What Did It Mean to Say “I Saw”?  
The Clash between Theory and Practice in Medieval Visionary Culture

By Barbara Newman

“In the year that King Uzziah died,” wrote Isaiah, “I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up” (Isa. 6.1). “In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day” of the exile, Ezekiel declared, “the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God” (Ezek. 1.1). “Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me,” said John the Divine, “and I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man” (Apoc. 1.12–13).

What did it mean to say “I saw”? Although the Bible from beginning to end is laced with visions, its writers showed little interest in the subjective experience of the visionary. Medieval authors, however, were fascinated by the question. Visionary texts of all kinds, some naive, others highly sophisticated, coexist with a large and contentious body of theoretical writings on visionary experience. The theorists wrote with diverse purposes: some to interpret the biblical prophets, others to teach contemplative practice, still others to discredit visionaries they held to be making fallacious claims. Thus exegetical, devotional, and juridical writers all took an interest in visions, but their diverse disciplinary perspectives presupposed radically different notions of what a “vision” implied and in consequence led to significant and ultimately dangerous gaps between theory and praxis.

Scholarship on medieval visions has not been lacking, but our contemporary discourses on the subject, like medieval ones, tend to break down along disciplinary lines. Literary critics have turned to medieval dream theory to illumine the corpus of Middle English dream poems.¹ Scholars of spirituality and gender have examined visionary women as a group, trying to explain why the great majority of medieval women writers known to us were visionaries—and why vision recitals

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constitute the sole medieval genre dominated by women. Art historians have explored the relationship between “the visual and the visionary,” showing how the reception and use of religious art could participate in the construction of visionary experience. Historians of sainthood, heresy, and witchcraft have investigated the fifteenth-century practice of “discernment of spirits,” which emerged in tandem with increasing clerical suspicion of religious women in general and visionaries in particular. Anthropologists and theorists of religion have produced transhistorical and cross-cultural studies that include medieval sources within broader analyses of the vision as a form of religious experience. In this study I aim to synthesize some of these insights with three principal goals: first, to promote analytical clarity by differentiating among the very diverse phenomena—and texts—that go by the name of “visions”; second, to place visionary experience within the context of a specialized religious subculture that included not only an array of theories to interpret it but also techniques to facilitate it; and finally, to shed light on the theological confusion and harsh ecclesiastical response that resulted from the eventual diffusion of these techniques among the laity. My sources will include theoretical attempts to make sense of visionary experience; monastic directives for attaining the inner state in which a vision might occur; hagiographic accounts of saintly visions; meditational scripts to help believers visualize the life of Christ; a first-person report on the use of such scripts; and finally, critiques of visionaries that demonstrate the consternation they might cause. But I begin with


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a typology of four components that appear, to varying degrees, in most vision texts.

A NEW TYPOLOGY OF VISIONS

No one denies, or should deny, that visions can occur without warning.6 The literature of psychology, anthropology, and comparative religion provides ample testimony from a wide range of cultures. Yet spontaneous waking visions are rare—though perhaps not so rare as we tend to think, given the powerful stigma now attached to them. Some evidence suggests that such visions occur most often in the context of near-death experience (Julian of Norwich is a celebrated example) or mental illness (Christine of Stomlmen comes to mind).7 Spontaneous visions are uncanny, defying the norms of ordinary perception: they may be joyful and comforting but can just as easily be disruptive and sinister. This type of visionary experience is of mysterious, ambiguous origins: “paranormal” may be the most neutral term for it. Medieval texts allude to it as mirum or admirandum, evoking the “marvelous” as opposed to the “miraculous.” Most interpreters of visionary experience, from Augustine onwards, presuppose spontaneous visions of this kind.

Without prejudice to this possibility, visions can also be—and in the Middle Ages usually were—the fruits of a complex spiritual discipline. Over a period of centuries, monastic writers developed a sophisticated art for the construction of inner experience, involving disciplines of memory, perception, reading, and attention. Although such disciplines have long since disappeared from our mainstream religious culture, they still persist within subcultures as diverse as neo-pagans and Jesuits; the widely used Ignatian spiritual exercises descend directly from these medieval prayer techniques. To be sure, meditational disciplines could not guarantee visions, nor were they expressly meant for that purpose. Nevertheless, such spiritual training did facilitate visionary experience and foster an acute sensitivity to its modes. Medieval teachers of meditation acknowledged the role of human striving, and encourage it, without assuming that assiduous spiritual effort will necessarily produce visions. But they do assert that such effort is often rewarded by divine grace. Judging from our extant sources, cultivated visions of this type were far more common than spontaneous ones.

A third component in vision texts is the aesthetic, long familiar to literary critics but acknowledged only recently by scholars of religion.8 Most medieval vision

8 See the debate between Peter Dinzlucker and Ursula Peters over the role of convention in medieval vision texts, Dinzlucker arguing for their value as witnesses to autobiographical experience, Peters for their literary constructedness: Peter Dinzlucker, Vision und Visionsliteratur im Mittelalter, Monographien zur Geschichte des Mittelalters 23 (Stuttgart, 1981), pp. 65–77; idem, “Zur Interpretation erlebnismystischer Texte des Mittelalters,” Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur 117 (1988), 1–23; Ursula Peters, Religiöse Erfahrung als literarisches Faktum: Zur Vorge-
texts, whether prose or verse, display at least some impulse toward artistic refine-
ment. Both the cultural privileging of visionary experience and the popularity of
visions as a literary genre encouraged a nearly irresistible tendency to improve on
experience, or at times to invent it from whole cloth. This impulse can be discerned
in both highly stylized, formulaic texts and strikingly original, idiosyncratic ones.
We see one version of the tendency in saints’ lives, where the subject’s visions often
conform so closely to conventional types, reported in nearly identical form from
one vita to another, that their authenticity is impossible to gauge. An alternative
brand of refinement appears in poetic dream visions, whose aim is not the replica-
cation of conventional saintly experiences but the creation of aesthetically satisf-
ying texts that enable readers to imagine, if not actually experience, the tran-
escendent.

Finally we come to the element that loomed largest in the medieval reception
of vision texts: the supernatural. Nontheists today might pathologize visionary
experience (as did medieval critiques of it), or they might account for visions by
recourse to extrasensory perception, psychic abilities, incursions of the subcon-
scious, or other mysterious capacities of the human mind. But those categories
were not available to medieval theorists, who tended to move rapidly from mira-
clusm, from the paranormal to the supernatural. As for visionaries them-
selves, they almost universally express a conviction that their experiences, whether
spontaneous or cultivated, derived solely from the grace of God and by no means
from their own imagination, learning, devout meditation, or artistic skill, however
much those qualities may be apparent to the reader. Such claims are made by
mystical writers for themselves, by hagiographers for their saints, and sometimes
even by authors such as Dante and the Pearl poet, who were obviously creating
poetic fictions. To endorse this claim normally meant to endorse the trustworthi-
ness or even saintliness of a visionary, whereas to reject it meant to cast aspersions
on her veracity, probity, or mental health.

These four elements—the paranormal, the meditational, the aesthetic, and the
supernatural—need not be mutually exclusive. Yet medieval accounts of visionary
experience evince a clear preference for spontaneous as opposed to cultivated
visions, minimizing or denying their aesthetic and meditational components even
when these are clearly present. The usual tenor of such accounts is to take vision-
ary claims as assertions of spontaneous divine intervention, resting on a strongly
supernaturalist account of “I saw”: not “I dreamed,” “I imagined,” or “I visual-
ized,” but “there appeared to me.” This paradigm derived chiefly from the Hebrew
Bible, with its famously matter-of-fact approach to theophanies. Old Testament
prophets were liable to receive the Word of God as a bolt from the blue, unpro-
voked and even undesired. When first assaulted by the divine message, the prophet
might be tending his sheep or trimming his sycamore trees, but he was certainly
not standing in the Temple reciting the complete Psalter, punctuated by genuflec-

(Tübingen, 1988). I have developed my own views on the relationship between visionary experience
and literary production in God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages
tions and prostrations.\textsuperscript{9} In contrast, medieval visions often sprang from just such a context of liturgical prayer, meditation, or devout reverie, but this could not be acknowledged without compromising the biblical paradigm. By the same token, neither could the careful literary shaping that marks so many vision texts be admitted by their admirers. The dominant theology of visionary experience called for exclusive agency—whether divine, diabolical, or human—and had great difficulty admitting the possibility of mixture. In order to be considered authentic and reliable, a vision must have come directly from heaven: its authority could not survive any acknowledgment that it had been sought or improved upon by the seer.

