performance had a changeable, unpredictable quality. Performance was accomplished through the human body, the singing, dancing, gesturing, speaking human body that Christianity saw as both formed in the image of God and fundamentally flawed by sin. Sacred performance embodied many of the tensions in medieval Christianity—between body and soul, ecstasy and order, inward and outward states, and the everyday and the extraordinary. Controversy hovered around medieval sacred performances as those who performed and those who watched attempted to work out these tensions and determine which performances were properly sacred and which were not. Many women created sacred performances, but men did so as well, even important abbots like Suger. Some church authorities who observed sacred performances approved, like Philip of Clairvaux, while others, like Eudes of Rouen, disapproved. It seems evident that this controversy about sacred performance was not laid out solely along lines of gender or role in the church hierarchy.

It was powerful. Medieval sacred performance had the capacity to change the world because of the unpredictable, ecstatic, powerfully moving ways it allowed humans to connect both with other humans and directly with God. The authorities of the Christian church sometimes feared and outlawed the power of sacred performance, and sometimes they appropriated that power for their own purposes, recasting questionable and perhaps heretical performances as orthodox performances instead. Church authorities repeatedly felt the need to control who performed, when, where, how, and with what intentions. Performers with acceptable beliefs and practices were approved; those with unacceptable beliefs and practices were rejected. However, sacred performances kept going beyond the bounds of the ordinary and accepted, pushing the edges of Christian faith.

## CHAPTER 7

## CONCLUSION: RESTING POINT

## Postlude

I am doing trembling. On my knees on the floor, I begin to shake. I have to breathe in gasps and sobs in order for the trembling to be full-bodied, and because I am breathing that way, I feel that way. I feel like my heart is breaking, but not over anything personal. Unlike times when I've wept in my room because of something in my life, here I'm weeping with the exact same emotion but for an entirely different purpose. I'm not trying to free souls from purgatory, but I have a sense of going beyond myself. Of creating, of falling into the thing I've created, of going past that thing into something else. Becoming fully engrossed in the moment and in the shifts my body is going through, the shifts my whole self goes through. The body can't be alone. As I move my body my whole self moves. My mind moves, my emotions move. I'm sure my spirit moves, if I could understand what it was doing. I don't think any words of a prayer but I know I am praying. And yet I know I am making art because it's part of my research and part of my dissertation.

Then I stand and by now my eyes are open. They were closed when I was trembling. I stand and look up but I don't see the room. Or I do see the room, but inside myself (I want to say in my mind but catch myself) I'm looking beyond. My room has a light on the ceiling and I look at the light. It's not very bright but it seems to fill my vision when my eyes are open very wide. And I stand and look and wait, like the text says.

Hadewijch and Mechthild talk of a vision of heaven. Of God moving in swift circles, of blessed souls leaping and dancing in all three dimensions. I've always imagined dancing in three dimensions, flying with no gravity to hold me down. I can't do that here, obviously. But I start out with a measured walk, in a circle, and let it grow through spins and skips and leaps into the most joyful, abandoned, energetic dance I can manage. In my small room I have to spin a lot, leap back around on the same spot. When I have more space I will make the leaps bigger, make them fly in great circles.

I still don't feel union with God as the beguines did. I'm not sure I even want to. But I envision a dance partner and there is a moment when I am clasping my hands over my face and running them down my body, doing a wave-like motion to the rhythm of my deep breaths, where I really do feel a sense of release, of myself going out toward God. And I end it by falling backward to the ground, not entirely gently. It is as much a collapse of exhaustion as anything else. But a happy collapse, and the exhaustion isn't just physical. This is so mentally and

emotionally wearing. I want to, like Hadewijch, just lie late into the day experiencing spiritual joys.<sup>1</sup>

### Sacred Performance Meets Research

My experiences performing sacred dance have been varied and lifelong. Throughout my childhood and my teenage years I danced in the Spirit-filled, nondenominational church in which I was raised, jumping up from my seat to dance in the back, or occasionally in the front near the musicians, whenever I felt so moved. When I was sixteen, I traveled to Ukraine as part of an arts-based mission trip and performed choreographed sacred dances in various parks and public spaces throughout that country. I remember that one dance began with the dancers on our knees with our heads curled down. From there we rose up with a motion of opening the arms. Sometimes the spot where we danced was on blacktop, and I distinctly remember the burning sensation in my knees and how miraculous I felt when I was able to ignore it.