Implicitly, at least, this all-or-nothing approach contradicts the devotional and contemplative manuals that taught the way to visionary experience. Yet for a number of reasons it carried general conviction. One was the assimilation of visionaries to biblical prophets; another was the link between visionary experience and women, who were often deemed too “simple” to speak of the things of God unless they became direct channels of his Word.\textsuperscript{10} The subtest but most significant factor may have been the perception of a genuine givenness in the experience itself, however deeply it had been desired, solicited, or anticipated beforehand. In any case, once the principle of exclusive divine agency had been established as a norm, convention and prudence alike dictated the suppression of human agency. If a visionary desired credibility, it would simply not do to admit too much “constructedness,” in the sense of either spiritual preparation before the vision or literary craftsmanship after it.\textsuperscript{11}

The penchant for cultivating visionary experience, while at the same time occluding human agency in vision texts, eventuated finally in a kind of category mistake, a pervasive intellectual confusion, that compounded late-medieval churchmen’s anxiety about uncontrolled visionaries. I seek here to demonstrate that this anxiety was fueled by a profound, yet rarely explicit, clash between two competing theologies of revelation. Within the devotional or meditational discourse on visions, which flourished in monasteries and other havens of the spiritual elite from the twelfth century onward, visionary experience was not a spontaneous, wholly unpredictable incursion of the divine into the world. Rather, it was a privileged cultural practice by which those with appropriate qualifications—at first only monks and nuns, later beguines and tertiaries, eventually even devout laypeople—might court sacred encounters through techniques for the deliberate alteration of

\textsuperscript{9} For unwilling prophets see Exod. 4.10–13; Amos 7.14–15; Jer. 1.6–7 and 20.7–9; and the Book of Jonah. Simeon and Anna, two New Testament prophets who do spend much of their time praying in the Temple (Luke 2.25–38), are rewarded not with a vision but with Christ’s presence in the flesh.

\textsuperscript{10} Not all clerics accepted this prevalent stereotype. For a range of views see Mooney, ed., Gendered Voices, and now Alcuin Blamires, “Women and Creative Intelligence in Medieval Thought,” with response by Barbara Newman, “More Thoughts on Medieval Women’s Intelligence: Denied, Projected, Embodied,” in Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages, ed. Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Notre Dame, Ind., forthcoming).

consciousness. This theology envisaged an implicit synergy between grace and human effort, and, without altogether discounting the wiles of demons, it expressed confidence in the devotee’s ability to expose and defeat them with the help of God. On the other side, prelates tended to favor a more cautious, skeptical theology, which originated with the desert fathers but was decisively codified in the fifteenth century as the discernment of spirits. This theology sternly warned the devout never to covet, much less solicit, any vision. While allowing that God might indeed reveal himself, as he did to the prophets of old, the disciners stressed the subtlety and danger of satanic delusion, since one of their principal aims was protection of the “simple”—and the church at large—from the devil’s guile. The more that clerics charged with the discernment of spirits conceived their task as a juridical one—scrutinizing, assessing, and if need be repressing visions—the more they worked at cross-purposes with devotional writers, whose goal was to facilitate them.

By the end of the Middle Ages, two extreme positions had emerged on either end of this spectrum. Faced with increasing lay interest in elite devotional practices, writers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries produced visionary scripts that aimed to help practitioners cross the fine line between “I visualized” and “I saw.” Popular manuals such as the Meditations on the Life of Christ diffused the techniques of affective prayer and visualization so widely that even illiterate lay folks might gain access to the realm of visionary experience and in consequence make exalted spiritual claims that, two centuries earlier, could scarcely have been heard outside the monastery or the recluse’s cell. But this very proliferation of visionary texts, experiences, and claims led to massive confusion about their nature and validity. Intentional visions had posed little threat so long as they remained safely cloistered, understood in the context of monastic piety rather than prophecy. But once laymen and women had begun to make prophetic claims on the basis of cultivated visions, trouble was bound to ensue. One way to avert it was to interpret the would-be prophet’s vidi more and more promptly as “I hallucinated,” if not “the devil deceived me.”

Theorizing Visions: From Augustine to Bonaventure

Throughout the Middle Ages, theorists continued to rely on texts from late antiquity, which predated both the systematic cultivation of visionary experience and the literary genre of the dream vision. The best known of these texts was the last book of De Genesi ad litteram, in which St. Augustine sketches his famous hierarchy of perception ascending from the visual (ordinary physical sight) through the visionary (spiritual or imaginative visions) to pure intuitive insight (the visio intellectualis, said to be imageless). If it was not “the final word on the matter,” as one scholar has asserted, De Genesi was usually the first. But Au-

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12 Johannes de Caulibus (?), Meditaciones vite Christi, ed. M. Stallings-Taney, CCCM 153 (Turnhout, 1997). On this work and its contested attribution see below, n. 81.

Augustine’s familiar trichotomy, though endlessly cited, proves to be of surprisingly little pragmatic use, since almost all medieval vision texts fall into his ambiguous middle category of visio spiritualis—visions that may be either false or true. Far more interesting is Augustine’s attempt to probe the relationship between the paranormal and the supernatural, that is, between merely unusual experience and divine revelation. In particular, he tries to sort out the various causes of visionary experience to see whether they bear any relationship to its trustworthiness.

Augustine’s analysis can be read as a range of possible answers to my question, what did it mean to saw “I saw”? On his account, the seer’s vidi can mean any number of things: sources of visio spiritualis turn out to include deliberate exercise of the memory (“I visualized”), images arising from “an excessive application of thought” (“I imagined”), cases of feverish delirium (“I hallucinated”), visions perceived in sleep (“I dreamed”), and images produced by the agency of a good or evil spirit (“there appeared to me”). To Augustine’s bewilderment, however, he finds no necessary correlation between the cause of a vision and its veracity. Emphasizing the mysterious, uncanny character of such events, he recounts three anecdotes involving a demoniac, a man delirious with fever, and an adolescent boy who fainted with pain from an inflammation of his penis. All three experienced truthful visions while in these abnormal states. Further, the theologian tells of a band of youths who pretended in jest to be astrologers and of another man who satirically mimicked spirit possession at a pagan festival. While role-playing, all uttered prophecies that, to their own astonishment, swiftly came true. But conversely, Augustine notes that even a seemingly benign vision may prove to have been inspired by a demon, and even a sacred experience like the rapture of St. Paul (2 Cor. 12.1–4) can leave doubts about central questions: “whether in the body or out of the body I know not, God knows.” In view of these troubling anomalies, Augustine refuses to identify the preternatural with the supernatural or to conflate even truthful predictions with the grace of God. Although visionary experience can yield true knowledge of the future or the divine, it is too bizarre to be altogether trusted. Far safer is the abstract intellectual vision, which dispenses with such peculiar psychic and bodily states. For all its fascinating subtlety, Augustine’s account bequeathed more questions than answers to its medieval readers.