During college I performed as part of a school-sponsored sacred dance group made up of dance majors and minors. We did an interpretation of the Lord's Prayer through movement and traveled to several local churches to perform it. Since the leader of the group was one of the dance professors, we were expected to achieve a certain standard of excellence in dance as well as display an appropriate attitude of spirit. In order not to cause offense at any of the churches we traveled to, our all-female group wore purple jumpers over our leotards for modesty. I found the jumpers dowdy, but enjoyed performing beautiful movement with other well-trained dancers who had a similar concern for the sacred. One Christmas we performed a dance piece in the college chapel in which we portrayed the shepherds watching over their flocks. We danced up

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from lived experience description written from December 2008-February 2009 about my dance experiences while performing my dissertation research.

the chapel aisles and posed on the stage. The movements were simple and meant to complement the live singing of the college choir.

Also during college I began to attend a Vineyard church, a Spirit-filled church of a slightly different variety than the one I had been raised in. This church was bigger and better organized, and the youth pastor's wife ran a sacred dance group. I joined, attended practices every week, and performed choreographed dance pieces during the services about once every month. There was always prayer before and after the dance practices. I felt awkward in this group. I was the most highly trained dancer there, and while I believed that one did not need to be a proficient dancer to praise God with movement, I did feel that if musicians had to meet certain standards in order to play in church, maybe dancers ought to as well. I never voiced this concern, but it made me feel like a bad Christian whenever I found myself critiquing the other dancers' technical skills.

After college I attended various churches, including Presbyterian and Catholic ones, and while none of them embraced dance or had dance groups I always moved during worship. I raised my hands, I closed my eyes, I swayed, and sometimes I made hand gestures or brought my hands to my heart. I tried not to be obtrusive, not to bother the people around me, but I couldn't stand still when I felt that urge to move. Of all the sacred dance experiences in my life, however, the ecstatic, spontaneous dances of my childhood are the closest to my heart. I remember those dances as a time when I felt very free, and was certain that I was accomplishing something good and valuable through my dance.

Although it has been some years since I have been involved in any form of sacred dance within a church, throughout the process of conducting this research I have been moving and dancing. While translating Philip's descriptions of Elisabeth's poses I jumped up to try them out

and see if they were as difficult as he claimed (they were indeed). During a meeting with my advisor to discuss one of my chapters, I probably startled the other patrons at the restaurant where we were having lunch by demonstrating the various ways a person might make the sign of the cross. When I wrote the section on bowing and falling I attempted different methods of going to the floor and rising up again, only to realize partway through that the women performing these movements would have been wearing long robes or tunics, making some of my versions of falling highly improbable. Some of the insights arrived at through movement have worked their way into the previous chapters.

Other insights came more indirectly from my experience as a dancer. My years of performing, observing, and teaching dance have made me aware of how techniques like stillness, improvisation, transitions, and virtuosic movements can be used in creating dances or in making them more effective. My experience, of course, is with dance in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, not the thirteenth, but it is reasonable to assume that compelling medieval performers may have possessed some of the same traits and used some of the same qualities of movement that compelling dancers do today.

Not until near the end of my research journey, however, did I delve intensively into movement experiences. I began devoting at least half an hour every day to creating a danced response that could stand alongside my written research and provide additional insight that could not be conveyed in words. Because I believe strongly that knowledge can be both expressed and discovered through movement, this danced aspect of my research has been very important to me even though I hold a number of reservations.

First, I knew that whatever movements I created would necessarily reflect my own dance training and my muscle memory. Even if I attempted the precise movements described in one of

the beguine texts, I was a modern woman performing modern dance, not a medieval woman creating a sacred performance. There was no way that I could authentically embody the movements of the beguines even if I knew precisely what those movements had been. In fact, even to desire authenticity might lead to an arrogant conflation of past and present. Therefore, rather than thinking of the dance I was creating as any sort of reconstruction, I determined to view it as my own response to the dances and sacred performances in the beguine texts.

Second, I knew that I needed to create this dance not merely as an artistic endeavor but also as a spiritual one, and this raised difficult personal questions of faith. My beliefs as a modern Christian with feminist leanings are quite different from the beliefs of the beguines I studied, although the basics of the faith remain the same. I may not believe in the transubstantiation of the eucharist or the rightness of a male church hierarchy, but I do believe in the possibility of the literal presence of God. I cannot know to what extent the beguines' various experiences of God were imagined, invented, or genuinely given, but I do know that for me to fake a spiritual experience would take away from me as a person. If I were to create a sacred performance of my own it needed to be genuinely sacred in my eyes. I needed to go through a process of prayer and meditation and make my dance a gift to God as well as a necessary part of this research.

As I created this dance, the conflict I felt between myself as a researcher and myself as a Christian was similar to the dual identity I have experienced while performing ethnographic research. Dancing a sacred performance that was also a research experiment held the same level of discomfort as trying to be an objective outside observer even while taking part in dances and becoming a member of a community. I believe the experience was worth the discomfort and

difficulty, however, as I experienced a number of revelations, less spiritual than the revelations of the beguines, perhaps, but nonetheless very valuable to this research.

The process of creating this sacred dance was not unduly complex. I wanted to base my movements on words from the core beguine texts, so that I would be dancing to the words of the women I had researched. I created a textual script for my movements by putting together passages from Hadewijch, Mechthild, and a few from Agnes (though the third person point of view in her text made it difficult to include). This script is available in Appendix A. I chose words that suggested movement to me, grouped them into sections with similar subject matter or themes, and then arranged these sections in an order that seemed to rise toward a climax. I used the words of the beguines as inspiration for movement and also drew inspiration from the various forms of sacred performance analyzed in chapter five. Specifically, I performed variations on bowing and falling, stillness, making the sign of the cross, and striking myself. Each section was shaped as a structured improvisation, with specific sorts of movements that would climax and then lead into the next section. None of the movements I included were particularly complicated, though some were difficult to perform because they were either physically or emotionally exhausting.

Once I had created the full order of the dance, I performed it as completely as possible without stopping in the middle to analyze, redo anything, or make notes. After my first attempt I realized that I needed a certain level of mental, emotional, and physical preparedness in order to approach this dance in the manner it deserved, and that this preparedness and intensity of energy could only be achieved through performing the sections of the dance in order, one after the other. Upon completing the dance each time, I took copious notes about what I had experienced and what insights had occurred to me. I also analyzed which sections needed more work and

speculated about movements that might fit better, but attempting movements out of their proper sequence in the dance was largely ineffectual, because the process of moving into and out of each section of movement was as important as the movements themselves.

I performed the dance daily for a week. Most of these performances took place in my own home, in a relatively small room that limited the space in which I could dance. I created this dance at home instead of in a studio because it felt safer and more familiar. I tried one initial session in a studio and I kept feeling concerned that someone would look in the window or come in to interrupt me. The entire process of creation felt extremely vulnerable, more so than any other dance I have ever choreographed. Partway through the week I filmed myself with a digital camera solely for the purpose of seeing what my dance looked like. I had no large mirrors in the room in which I danced, and looking in mirrors would have entirely broken the mood and energy of the dance. At the end of the week I filmed myself again, this time in a studio for documentation purposes. This second film is available on DVD along with the written portion of this dissertation.

I gained several insights during my week-long intensive process of dance creation and performance, none of which had occurred to me while performing the textual and contextual research that preceded it. These insights remain specific to my experience. Another dancer attempting a similar performance might have a completely different experience, and my emotions, thoughts, and movements while performing certainly cannot be generalized to the beguines of the thirteenth century. It is not surprising, however, that several commonalities emerged between my lived, danced experience and their written records, since I used their writings as inspiration for my dance.

Throughout the creation and performance of this piece I became hypersensitive to my inner self, my thoughts, emotions, and spiritual state as I prepared myself to dance, as I danced, and immediately after I danced. I had not experienced this level of inward focus before. Improvisation is one of my preferred forms of dance, and most improvisations I have taken part in have required some amount of inward focus, paying attention to my body's movements as they feel to me as well as how they may look to an outside observer. In most improvisations, however, I have also been actively attempting to discover new movements for use in subsequent choreographies. In this sacred dance, although my movements had a certain level of improvisation to them, my goal was not to create new choreography but instead to experience a performance driven from a different impetus, an impetus to connect with God.

As I danced, I was constantly aware of the physical sensations of my body, particularly my breath, as well as my emotions and my thought processes. Sometimes I was able to simply experience an emotion, but at other times I found myself analyzing my own state even as I danced. "Am I feeling loss strongly enough here? Is my sense of joy genuine?" I did not analyze my physical movements with nearly the same intensity. In several sections I reworked the order of certain movements after performing them once and finding them awkward, but after the second performance I largely left the movements alone and let them develop as they would. Except for several points where I was trying to create a specific image or prayer posture with the shape of my body, I did not really concern myself with the shape, spacing, or dynamic qualities of my movements. It was strange to be more critical of my emotions than of my movements, because in the rest of my life as a dancer I have been constantly concerned with the placement of limbs and torso, trying to make my turnout wider, my extensions higher, or my muscles stronger.