The same may be said of dream theory, which drew its chief inspiration from

14 The much rarer examples of visio intellectualis include certain moments in Julian of Norwich’s Revelation of Love, such as her vision of “God in a point” (chap. 11), and Thomas Aquinas’s experience of 6 December 1273, after which he abandoned his Summa because all he had written appeared to him “like straw” in comparison with what he had seen: The Writings of Julian of Norwich, ed. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (University Park, Pa., forthcoming); James A. Weisheipl, Friar Thomas d’Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Work (Garden City, N.Y., 1974), pp. 321–23.
17 Ibid. 12.13, pp. 397–98.
18 Augustine also discussed dreams and visions elsewhere in his works: De Trinitate 11.4.7; Epistolae 9 and 159; De divinazionee daemonum 5.9; De civitate Dei 4.26 and 11.2. But none of these discussions matched the influence of his systematic treatment in De Genesi ad litteram.
the pagan philosophers Macrobius and Calcidius. In his informative study *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, Steven Kruger emphasizes the "doubleness" and "middleness" of dreams in medieval thought. Like Augustine's *visio spiritualis*, dreams in principle come in opposed binary types; that is, they can be either true or false. But in practice most are ambiguous and fall somewhere between the two extremes. Theorists persistently tried to impose some kind of dichotomy on these nightly encounters with the uncanny, but the dreamworlds of experience no less persistently escaped and demanded a more subtle typology. For Macrobius, whose views gained currency through his *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, there are five fundamental dream types, two false and three true.19 The *insomniun*, or anxiety dream, and the *visum*, or hypnagogic image, are essentially meaningless. Macrobius's *somnium* is the median between truth and falsehood, taking its name from the ordinary Latin noun for "dream": it veils a truth in ambiguous metaphors and cries out for interpretation. In a *visio* or prophetic dream the subject clearly perceives future events, while in the sublime *oraculum* some figure of authority, such as a parent, priest, or god, proffers advice and revelations from beyond.20

Macrobius’s rival, Calcidius, transmitted his theory of dreams through a widely studied translation and commentary on Plato’s *Timaeus*. He, too, distinguished among various types of revelatory, deceptive, and merely psychosomatic dreams. Like Macrobius, Calcidius held the oracular dream or *admonitio* to be the highest type, but he placed it on a continuum with the even more impressive waking vision (*spectaculum*) and ascribed both to the agency of gods. Loftiest of all is the *revelatio* or prophecy, which may occur in either a dream or a waking vision. One curious resemblance between these two theorists lies in their fixation on predicting the future—a feature of the Macrobian *visio* and *oraculum* as well as the Calcidian *revelatio*. Yet, despite its prominence in ancient and biblical dream lore, prognostication was only a marginal concern of the religious dream visions so common in medieval literature. Dreams of this type, like waking visions, focus less on predicting the future than on achieving self-knowledge, entering vividly into past events (such as scenes from the life of Christ), or manifesting eternal truths (such as the reality of heaven and hell). For this reason Macrobian theory, though often cited by literary critics, proves less helpful than it seemingly ought to be.

Both Calcidius and Augustine had to acknowledge the similarity of dreams and feverish hallucinations to other, more prestigious forms of visionary experience, for statements such as "I dreamed," "I visualized," and "I hallucinated" all denote altered states of consciousness—a sine qua non for the experience of visions. The resemblance between trance and dreaming was also remarked by Bernard of Clairvaux, who wrote of the monk that "falling asleep in contemplation he dreams of


20 Noting that the *oraculum* now seems so obsolete that it could be dismissed as pure literary convention, A. C. Spearing remarks that "it may be that people really did have dreams of that kind in patriarchal, authoritarian societies, . . . whereas we, in a society in which authority is less personal, have ceased to have such dreams": *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (see above, n. 1), p. 11; see also E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Sather Classical Lectures 25 (Berkeley, Calif., 1951), pp. 102–34.
God.” Even this fleeting glimpse *per speculum in enigmate* causes him to burn with insatiable love.\(^{21}\) For precisely this reason, medieval teachers of prayer placed a high valuation on trance states, which they denoted by such terms as *excessus mentis*, *exstasis*, *alienatio*, and *raptus*.

This terminology itself is not without interest. *Excessus mentis*, the most common term, occurs several times in the Vulgate: it is used by the Psalmist (30.23 and 67.28), by Luke to describe Peter’s vision abrogating Jewish dietary laws (Acts 10.10 and 11.5), and by Paul of his own missionary fervor (2 Cor. 5.13). While *excessus mentis* is the Latin technical term for “trance,” equivalent to Greek *exstasis*, the notion of “exceeding bounds” links it to other meanings of *excess*: surplus, exuberance, transgression, and death. Bernard explains that ecstasy is called *excessus mentis* because in that state “the inner self transcends the bounds of reason and is rapt above itself.”\(^{22}\) *Exstasis* is a more specialized term. Literally “standing outside of oneself,” it occurs most often in Latin versions of Dionysius the Areopagite and writers influenced by him, such as John Scotus Eriugena and William of Saint-Thierry. For Dionysius, the contemplative’s ecstasy mirrors God’s own nature as *eros ekstaticos*, or ecstatic love.\(^{23}\) Given the strongly apophatic character of Dionysian theology, the object of such contemplation is not an imaginative vision of the kind I am considering here, but an ineffable fullness or “superessential ray of divine darkness.”\(^{24}\)

*Raptus* and *alienatio* have more ambiguous connotations. *Alienatio mentis* is a comprehensive term for states of mental disturbance or unconsciousness, such as fits of madness, epileptic seizures, paralyzing fear, and torpor due to physical or moral weakness. But the mind in trance is also “alienated,” that is, separated from the bodily senses; thus Cistercian writers define *alienatio mentis* as a state of spiritual intoxication or excess of joy, in which the soul forgets itself and the world and becomes conscious only of God.\(^{25}\) Finally, *raptus*, from *rapere*, “to snatch or seize,” in legal Latin denotes a range of crimes including robbery, seizure, abduction, and especially rape. Its only positive meaning is the mystical sense of “rapture” or “ravishing,” which is doubled by its Old French derivative *ravissement*.\(^{26}\)

These terms carry strong and disturbing sexual overtones: just as a raped woman was thought to experience special pleasure, the contemplative soul longs to be snatched away and ravished by God, much as in John Donne’s seventeenth-

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\(^{22}\) “Sed aliquando homo interior rationem excedit et supra se rapit, et dicitur excessus mentis”: Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones de diversis* 115; *Opera*, 6/1:392.

\(^{23}\) Dionysius the Areopagite, *De divinis nominibus* 4.13, PG 3:712A.

\(^{24}\) “En enim teipso et omnibus immensurabili et absoluto pure mentis excessu ad superessentialem divinarum tenebrarum radium, omnia deserens et ab omnibus absolutus ascendens”: Dionysius, *De mystica theologia* 1, trans. John Scotus Eriugena, PL 122:1173A.

\(^{25}\) “Ab hoc spiritualis iucunditatis excessu et ebrietate sobrium fieri, et propter fratres necessitates ab alienatione mentis temperare, quid nisi vulnum in diversa mutare est?” Gilbert of Hoyland, *Sermones in Canticum Salomonis* 10.1, PL 184:56B.

century sonnet: “for I, / Except you enthrall me, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.”

Using this highly charged vocabulary, medieval theorists developed their understandings of ecstatic vision in both exegetical and devotional contexts. The first biblical visionary turns out to have been, surprisingly, Adam. Western exegetes were familiar with a version of Gen. 2.21 based on the Septuagint, in which the “deep sleep” (Hebrew tardema) that God sends upon Adam is not sopor as in the Vulgate, but exstasis. On this reading, the entranced Adam’s soul ascended to heaven and learned from the angels while God was creating Eve, so that on his return he prophesied not only their marital union but also the union of Christ and the Church which it prefigured. Exegetes ascribed further ecstatic visions to the Queen of Sheba, who after beholding King Solomon’s glory and wisdom had “no more spirit in her” (2 Chron. 9.4); to “Benjamin, a youth, in ecstasy of mind” (Vulg. Ps. 67.28); to Peter, James, and John at the Transfiguration (Matt. 17.1–9); to Peter in the house of Cornelius (Acts 10.9–16); and especially to Paul, who experienced rapture on the Damascus road (Acts 9.3–9) and again when he was ravished up to the third heaven (2 Cor. 12.1–4). In twelfth-century commentaries on the Song of Songs, the Bride is a visionary par excellence: she experiences ecstasy and beholds divine mysteries when she drinks the wine of her Beloved and falls asleep in his embrace.