In this sacred dance, such concerns faded almost completely, to be replaced by a new set of inward struggles.

The script for my sacred dance stated the movements I would perform in each section, trembling, leaping, and so on. It did not initially specify an emotion to accompany the movement, though some of the beguine texts upon which I based the various sections contained statements of emotion. I found, however, that as I performed the movements emotions followed. For example, in the section where I trembled I needed to breathe fast and in a ragged manner in order to make my body tremble. That sort of breathing made me feel sad and afraid, even though I had no reason to feel such emotions. It became difficult to determine whether the emotions I felt as I performed stemmed from my inner self or from my movements. I wondered about authenticity—was the joy I felt because of leaping and spinning around the room any less a real joy because I had not felt it until I began to move in a joyful way? There was no way to divorce action from emotion, though, and I would not wish to if I could. I thought about Hadewijch trembling with fear and desire and wondered which came first for her, the feeling or the action, or if she even thought about them as separate things. I wondered how Elisabeth's performances made her feel, day after day, and whether there were days when she could not feel the appropriate emotional state until drawn into it by movement.

When I danced, I often alternated between stillness and motion, standing still and breathing while I waited to begin the next section. Certain movements like making the sign of the cross began small and became larger, stretching further and further as they were repeated. Other movements began slow and built to a faster tempo. Repetition always ended up changing the movement, if sometimes in very subtle ways as my muscles tired and my breath came faster. I did not make a conscious decision to use either contrasting stillness and motion or repeating

movements, though such concepts were certainly in my subconscious. I simply found myself, as I improvised in the early stages of creating this sacred dance, coming to long moments of rest between energetic passages, and doing certain movements again and again. As I danced, repetition had meaning. It built intensity; I often felt a sense of climax after several repetitions, and then the movement might flow on to something new.

This dance was unexpectedly exhausting. The performance took between fifteen and twenty-five minutes, and although I would not consider any of the movements virtuosic, I rose and fell repeatedly. In the first section, I stood and then knelt several dozen times until I could feel the strain in my muscles and my movement quality changed. I do not think it was the repeated movements, however, but instead the heightened states of emotional intensity and the breathing that accompanied some of them that made me feel so drained afterward. When I finished, I sometimes wanted to remain lying on the floor in the spot where the dance ended. I thought of Hadewijch and Agnes, both of whom reported lying still for extended periods of time after receiving spiritual revelations, and I envied them their liberty to do so. I had to get up, write in my journal about my dance experience, and then continue on with the rest of my obligations for the day.

My experience of sacred dance in response to the writings of the beguines involved focused attention on my inner state, a reciprocity between motion and emotion, the emergence of both stillness and movement, repetition building to a climax, and a level of physical and emotional intensity that was truly exhausting. While the creation of this dance was deeply personal, I have discussed it here and have submitted a film of my performance along with my written dissertation because I think it may be of interest to other scholars of medieval history and dance. Because there is no filmed or photographic evidence of and no way to truly reconstruct

beguine sacred dance and performance, the closest any modern scholar may be able to come to such performances is through her own embodied experience. I understand that many scholars are not performers; others may have no time or inclination to undertake such a physical research experience themselves, so I offer my dance to them as an example of one woman's performance of the sacred.

### Final Thoughts

As I weave together the final threads, I would like to address some concluding thoughts to two of the populations for whom I intended this research—those who practice sacred dance, and those who study it, either through the lens of medieval studies or that of dance history. For fellow practitioners of Christian sacred dance, I present a thought about the longevity and variety of the embodied performance traditions upon which we draw. Sacred dance in the United States today has great variety in different churches. I have witnessed a processional dancer in a long white robe whose feet barely left the ground; college students putting choreographed hand gestures to the words of praise songs; congregations leaping up to spontaneously grab hands and circle the sanctuary; and people weeping, trembling, and falling to the ground as they pray. Some Christian traditions are more open to sacred dance than others, though even in the most conservative denominations some form of meaningful movement can be seen, whether that be kneeling to pray or taking the hands of those nearby in what is known as the sign of peace. Celeste Snowber Schroeder, a liturgical dancer and teacher of dance, acknowledges these many forms of what she calls “bodily ritual” and “embodied prayer.” She laments, however, that “unfortunately many of the Church traditions that encourage lifting of the hands may not

encourage kneeling and vice versa.”<sup>2</sup> In my experience, it tends to be the more traditional, liturgical churches that use kneeling and the more contemporary churches that encourage raised hands, swaying, and sometimes, spontaneous dancing.

Having attended churches at both ends of this spectrum, I can say that as a dancer I experience kneeling, raising my hands, and all other forms of movement motivated by a spiritual impulse as dance. In a modern-day reflection of Agnes’ scribe’s concerns over her use of the word “dance,” some Christians today might be offended that I consider such solemn movements as kneeling and crossing myself to be a dance. The terminology for sacred performance is no less tangled today than it was in medieval Europe. Even for those Christians who embrace dance, the terms “sacred dance,” “liturgical dance,” “worship dance,” “interpretive dance,” “praise dance,” and “Holy Spirit dance” or “Holy Ghost dance” can mean different things in different churches, and a dance that is acceptable in one congregation may be frowned on in another. Dance and sacred performance are still contested issues in Christianity today, and while the responses I have experienced to my own sacred dances have been primarily positive, I have also felt the need to defend the use of dance in worship to those who might question it. I imagine that most devout Christians who dance have encountered similar skepticism.

Although Christians of many different backgrounds perform sacred dance, dance as a form of worship is particularly strong in the traditions of people of African descent. Sacred dance or rhythmic movement is common both in African Christianity and among Christians throughout the African Diaspora. In the United States, much of the sacred dance performed today in churches both white and black undoubtedly has its roots in the fusion of African danced

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<sup>2</sup> Celeste Snowber Schroeder, *Embodied Prayer: Harmonizing Body and Soul* (Liguori, Missouri: Triumph Books, 1995), 89.

religions with European Christianity that occurred during slavery.<sup>3</sup> The members of the Spirit-filled church in which I was raised, an all-white church in the rural Midwest, traced their heritage back to an event that many pentecostal and charismatic Christians see as the foundation of their denominations, the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles in 1906-09. During this revival an African-American preacher, William Seymour, spoke to crowds of people of various ethnicities who broke into spontaneous, ecstatic worship including “speaking in tongues.” The Azusa Street Revival is commonly credited with breaking down barriers of gender, race, and social class and bringing about a new form of pentecostal Christianity.<sup>4</sup> In this way, my childhood church owed its acceptance of dance and ecstatic worship at least in part to African-American derived influences. I doubt any of the church members were consciously aware of such influences. They spoke of Azusa Street simply as a time when the Holy Spirit came to America and made no mention of race. I certainly did not make any connection between pentecostal Christianity and African-American influences until I began teaching dance in the urban environment of Temple University in Philadelphia and one of my African-American students did a presentation on praise dance, which looked to me very much like the dance I had performed as a child. It was then that

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<sup>3</sup> Omofolabo Soyinka Ajayi, “In Contest: the Dynamics of African Religious Dances,” in *African Dance: an Artistic, Historical and Philosophical Inquiry*, ed. Kariamuwelsh Asante (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1994), 200-201. For dance during the time of slavery, see P. Sterling Stuckey, “Christian Conversion and the Challenge of Dance,” in *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, ed. Thomas F. DeFrantz (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 39-58 and Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, “Dancing under the Lash: Sociocultural Disruption, Continuity, and Synthesis,” in *African Dance*, 101-130.

<sup>4</sup> Joe Creech, “Visions of Glory: The Place of the Azusa Street Revival in Pentecostal History,” *Church History* 65, no. 3 (1996): 406-12. While Creech acknowledges that “African-American culture has undoubtedly shaped pentecostal worship styles and spirituality,” (410) he also thinks that very few subsequent pentecostal churches have broken racial barriers in the way that the Azusa Street Revival did, and in spite of all the lip service given to Azusa Street as a “myth of origin” (406), many pentecostal churches remained quite racist.

I researched the roots of the pentecostal movement in America and discovered its connection with African-American worship traditions, including dance.

While it is not my intent here to contest the impact of African-derived danced worship on sacred dance in American Christianity, I seek to also honor the European roots of danced worship. While sacred dance has not been as important in European Christianity as it has been in the traditional religions of Africa, there was certainly, as I have shown, a strain of ecstatic sacred performance in medieval Europe. The beguines were well-known in their time, and some were greatly admired. People traveled from distant places to visit Elisabeth of Spalbeek and see her dance, and a cult grew up around her. Even if those who admired Elisabeth's dance did not precisely imitate it, there were other ways that ordinary medieval Christians could physically express and perform their faith. It is important to remember that Europe in the thirteenth century was still in many ways an oral and not a written culture. Outside the monasteries and centers of learning where the written word was supreme, Christianity was also part of that oral culture. Through the performance of the mass, feast-day processions and dances, sacred dramas, and the chanting of the liturgy, medieval Christianity was a religion that relied heavily on physical performance.