Biblical paradigms offered monastic and mendicant writers ample opportunities to work out their theories of visionary experience. In the twelfth century this was something of a Cistercian specialty. De spiritu et anima, a popular pseudo-Augustinian treatise on psychology now ascribed to Alcher of Clairvaux, offers a particularly interesting synthesis. This writer begins with Augustine’s trichotomy but gives it an optimistic spin typical of twelfth-century mystical thought. In intellectual vision, he notes, the soul is never deceived, whereas in corporeal vision it is often deceived by optical illusions. Spiritual vision occupies an intermediate status:

In spiritual vision, too, the soul can be deceived and subject to illusion, for the things it sees are sometimes true and sometimes false, sometimes troubled and sometimes calm. Those that are true at times strongly resemble future events, either openly announced or foretold in obscure symbols, as if in figurative language. But in ecstasy, when the soul is alienated and withdrawn from all the bodily senses, more than in sleep but less than in death, it is not deceived. Rather, great revelation occurs while the mind is divinely assisted, or else someone expounds the vision, as in the Apocalypse of John. For when the soul is taken up by a good spirit, it cannot be deceived, since the holy angels in marvelous ways make what they themselves see visible to us, through an easy and extremely powerful kind of union or commingling. In an ineffable manner they create the form of their own vision within our spirit. For they indeed have authority over bodily things for the sake of judgment and service; in spirit they discern significant images of bodies, and they


can act so powerfully as to join those images to human spirits by some means in revelation. So it is that the angel of the Lord appeared in dreams to Joseph, saying, “Fear not to take Mary, your wife” (Matt. 1.20), and again, “Take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt” (Matt. 2.13). And God says through the prophet, “I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams” (Joel 2.28).29

Alcher goes on to say that all visions are technically of the same nature, spirituals, insofar as the things seen (visa) are not actual bodies but images of bodies produced by the human spirit. In sleep or mental illness (phrenesis), or even in certain kinds of daydreaming (cogitationes), the pathways of normal perception (viae sentiendi) are blocked in such a way that the eye does not focus on physical reality but instead turns inward toward images that exist within the mind. In ecstatic visions the mysterious fusion of human with angelic consciousness provides a safeguard against the kind of illusion that Augustine feared, enabling such visions to be wholly trusted. Higher still is ecstatic vision without images—Augustine’s visio intellectualis—in which “the mind of the contemplative can be disturbed by no tumult of competing thoughts, for it finds absolutely nothing to seek in desire, reject in disgust, or reproach in hatred, but it is wholly collected in the serenity of contemplation and introduced into a most unaccustomed state of affection. . . . Sensuality does nothing, imagination nothing; but every inferior faculty of the soul is temporarily deprived of its office. Rather, the purer part of the soul is joyfully introduced into that secret place of intimate peace, that mystery of supreme tranquillity.”30

Cistercian Song commentaries present similar teaching in an eroticized key, casting visionary experience in the paradoxical terms of a sober drunkenness or a waking dream. Commenting on “Ego dormio et cor meum vigilat” (Song of Sol. 5.2), Gilbert of Hoyland says that while the body and its senses sleep, drugged by


30 “[C]ontemplantis animus nulla altercantum cogitationum tumultuatione turbetur, nihil omnino inveniens quod vel per desiderium petat, vel per fastidium arguat, vel per odium accuset: sed intra contemplationis tranquillitatem totum colligitur, et intromittitur in quemdam affectum multum insitumatum. . . . Nihil sensualitas, nihil agit imaginatio; sed omnis inferior vis animae proprio interim viduatur officio. Purior autem animae pars in illud intimae quietis secretum, et summae tranquillitatis arcanum felici jucunditate introductur”: Alcher, De spiritu et anima 34, PL 40:804.

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the intoxicating wine of the Beloved, the Bride’s heart awakens to the raptures of love and she beholds God in a dreamlike vision—dreamlike because it occurs not through human choice or effort but through grace. John of Ford imagines the ravished Bride crying out, “I am my Beloved’s, and my Beloved is mine,” not knowing what she says, for “sacred ecstasies like this induce a pleasant cloud of unknowing, and from amazement at such a stupendous new experience, they can at times cause a mist of grateful forgetting, as it were, so that people remember neither themselves nor the things they have in hand.” In the same way, when Peter beheld Jesus transfigured on Mount Tabor, he “did not know what he was saying” (Luke 9.33), and the Queen of Sheba was so overwhelmed by Solomon’s glory that her breath failed her (2 Chron. 9.4). But as long as she remains on earth, the Bride must temper these ecstatic flights with sobriety and humility “so that, when she is carried out of herself, she is not carried away from herself.” She knows that rapt self-forgetfulness must alternate with sober self-possession until “I come into the fullness of the invisible light, and, saying farewell to all that is transient, I am absorbed again into my beginning and imprinted with my exemplar.”

In reality, of course, the Bride is a figure of the contemplative monk. Isaac of Stella lets us in on the secret, reminding his readers that these spontaneous raptures presuppose a great deal of disciplined preparation: “Many are the wondrous, sweet, joyful, and luminous things, my beloved brothers, that spiritual men—who have trained their senses through habitual exercise—see, taste, and experience when they are rapt in their prayer and contemplation as if in ecstatic trance, which they can by no means tell and scarcely even remember once they return to themselves.” Like dreams, such visions fade in the cold light of waking consciousness, yet their impression is indelible, creating in the soul a state of permanent longing.

Theorists differed as to whether the loftiest form of visionary experience is totally image free. The best authorities, including Augustine and Dionysius, asserted that it was, and the more austere writers followed them, noting with Alcher of Clairvaux that neither the senses nor the imagination can partake of this joy. But it is hard to write stirring devotional prose without imagery, so many authors who might have conceded the point in principle nevertheless introduced a cascade of biblical images to convey the sublimity of the highest state. Gerard, a prior of

31 “Visio ista habet aliquid somnio simile, eo quod non humano arbitrio et industria fiat, non ex investigatione nostra, sed ex visitatione orientis ex alto”: Gilbert of Hoyland, *Sermones in Canticum* 42.2, PL 184:221A.


33 “Prorsus quid ego sim dum luce inuisibili perfuor, cunctisque ualefaciens transitoriis meae refun- dor origini, meoque imperior exemplari, sentire interim licet sed omnino effari non licet”: ibid. 46.8, p. 331.

Grandmont, in the late twelfth century, represents the most exalted intellectus as follows:

There still remains the fourth and highest [type of scriptural understanding], the anagogic, which takes place in ecstasy. When the human mind hears that the Son of God has come in the flesh and died for man, has accepted burial, risen, ascended to heaven, and taken his seat at the Father’s right hand, then it is ravished with Paul to the third heaven, that is, to the contemplation of the holy Trinity, and enters the place of the wondrous tabernacle, even to the house of God, in a voice of exultation and confession, that it may marvel, rejoice, give thanks, feast, and be intoxicated with the abundance of God’s house, and drink of the torrent of his pleasure, and take its fill of the breasts of his comfort, and hear there mysterious words which it is not permitted for man to utter, where the young Benjamin, “the son of the right hand,” is in ecstasy, and see the Lord sitting on a high and lofty throne, he whose majesty fills the whole earth. There let him sing for joy with the stars of heaven, the angels, as they chant and say, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts! Heaven and earth are full of your glory! Amen! Alleluia!” And again let him say, “Let your streets, O Jerusalem, be paved with pure gold, and let there resound in you a song of gladness, and through all your quarters let all say Amen! Alleluia!”

While this text does not describe a vision as such, it presses intense visionary language into service to depict an ecstatic experience that might otherwise elude representation. In the process, of course, it supplies examples to direct the imagination of would-be contemplatives. Thus, even if images were admitted to play no role in the experience itself, they could still prove useful as spurs to meditation and desire. For some writers, the patristic concept of “spiritual senses” offered a useful compromise between the abstraction demanded by apophatic theology and the sensuality required for rhetorical brilliance. Thus Bonaventure writes of the twelfth stage of contemplation that

in it the holy soul receives an abundance of spiritual gifts by which it is fulfilled and delighted; and then a person is fit for contemplation and for the gaze and embraces of the Bridegroom and Bride, which take place in accord with the spiritual senses. Through these the supreme beauty of Christ the Bridegroom is seen as Splendor; his supreme harmony is heard as the Word; his supreme sweetness is tasted as Wisdom, comprehending both the Word and the Splendor; his supreme fragrance is smelled as the inspired Word in the heart; his supreme tenderness is embraced as the incarnate Word, dwelling

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among us in the body and making himself present to our touch, our kiss, and our embrace through the most ardent charity, which causes our mind to pass in ecstasy and rapture from this world to the Father.36

Such texts lie on the borderline between theory and practice. Aiming to systematize the full range of ecstatic and visionary experiences, often by arranging them in hierarchical order, they at the same time seek unabashedly to awaken the reader’s desire for such experience. It can hardly be otherwise, given that “theory” itself derives from theoria, a synonym for seeing or beholding. In medieval contemplative writings, theory not only grows out of practice but always feeds practice in return. This dialectic, so deeply ingrained in Cistercian, Victorine, and early Franciscan literature on visionary experience, is among the features that distinguish that literature most sharply from later treatises on the discernment of spirits.