Whatever happened in the intervening centuries of the Reformation and the early modern era, left-over medieval performance made its way from Europe to America in a number of forms, including Americanized Passion plays and the Philadelphia Mummers' Parade, a New Year's Day performance I myself have witnessed and that Claire Sponsler believes has its roots in medieval Christmas season traditions of misrule and role-reversal.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps these memories of

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<sup>5</sup> Claire Sponsler, *Ritual Imports: Performing Medieval Drama in America* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004). Sponsler's work is an intriguing look at how medieval

once-sacred performance in the European Christian tradition were lying dormant, waiting to be rekindled, and meeting with the vibrant danced worship of the African tradition woke them and brought them to life again. While P. Sterling Stuckey talks about white slave-owners disapproving of African-American sacred dances,<sup>6</sup> the whites who experienced the Holy Spirit at Azusa Street were far from disapproving of the ecstasy it brought, and people of both African and European descent in the subsequent decades have danced spontaneously in church and fallen into ecstasy or trance, and whether they call it “liturgical dance” or “praise dance,” being “slain in the Spirit” or “getting happy,” I see it as a manifestation of the same religious impulse. I like to imagine that both the European and the African ancestors of today’s sacred Christian dancers might see something familiar in the performances that are being created in churches throughout America. I also hope to see a greater awareness, particularly among Christian sacred dancers of European descent, of the acceptance of dance and the body that is their heritage, alongside the heritage of dualism that is also part of Western culture. For those who often have to justify their use of dance to Christians of a more conservative bent, it might be liberating to realize that dance and sacred performance have a long, if contested, tradition within Christian worship and that the questions and struggles they experience today are not new.

For fellow scholars who study medieval dance, whether through the lens of dance studies, women’s studies, religion, history, or any other discipline, I present the concept of the dancing soul and the dancing body as inextricably intertwined in medieval Christianity. Despite the emphasis I have continually given to the important role of physicality in medieval Christianity

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ritual performance influenced and transformed within American culture. Interestingly enough, Sponsler connects the Philadelphia Mummers to the medieval Christmas festivities including the Feast of the Holy Innocents, about which I wrote in chapter six (73).

<sup>6</sup> Stuckey, 47-52.

and the way I have sought to downplay the overbearing role of dualism in Western culture, I cannot deny that medieval Christians often elevated the soul as the part of the human person that was able to approach closest to God. It is quite the truism that souls were important to medieval Christians. Given this truism, it would seem logical that the soul was important to medieval concepts of dance as well—and indeed, in medieval Christian writings souls danced in visions, after death, and joined together with the body again after the Last Judgment.

Although Ann Harding suggests that mystic spiritual dance had nothing to do with actual physical, earthly dancing,<sup>7</sup> medieval texts give many examples of the dance of the soul shining through and animating the body, making the body more holy. Beatrice of Nazareth's joyful soul burst out into a joyful dance of her body.<sup>8</sup> Philip of Clairvaux saw Elisabeth of Spalbeek's dancing soul shining in the exultation she displayed on her face.<sup>9</sup> In Mechthild of Magdeburg's writings the body and the soul were sometimes enemies, sometimes old, longsuffering friends. In the end, the body aided the soul and the soul brought the body into salvation.<sup>10</sup>

None of this suggests that medieval people's bodies were cut off from their souls, in dance or otherwise. In fact, through reading the texts of the beguines I have come to the sense that they sometimes used "soul" to mean "self," encompassing more of the human person than

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<sup>7</sup> Ann Harding, *An Investigation into the Use and Meaning of Medieval German Dancing Terms* (Göppingen: Verlag Alfred Kümmerle, 1973), 81-82.

<sup>8</sup> *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth, 1200-1268*, trans. Roger De Ganck (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1991), 95, 97.

<sup>9</sup> *Catalogus codicum hagiographicorum bibliothecae Regiae Bruxellensis*, vol. 1., (Brussels: 1886), 371-72.

<sup>10</sup> Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 42, 335.

just an inner spiritual spark. Because of the importance medieval people placed on souls and the ways they believed souls influenced all other parts of the human self, I suggest that future research into medieval dance should take descriptions of dancing souls as a palpable, experiential reality rather than as imaginings or fictions. Even if very little or no physical movement is described in a dance of souls, such a dance was not necessarily cut off from physicality. Rather, it must have been, by virtue of the relationship medieval people understood to exist between body and soul, intertwined with physicality at a very deep level. Even if we as scholars cannot know what they looked like from an outside perspective, dances of souls were considered to be actual happenings by the authors who wrote about them, and studies of medieval sacred dance cannot afford to overlook dancing souls any more than they can afford to overlook dancing bodies.

For scholars who study dance, I also present a call for future research directions. Up to this point, research on medieval sacred dance and performance, including this dissertation, has largely been a corrective for past marginalization. I have attempted to show that medieval sacred dance and performance did exist as valid and accepted forms of Christian practice, and I have celebrated the existence of such embodied performances. Other authors such as Joanna Ziegler, Susan Rodgers, and Karen Silen have done the same.<sup>11</sup> Now that such groundwork has been laid, scholars need to take a more critical look past the idea that medieval Christians were

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<sup>11</sup> Karen Silen, "Elisabeth of Spalbeek: Dancing the Passion," in *Women's Work: Making Dance in Europe before 1800*, ed. Lynn Matluck Brooks (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 207-227; Susan Rodgers and Joanna E. Ziegler, "Elisabeth 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 Joanna E. Ziegler (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 299-355.

dancing and creating sacred performances to why they were creating such performances and what agendas their performances served. Dyan Eliot's study about female spirituality is an excellent model. She critiques the way previous scholars in her field have unproblematically celebrated female spirituality as empowerment. Instead, she takes a hard look at how Christian women acted within boundaries and constraints laid by men, and how their actions were used to fit specific male agendas of politics and power structures.<sup>12</sup> Similar studies need to be undertaken regarding medieval sacred dance and performance. I have offered evidence for the prevalence and power of performance within medieval Christianity. I suggest that it is time to take a nuanced and critical look at how that power was used in specific performance situations, by men and women, by clergy and laypeople, by those who performed and those who observed, and what political agendas and power structures were supported or undermined through dance and sacred performance. When scholars who critique, analyze, and contextualize specific performances from a number of different points of view can enter into dialogue with each other, the study of medieval dance and sacred performance will move toward greater historical specificity, more provocative accounts of power and disempowerment, and richer examinations of the diverse strategies of embodied spirituality in medieval European Christianity.

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<sup>12</sup> Dyan Elliott, *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004).

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APPENDIX A  
PERFORMANCE SCRIPT

*Approach to God*

(This section is not inspired by any words. I bow all the way to the ground repeatedly, until my muscles become tired enough that I stay on the floor.)

*Fear*

(This section is performed entirely on the floor. I tremble, weep, and rock myself back and forth.)

My heart and my veins and all my limbs trembled and quivered with eager desire and, as often occurred with me, such madness and fear beset my mind that it seemed to me I did not content my Beloved, and that my Beloved did not fulfill my desire, so that dying I must go mad, and going mad I must die. On that day my mind was beset so fearfully and so painfully by desirous love that all my separate limbs threatened to break, and all my separate veins were in travail. The longing in which I then was cannot be expressed by any language or any person I know.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: the complete works*, trans. Mother Columba Hart (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 280.

*Preparation*

(When this section begins, I suddenly rise up to my knees as if I have heard a voice. The movements are variations on the sign of the cross. At the end of this section I stand and wait until I feel ready to begin the next section.)

As my mind was thus beset with fear, I saw a great eagle flying toward me from the altar, and he said to me: “If you wish to attain oneness, make yourself ready!” I fell on my knees and my heart beat fearfully. . . . But the eagle turned back and spoke: “Just and mighty Lord, now show your great power!”<sup>2</sup>

Then the soul sees, and it sees nothing. . . . The soul waits; God gives, and it receives. And what it then receives in verity, and spiritualness, and pleasure, and wonder can be communicated to no one. And it must remain in silence, in the liberty of this bliss.<sup>3</sup>

*Vision of the Heavenly Dance*

(This section is based on circling and leaping, with a feeling of lightness and abandon. It begins with a slow walk in a circle and builds to a crescendo of jumps. At the end I collapse to the ground.)

I saw a city, large, and wide, and high, and adorned with perfections. And in the midst of it there sat Someone upon a round disk, which continually opened and closed itself again upon hidden

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<sup>2</sup> *Complete Works*, 281.