Cultivating Visions: A Monastic Praxis

Just as theory implies theoria, an attentive gaze, so cultivation implies a culture. Medieval visionaries, far from being the isolated and marginal figures chastised by Enlightenment scholars, were engaged in a profoundly social practice that flourished in certain subcultures and faced opposition in others. The visionary subculture par excellence was the monastery, where constant immersion in Scripture, exegesis, hagiography, and contemplative writings trained the monk or nun to accept the possibility, or even likelihood, of visions and to esteem them highly. Visionary experience was never supposed to be an end in itself, at least not in principle: it was valued because it could lead the soul into deeper contrition, purer devotion, more perfect knowledge, and greater intimacy with God.37 Nevertheless, visions and ecstasies were always treated in hagiography as signs of divine favor, and competition for these graces could be intense. Specific practices conducive to visionary experience included the rigorous fasting observed in some communities; the hours devoted to lectio divina, or scriptural reading interspersed with meditation; the repetitive chanting of the Divine Office; and the custom of returning to one’s cell for prayer or sleep between the predawn office of matins and the hour of prime. Although medieval monastics did not use hallucinogens, Caroline Bynum’s work has demonstrated that, for devout women from the thirteenth century forward, receiving the Eucharist could have much the same effect. The efficacy

36 “Est enim duodenarius numerus abundans, in quo insinuatur spiritualium charismatum exuberantia, quibus fruitur et delectatur anima sancta; et tunc est homo ad contemplationem idoneus et ad aspectus et amplexus sponsi et sponsae, qui fieri habent secundum sensus spiritualibus, quibus videtur Christi sponsi summa pulcritudo sub ratione Splendoris; auditor summa harmonia sub ratione Verbi; gustaturna summa dulcedo sub ratione Sapientiae comprehendentis utrumque, Verbum scilicet et Splendorum; odoratur summa fragrantia sub ratione Verbi inspirati in corde; asstringitur summa suavitatis sub ratione Verbi incarnati, inter nos habitantis corporaliter et reddentis se nobis palpabile, osculabile, amplexabile per ardentissimam caritatem, quae mentem nostram per ectasiam et raptum transire facit ex hoc mundo ad Patrem”: Bonaventure, Breuioloquium 5.6.6, ed. Jean-Pierre Rezette, 7 vols. (Paris, 1967), 5:72–74.

of all these methods could be enhanced by the power of suggestion and example. Thus merely observing that some people customarily had visions at certain times, as when receiving Communion or meditating before the cross on Good Friday, made it easier for others in the same community to do likewise.

Monastics developed a wide variety of meditational techniques, all of them involving some form of trained or disciplined attention. More often than not, the meditator’s gaze was directed toward some specific visual focus, whether this object was a part of the natural world, an illuminated book, a crucifix, a consecrated host, or an internal image constructed by the mind. This deliberate training of the gaze was sometimes explicitly theorized as conducive to visionary experience. Programmatic accounts of the stages of contemplation often begin with *speculatio*, the attentive and reflective study of a visual object, and end with ecstasy.

Latin *speculatio*, like Greek *theoria*, had a range of meaning that extended from sight, show, and spectacle to spectatorship, speculation, and contemplation. To “speculate,” as Jeffrey Hamburger reminds us, means literally “to see in a mirror” (*speculum*), an idea with a long and complex genealogy in medieval thought, as we might guess from the popularity of *Speculum* as a book title. Two Pauline texts offered points of departure for the practice of trained, cultivated, “speculative” vision. One was 1 Cor. 13.12, “videmus nunc per speculum in enigmate, tunc autem facie ad faciem.” Bernard of Clairvaux and others construed this mode of seeing “through a mirror in a mystery” as visionary experience, which afforded tantalizing glimpses that foreshadowed the face-to-face vision of the blessed. The complementary verse was Rom. 1.20: “invisibilia enim ipsius a creatura mundi per ea quae facta sunt intellecta conspiciuntur.” This passage counterbalanced the first, referring less to the ephemeral, ecstatic moment than to a long discipline of visual meditation. As Richard of Saint-Victor explained, “When it is written that the invisible things of God are seen by the intellect from the creation of the world, through the things that are made, this plainly means that reason would never rise to the knowledge of invisible things unless its handmaid, imagination, presented to it the form of visible things.”

Training the mind to see vestiges of the Creator

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38 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics 1 (Berkeley, Calif., 1987). I do not mean to imply that medieval theologians ascribed to the Eucharist any miraculous power to induce visions or ecstasy. But the phenomenon of eucharistic visions does suggest that even when known hallucinogens, such as peyote and mescaline, were used in religious rites, their efficacy is enhanced by ritual performance and cultural expectations. On this theme see Carlos Castañeda’s anthropological fiction, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (Berkeley, Calif., 1968), and its sequels. On other cross-cultural techniques for inducing visionary experience see Noll, “Mental Imagery Cultivation” (see above, n. 5).


in the creature was one rationale for the Victorines’ comprehensive educational program, which justified scientific study in the “book of Nature” as well as exegetical study in the book of Scripture. Not only could a well-trained mind discern the divine cause from its material effects; it could even perceive traces of the Trinity in the power, wisdom, and goodness apparent in the world, in keeping with Alan of Lille’s famous verses: “Omnis mundi creatura / Quasi liber et pictura / Nobis est et speculum.”  

But if God could be seen in the whole created world by the eyes of reason, he could be seen more intimately by the eyes of faith in sacred art and in the sacrament of the altar. Art historians have observed that the late-medieval fascination with visions was but one aspect of a much broader privileging of sight over alternative modes of experience. Beginning around 1200, the elevation of the consecrated host at Mass, amplified by later customs such as its display in monstrances and Corpus Christi processions, led to an emphasis on “seeing God” instead of receiving Communion as the culmination of the layperson’s religious experience.  

It should not be surprising that a gaze fixed lovingly and habitually on the host, understood as the visible, edible body of God in the world, should sometimes see it transformed into the infant Christ. In eschatology as well, the idea of the beatific vision—once again, “seeing God”—gradually displaced alternative metaphors, such as feasting, music, and dance, for the bliss of heaven. And, of course, the late-medieval proliferation of religious art in all media, including theater, made “holy seeing” accessible to almost everyone. Closely linked to the veneration of actual painted or sculpted images was the construction of holy scenes within the mind. A nun who daily wept before the pietà or kissed the feet of the Crucified would find it increasingly easy to visualize these figures in prayer, and the line between “visualization” and “vision” is a fine one.

Not all devotional writers recommended visualization as a prayer technique. Some in the Dionysian tradition, such as the author of the Middle English Cloud of Unknowing, most emphatically rejected it. Yet the technique figured prominently in many devotions, especially in the late Middle Ages. To pray the rosary was, and is, to visualize complex scenes from the life of the Virgin—the joyful, sorrowful, or glorious mysteries—while counting out a fixed number of Hail Marys on the prayer beads. By the fifteenth century this devotion, which demands


Medieval Visionary Culture

a difficult layering of attention, had achieved immense popularity not only among religious but also among the laity—an index of the sophistication that can be achieved in this vein even without literacy. Late-medieval nuns improved on the technique, creating communal “gifts” for Mary—for example, an embroidered cloak or a garland of roses—by visualizing these items intensely as they recited many thousands of Aves.

But if visualization could be combined with the rote recitation of prayers, it could also be combined with highly literate exercises such as the composition of poetry or visionary prose. In her brilliant volumes The Book of Memory and The Craft of Thought, Mary Carruthers has identified the technique of visualization as an important link between the classical art of memory and the monastic art of prayer. For the ancients, memory was a component of rhetorical training. They considered an agile, well-stocked memory essential to literary composition (inventio), and to foster it they developed a mnemotechnics grounded in pictorial techniques, such as the mental linking of particular topoi or parts of a speech with rooms in a house or arches in a colonnade. Whatever the preferred structure, it should be one visualized so frequently by the student as to become second nature. Quintilian also taught the mental construction of visiones, or mnemonic images, as a potent method of rousing the emotional energies of speaker and audience. Rhetoricians even recommended certain postures as especially suitable for memory work—reclining in bed, sitting pensively with a book, strolling in a garden—or any other attitude that fostered the combination of focused attention with imaginative freedom.