<sup>3</sup> *Complete Works*, 111.

mysteries. And he who sat there above the disk was sitting in constant stillness; but in the disk his Being circled about in unspeakable swiftness without stopping.<sup>4</sup>

And in the abyss of Love resounded both a new noise, which set everything in motion, and an amazing and unheard-of song of praise; and a new rushing flood surged upward with new storm to fill the new arrivals, who there took fire.<sup>5</sup>

They sing with joy, charmingly laugh and leap with measured step, flow and float along. They soar and climb from choir to choir to the heights of the realm where they gaze into the mirror of eternity.<sup>6</sup>

Thus do they become utterly free and happy,

Agile, strong, and filled with love,

Radiant and as godlike as one can be.

They travel about wherever they want

As swiftly over a thousand leagues

As one here forms a thought.

Just think what such movement is like!<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Complete Works*, 293.

<sup>5</sup> *Complete Works*, 299-300.

<sup>6</sup> Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 274.

<sup>7</sup> *Flowing Light*, 274.

*Loss*

(This section begins on the ground, with a sense of heaviness and frustration. I push myself with my hands to make my body move. Pushing changes to striking, and the striking becomes rhythmic, a wake-up call for the different parts of my tired body. Finally, the frustration eases and instead of striking myself I massage and kiss my arms and legs.)

And with this I returned, woeful, to myself.<sup>8</sup>

Both soul and body entered into such a great darkness that I lost knowledge and light, and I knew nothing of God's intimacies. Even blessed love went off on its own.<sup>9</sup>

Then the body speaks to the soul:

"Where have you been?

I can't take it anymore."<sup>10</sup>

I suffer, I strive after the height,

I suckle with my blood;

I greet the Sweetness that can

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<sup>8</sup> *Complete Works*, 280.

<sup>9</sup> *Flowing Light*, 154.

<sup>10</sup> *Flowing Light*, 44.

Alleviate my madness of Love.<sup>11</sup>

Her chains encircle me within so tightly  
That I think I shall die of pain;  
This is the chain that binds all in union  
In the anguish or the repose or the madness of Love.<sup>12</sup>

The soul speaks to the body:  
Rise up, my dearly beloved, and be healed of  
All your sufferings,  
All your days of pain,  
All your humiliation,  
All your sadness,  
All your loneliness,  
All your wounds,  
And all your toils.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Complete Works*, 351-52.

<sup>12</sup> *Complete Works*, 353.

<sup>13</sup> *Flowing Light*, 261.

*Union*

(I begin by raising my arm as if to hold an imaginary partner's hand. The movements in this section are flowing, wave-like, and based heavily on the rhythm of my breath. At the end I flow down to the floor and when I cannot support myself any longer and I feel a sense of completion, I fall backward and lie still.)

All other virtues are illumined through the light of love, . . . through the movement of love, more would be merited than through mourning, flagellation, and similar efforts, . . . when someone is in the motion and act of love, he is cleansed in the fire of love.<sup>14</sup>

I cannot dance, Lord, unless you lead me.

If you want me to leap with abandon,

You must intone the song.

Then I shall leap into love,

From love into knowledge,

From knowledge into enjoyment,

And from enjoyment beyond all human sensations.

There I want to remain, yet want also to circle higher still.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Agnes Blannbekin, *Agnes Blannbekin, Viennese Beguine: Life and Revelations*, trans. Ulrike Wiethaus (Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2002), 108.

<sup>15</sup> *Flowing Light*, 59.

Lord, heavenly Father, you are my heart.

Lord Jesus Christ, you are my body.

Lord Holy Spirit, you are my breath.

Lord, Holy Trinity, you are my only refuge and my eternal rest!<sup>16</sup>

Lord, your blood and mine are one, untainted.

Your love and mine are one, inseparable.

Your garment and mine are one, immaculate.

Your mouth and mine are one, un-kissed.

Your breast and mine are one, not caressed

By any man but you alone.<sup>17</sup>

There eye reflects in eye, there spirit flows in spirit, there hand touches hand, there mouth speaks to mouth, and there heart greets heart. Thus does the Lord and Master honor the mistress at his side.<sup>18</sup>

And that beauty will meet with one Beauty,

And they will greet with one single greeting.

And that kiss will be with one single mouth,

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<sup>16</sup> *Flowing Light*, 186.

<sup>17</sup> *Flowing Light*, 96.

<sup>18</sup> *Flowing Light*, 157-58.

And that fathoming will be of one single abyss,  
And with a single gaze will be the vision of all  
That is, and was, and shall be.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Complete Works*, 342.