The same techniques that helped Roman schoolboys memorize the Aeneid or polish their oratory could just as well help the monk memorize Scripture or craft meditative prayers. Certain books of the Bible, such as the Prophets and the Apocalypse, seemed especially suitable for visualization because they are so full of startling, unusual imagery: the Apocalypse remained a favorite of manuscript painters from the time of Beatus of Liébana to the end of the Middle Ages. Visualizing such images—transferring them from the sacred page to the storehouse of memory—was considered a cognitive act, and “the result of this assumption” was, in Carruthers’s words, “a weak distinction . . . between meditative reading and visionary experience.” Through visualization the scriptural text could be deeply internalized, and this inner landscape prepared the ground for new visions and


vision texts. As an early example of “monastic visionary invention,” Carruthers discusses the Carolingian Vision of Wetti, which has literary sources in the Psalms, Ezekiel, the Apocalypse, and the Dialogues of Gregory the Great. Yet this derivative character does not make the work any less “experiential,” for a vision deliberately crafted by a trained practitioner can be experienced almost as vividly as a spontaneous one.

The practice of lectio divina offered yet another route for the monk or nun to progress from disciplined attention to ecstatic vision. Although the Benedictine rule itself mandates several hours a day to be spent in sacred reading, lectio divina as a prayer method is most succinctly described in the twelfth-century Scala claus trium by Guigo II the Carthusian. According to this treatise, the devotee’s goal is to ascend the four rungs of the ladder from attentive reading out loud (lectio) through discursive reflection (meditatio) to vocal or mental prayer (oratio) to a trance of stillness (contemplatio) in which the mind holds itself open to divine inspiration, including possible visions. The second stage may involve visualization and the linking of scriptural texts through memory work, while even prayer can be a quasi-literary exercise in which the soul strives with “burning words” to inflame its own desire. Contemplation, when it comes, rewards the effort of the first three stages but “can never, or hardly ever, be won without” them. Treatises such as Richard of Saint-Victor’s influential De arca mystica, or Benjamin major, presuppose this discipline within a social environment where even the subtlest nuances of contemplative experience could be discussed and compared. Richard observes that ecstasy may occur spontaneously as a gift of God, but it can also be assisted by human effort: the mind may be lifted above itself by intensity of desire, by greatness of wonder, or by sheer joy. If such graces are withheld, seekers should not wait passively but redouble their striving through the deliberate exercise of memory. When the prophet Elisha lacked inspiration, Richard notes, he summoned a minstrel and, upon hearing the music, was filled with the prophetic

48 Chap. 48, “On the Daily Manual Labor,” says that monks should devote at least two hours to sacred reading every weekday and more on Sundays. In addition, each monk is to be given a book from the library at the beginning of Lent, to be read straight through from beginning to end: The Rule of Saint Benedict, trans. Leonard Doyle (Collegeville, Minn., 2001), pp. 109–12.


50 Ladder of Monks 13, p. 80.


52 “Therefore, think how beneficial it is to reconsider often the mysteries of our faith and to have them frequently in memory, since from such effort we shall be able to obtain a multitude of divine showings. Therefore if we can neither see [the divine mysteries] by ecstasy of mind nor comprehend by means of pure and clear understanding . . . nevertheless, insofar as it is possible for us, let us draw into frequent consideration those things which we receive from the Catholic tradition and hold by faith. . . . I think that the consolation of divine showings will not be completely foreign to those who both often and willingly behold by the eye of faith the hidden secrets of divine mysteries”: Mystical Ark 4.21, trans. Zinn, p. 301; PL 196:163D–164A.
spirit (2 Kings 3.15). Allegorically, to call for a minstrel means to “shout in divine celebration . . . with a great shout of the heart,” and this in turn means “to awaken devotion of the heart by recollection of divine kindnesses and promises.”53 In other words, to rekindle the fading embers of desire a monk should meditate on the Scriptures, the Trinity, and his own past experiences of God. By that practice he can once again become worthy of ecstatic vision.

Elsewhere in the treatise Richard draws a telling analogy from optics, acknowledging the parallels between corporeal and spiritual vision. In the physical world, the more tranquil a body of water, the more brilliantly it reflects the sun. Even so with the meditating mind:

What does water mean, except human thinking that always flows to a lower place unless it is confined by a barrier of great strength? Water that has been collected in a container represents thinking that is directed towards meditation and fixed by intention. The gathering together of water represents meditation of the heart. A ray of the sun directs itself onto such water when a divine showing meets with meditation. But when the water receives in itself the ray of light from above, it sends a flash of light to the very heights. . . . [B]y trembling it makes the light tremble; by being quiet, quiet; by being purer, purer; by being wider, wider. . . . [T]he more fully and perfectly the soul is able to compose itself in inward peace and tranquillity, the more firmly and tenaciously it will adhere to this raising up to the supreme light by means of contemplation.54

Richard was not the only author to draw parallels between visual and visionary experience. In the treatise *De oculo morali*, the thirteenth-century Franciscan Peter of Limoges works out elaborate analogies between contemporary optical theory, moral behavior, and devotional practice.55 More broadly, the medieval science of optics (*perspectiva*) provides a useful analogue for the disparity between supernatural and meditational approaches to visions. Learned opinion was divided between theories of “intromission” and “extramission,” which differed on the question of how the eye makes contact with the objects of vision. Following Aristotle, Avicenna, and Averroes, intromissionists believed that all objects emitted rays or particles of some kind, which reached the eye through a medium, such as air, and thus communicated their images to the beholder. Extramissionists, following


54 “Quid est aqua, nisi cogitatio humana, quae semper ad inferiora labitur, nisi sub distrisionis magnae moderamine cohibetur? Aqua in vase collecta, cogitatio meditationi intenta, et per intentionem defixa. Aquae collectio, cordis meditatio. Ejusmodi aquae solis radius se infundit, quando divina revelatio meditatio occurrat. Sed cum aqua radium in se superni luminis accipit, fulgorem quoque luminis et ipsa, ut dictum est, ad superiora emittit. . . . [I]ta ut tremula tremulum, quiescet, purior puriores, diffusior diffusiorum efficiat. . . . [Q]unto plenius atque perfectius ad intimam animam pacem et tranquillitatem componeret se praevaleverit, tanto firmius, tanto tenacius in hac sublatione summae luci per contemplationem inhaeret”: ibid. 5.11, PL 196:180; trans. Zinn, pp. 325–26 (punctuation altered).

Plato, Euclid, Galen, and Augustine, believed that the eye itself played an active role in perception, emitting visual rays that sought out their objects and so enabled them to be seen. The thirteenth-century English scientists Robert Grosseteste and Roger Bacon worked out complicated theories that attempted to synthesize these rival views, allowing for both visual rays from the eye and emanations from the object.\footnote{David C. Lindberg, “The Science of Optics,” in Science in the Middle Ages, ed. Lindberg (Chicago, 1978), pp. 338–68; idem, “Roger Bacon on Light, Vision, and the Universal Emanation of Force,” in Roger Bacon and the Sciences, ed. Jeremiah Hackett, Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters 57 (Leiden, 1997), pp. 243–75. See also Biernoff, Sight and Embodiment (see above, n. 3), chaps. 3–4, and Robert Podgurski, “Where Optics and Visionary Metaphysics Converge in Dante’s ‘Novella vista,’” Italian Quarterly 35 (1998), 29–38.} By analogy I might characterize the authors of meditative guides as engaged in a similar project. The devotee who follows their instructions for visualizing the life of Christ is not a passive perceiver: her mental gaze participates in constructing what she sees. Yet neither is the object of her visions passive, for Christ himself is understood to illumine the meditating mind with divine radiance. As in the case of physical sight, successful visio requires three elements: an external object, an active and focused eye, and a source of light.

Cultivated visions often reveal as much about a community’s visionary subculture as they do about the protagonist of a vision text. To conclude this section I will consider two examples: the Life of Christina of Markyate, from twelfth-century England, and Mechthild of Hackeborn’s Liber specialis gratae, from thirteenth-century Helfta. Both texts stand on the boundary between hagiography and first-person narrative, as each visionary’s revelations were recorded by a close friend and confidant. Christina’s unfinished Vita, told to a monk of St. Alban’s, stands closer to the genre of a conventional saint’s life.\footnote{On the circumstances of its composition see Rachel Koopmans, “The Conclusion of Christina of Markyate’s Vita,” Journal of Ecclesiastical History 51 (2000), 663–98.} Replete with visionary experience, it displays a virtually interchangeable use of dreams, prayer trances, and waking visions. Richard of Saint-Victor had listed “the effervescence of burning desire” as the first cause of ecstasy, and it is while she prays in this state that Christina experiences a vision of the Virgin Mary:

> Once as she was at prayer, her face wet with tears from yearning for heavenly things, she was suddenly raptured to heaven above the clouds, where looking around she saw the Queen sitting on a celestial throne and the glorious angels attending her. . . . The light of the angels could scarcely be compared with the light that surrounded her who bore the Most High. . . . Yet as [Christina] directed her gaze now to the angels, now to the Lady of angels, amazingly, her sight pierced the splendor surrounding the radiant Lady more easily than the brightness around the angels, although the weakness of human sight finds it more difficult to gaze on things that are too bright.\footnote{“Nam cum aliquando lacrimis in oracione maderet pre desiderio celestium, subito rapitur ultra nubes usque ad celum ubi conspicata reginam celesti in trono sedere vidit et angelos illi gloriosos assistere. . . . Nec tamen lumiini quo circumdabatur illa que genuit altissimum potuit comparari lumen angelorum. . . . Cum tamen vicissim intenderet, nunc in angelos nunc in dominam angelorum, miro modo facilius penetrabat candidentis obtutus splendorem dominum quam qui circumfulgebant angelos, cum infirmitas humane visionis habeat egrius inspicere clariora”: The Life of Christina of Markyate, a Twelfth Century Recluse 42, ed. and trans. C. H. Talbot, Medieval Academy Reprints for Teaching 39 (Toronto, 1998), pp. 108–10 (punctuation altered here and in the following note; both translations are my own).}
The text reveals a characteristic interplay of active and passive verbs: Christina is suddenly and passively “raptured” (“rapitur”), yet active verbs of seeing reassert her agency within the vision (“vidit . . . intenderet . . . penetrabat”). Its miraculous nature is signified by the fact that Christina’s heavenly seeing reverses the characteristics of physical sight: on earth an excessively bright light is blinding, but in heaven the brighter the light, the clearer the vision.

Elsewhere in the Life, as in many similar texts, Christina’s biographer describes revelatory dreams by alternating “vidit” (she saw) with its passive equivalent, “videbatur sibi” (it seemed to her). In her first visionary dream, while still living with her abusive parents and trying to escape her unwanted marriage, the would-be nun dreams of being “led into a beautiful temple with other women,” where she sees a priest about to celebrate Mass. “After seeing these things she awoke and found her pillow wet with many tears, and just as the tears she thought she had shed in her dream turned out to be real, she had no doubt about the rest of the things she had seen in the same dream.”59 The reality of the tears confirms the reality of the vision. An equivalence between dreams and waking visions is suggested by the hagiographer’s blithe indifference to contradictions in his terminology. On one occasion Christina’s “beloved,” Abbot Geoffrey of St. Alban’s, is “sitting awake on his bed in the early hours of the morning,” presumably meditating between matins and prime, when he “clearly sees” Christina sitting nearby, “for it was no dream” (“vidit manifeste, neque enim somnium erat”). Her silent presence inspires him to pray more attentively. The next morning he sends a messenger to inform Christina of the experience, but it turns out that she has already told her sister about “that dream” (“illo somnio”) in which she had deliberately appeared to him.60 This shared visionary experience recalls the practice southern Netherlandish hagiographers called “sending God,” in which one friend would promise to obtain special graces for another at an arranged time and place.61 Such experiences usually took place at Mass, but Christina’s bedroom visit seems appropriate to the muted eroticism of her relationship with Geoffrey. The ambiguity of his vision—was it a dream or wasn’t it?—suggests the kind of contemplative prayer trance described in Cistercian and Victorine writings.

Another occasion for communal visio is afforded by an eye inflammation that rendered Christina temporarily blind. “Her eyelids were contracted, her eyeball bloodshot, and underneath the eye you could see the skin flickering without stopping, as if there were a little bird inside it striking it with its wings.”62 Apparently near death, Christina had lost both physical and spiritual sight, but one of her

59 “Nocte quadam cum dormiret, videbatur sibi quod in quoddam pulcherimum [sic] templum cum aliis mulieribus introducta fuisse. Et ecce stabat ad altare quidam indutus vestimentis sacerdotalibus quasi ad solemnia missarum celebranda paratus. . . . Post hec visa evigilavit et cervical suum multis lacrimis madsuisse reperit, ut sic tur verum fie fuit quod somniasse putabat, ita de reliquirum eventu non ambigeret, que per idem somnium viderat”: ibid. 24–25, pp. 74–76.

60 Ibid. 67, pp. 152–54.


62 “Contrahebantur palpebre, turbabatur oculus, sub ipso oculo videres cutem ita sine intervallo moveri, ac si eam intus latens avicula iugi volat volant percuteret”: Life of Christina 48, pp. 122–23.
nuns has a visionary dream on her behalf. In a Macrobian oraculum, she sees “a matron of great authority”—the Mother of God—giving Christina a medicinal lozenge. Upon awakening, the nun learns that the sick woman has in fact been restored to health, the first signs of her cure being “a movement of her eyelids” and “sight in her eye which had been blind.” Here Christina and her sister share a joint miracle: one receives a spiritual vision, the other restoration of her physical sight. As in the case of Abbot Geoffrey, Christina’s visionary talent acts as a catalyst to inspire visions in those around her. This is a phenomenon we meet time and again in women’s religious communities, culminating in the Dominican sister-books of the fourteenth century.63 In a visionary subculture, “I saw” could mean “I learned to see.”

One of the most celebrated subcultures of this kind was the convent of Helfta in Saxony. In the last decades of the thirteenth century, this unofficially Cistercian community was home to at least three visionary writers: Gertrude the Great (d. 1301/2),64 her close friend Mechthild of Hackeborn (d. 1298/99), and the beguine Mechthild of Magdeburg (d. 1282), who took refuge there when old age, clerical harassment, and encroaching blindness made her former independent life impossible. It was at Helfta in the 1270s that the ex-beguine wrote the final book of Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit, perhaps inspiring the nuns to heightened literary activity. Unlike the vernacular mystic, the two convent-educated nuns were both excellent Latinists, who collaborated—along with still other unknown sisters—in recording one another’s visions. Thus the Legatus divinae pietatis ascribed to Gertrude consists of a short Vita written after her death (book 1), her own visionary narrative (book 2), and three further books of her revelations taken down by Mechthild of Hackeborn and others. In return, Gertrude was among several amanuenses who penned Mechthild of Hackeborn’s lengthy book of visions, entitled Liber specialis gratiae but translated into Middle English as the Booke of Goslye Grace.65 The women of this learned and ardent milieu clearly prized visions, both as experience and as text. In their works we find virtually all the techniques for cultivating visionary experience discussed above, as well as mutual literary influence.

Mechthild’s fervent devotion and vivid, painterly visions, together with Gertrude’s elegant Latin, made her book a favorite among connoisseurs of such things. Like other cloistered visionaries, her revelations have a strong liturgical character. The Liber visions also reveal a playful streak, with some of the theological daring

63 Gertrud Jaron Lewis, By Women, for Women, about Women: The Sister-Books of Fourteenth-Century Germany, Studies and Texts 125 (Toronto, 1996); Rebecca L. R. Garber, Feminine Figurae: Representations of Gender in Religious Texts by Medieval German Women Writers, 1100–1375, Studies in Medieval History and Culture 10 (New York, 2003), chap. 3.
64 This Gertrude is not to be confused with Mechthild’s natural sister, Abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn (1232–91).
65 Mechthild of Hackeborn, Liber specialis gratiae, ed. Louis Paquelin, in Revelationes Gertrudianae ac Mechtildianae, 2 (Poitiers, 1877). This edition by the monks of Solesmes is quite rare. A complete edition of the Middle English text is available in microfiche: The Booke of Goslye Grace of Mechthil of Hackeborn, ed. Theresa A. Halligan, Studies and Texts 46 (Toronto, 1979). Goslye grace translates an erroneous Latin title, Liber spiritualis gratiae, which is explained by the very similar abbreviations of specialis and spiritualis.
more often ascribed to Mechthild of Magdeburg. At one point the nun imagines playing a game of dice with Christ, ignoring the clerical condemnations of gambling.66 Elsewhere she elaborates on the Crucifixion as a wedding feast, making Jesus become in quick succession the price of the banquet, the meat and wine, the harp and organ, the tumbler and the dancer. Finally he even becomes the bride, “entering the marriage-bed of the cross” and opening his heart for his lover to penetrate, “when in dying on the cross I slept with you the sleep of love.”67 Typically audacious is the nun’s vision of Divine Love, a goddess favored in thirteenth-century Continental texts. Love appears as a “full fayre maydene” in the heart of God, against which she insistently knocks with her diamond ring. Questioned by the visionary, Love says that “this stone betokeneth the synne off Adam” and explains that just as a diamond cannot be cut except by blood, nor could Adam’s sin be undone save by the blood of Christ. So as soon as Adam fell, she began to batter the heart of God with her ring until at length she drove Christ out of the Father’s bosom into the Maiden’s womb, and so on to the creche, the ministry, and “the gybette of the crosse,” until she had “cowplede man to God with a bande of love whiche maye nowght he unbowndnen.”68 In short, original sin provides the jewel in the ring with which God weds humankind—a new and unexpected twist on the doctrine of felix culpa.

The trained allegorical imagination at work here suggests both disciplined theological meditation before the visions and literary elaboration after them, perhaps in conversation with Gertrude. Yet none of this likely context figures in the text itself. Rather, the language of seeing in Mechthild’s Booke is typical of prayer visions or trances, not unlike the diction observed in Christina of Markyate’s Life. “In here tyme of pryere, when sche desyrede here love,” the reader is assured, “sodeynlye the vertewe of the Godhede drowe here sowle sodeynlye to hym.”69 The adverb “sodeynlye” is repeated as if to stress divine agency and spontaneity. But the vision cannot have been wholly unexpected, for it occurs during a fervent, erotically inflected prayer just as Bernard, Richard of Saint-Victor, and other teachers of contemplation advised. Moreover, the writer clearly knew the Augustinian definition of visio spiritualis. What Mechthild “sawe” in her vision was “gostlye” rather than bodily, so it appears only in the mind’s eye (“to here semynge”), and Love presents herself only “als itt hadde bene” a fair maiden, echoing the “as if” language (quasi, sicut, velut) familiar in Latin visionary texts.

Mechthild’s revelations are all waking visions. Since many of them occur during the Divine Office, these at least cannot have been ecstatic, for the seer was chantress and could hardly afford to swoon in choir. Her liturgical role figures in the epilogue to her Booke, where it is not Mechthild but her editor Gertrude who has

67 Liber specialis gratiae 3.1; Finnegan, Women of Helfta, pp. 51–52.
the authorizing vision. Gertrude dreams that Mechthild, after receiving Communion, intones the chant “Domine, quinque talenta” to signify that she has turned a good profit on the talents given her by Christ. She then asks the nuns if they would like to receive honey from the heavenly Jerusalem. Mechthild offers a honeycomb to each sister in choir, but to Gertrude she also gives a morsel of bread, which is miraculously transformed into a whole loaf. Here the devout recipient of Communion becomes a priestly figure able to dispense it. If the quasi sacrament of honey indicates the sweetness of Mechthild’s visions, the loaf seems to represent Gertrude’s book, suffused inside and out with the “swete lykoure”—yet so great is the excess of honey “that itt wette alle here lappe, ande so ranne forth ande moystede alle the erth abowte them.” This vision, a shared experience like several in Christina’s *Life*, manages to convey at once the authority of Gertrude’s book, its insufficiency to contain the fullness of Mechthild’s “ghostly grace,” and its nurturing sweetness for the reader.

Gertrude’s epilogue to the *Liber specialis gratiae* bears comparison with an unknown nun’s prologue to her own *Legatus divinae piетatis*, written in the early fourteenth century. As if rebutting the arguments I have just made, this nun firmly reminds her audience that what they are about to read is *not* a literary text:

> Although [Gertrude] abounded in these and similar gifts which normally produce pleasure, it should by no means be thought that she imagined [the visions] that follow out of her own ingenuity or the keenness of her intellect just as it pleased her, or that she composed them out of diligence in writing (ex industri sermons) or fluency with language (ex habilitate eloquentiae). Not at all! Rather, it must be firmly believed, without the least hesitation, that all were truly infused in her by a gratuitous gift of the Spirit from the very fount of divine wisdom. . . . But since invisible and spiritual things can by no means be expressed for the human intellect except through visible and corporeal images, it is fitting to imagine them in human, bodily forms.

Does the sister protest too much? She knows that Gertrude’s text will give pleasure because of her lively intellect and elegant style, and for that very reason readers may be tempted to see the book as a literary product. Its pervasive sensual imagery can be justified by a passage from Richard of Saint-Victor (cited under the name of Hugh) on the biblical use of attractive material symbols to represent immaterial realities. But the divine origin of the visions must be emphasized more strongly: they derive solely from infused grace, the free gift of the Holy Spirit.

Had the editor been a male cleric introducing a woman’s vernacular text, as Hein-

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72 Hamburger, “Speculations on Speculation” (see above, n. 39), pp. 388–91.
rich of Halle did for Mechthild of Magdeburg, the case might have seemed clearer. *Illiteratae* are more obviously inspired because they are *not* presumed to be intelligent and skilled in writing.73 But Gertrude could not so easily be dismissed as an unlettered rustic, nor did the nun who wrote her prologue have a gendered interest in denying or minimizing the seer’s human abilities. Nevertheless, given the all-or-nothing approach to divine revelation I have described, the “authenticity” of Gertrude’s visions must be defended by emphatically denying their literariness.

**Scripted Visions: From the Cloister into the World**

Cultivated visionary experience was considered normal, even normative, in some religious communities.74 Visions like those of Christina of Markyate or the Helfta nuns were grounded on the literary side in the art of memory and rhetorical *inventio*, on the religious side in *lectio divina* and the cultivation of meditative trance. They never lost their essentially monastic character, even though thirteenth-century beguines brought the genre to its most vivid flowering.75 But this type of visionary practice required an intensive training that laypeople, even the very devout, were unlikely to obtain. Thus, when the laity began to infiltrate the visionary realm in significant numbers, their visions had a more formulaic character, almost as if they were following a script—as, in many cases, they were.

The phenomenon I will call “scripted visions,” like so many other lay devotional practices, had originated in spiritual exercises for professed religious. From the mid-twelfth century onward, clerical writers produced a long series of texts meant to help readers visualize the life of Christ so vividly that pious imagination would shade into visionary experience. Such writings are best described as visionary scripts. Aelred of Rievaulx’s *Rule for a Recluse* is one of the earliest entries in a genre that culminated in the fourteenth-century *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, with its many counterparts and translations. While Aelred wrote for a select and tiny audience of cloistered women, by the early fifteenth century the *Meditations* had reached a public so wide as to open the privileged path to visionary experience for even the illiterate, as we see in the celebrated case of Margery Kempe.

If the notion of a visionary script seems counterintuitive, even perverse, it is worth noting that this meditational technique has lately experienced a revival within our own culture, and not only among Christians. Creating and following

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73 In his prologue to the *Lux divinitatis*, a translation of Mechthild of Magdeburg’s *Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, Heinrich suppresses the name of “the woman through whom this writing was made public” in a “primitive tongue” in order to represent the text’s real author as “the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”: *Revelationes Gertrudianae ac Mecthildianae* (see above, n. 65), 2:435–37; *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin (New York, 1998), pp. 31–33. The translator Heinrich of Halle should not be confused with the Heinrich of Halle who had been Mechthild’s confessor.

74 This seems to have been true especially of the fourteenth-century German Dominican convents that compiled *Schwesternbücher* or collective hagiographies; in such communities a non-visionary nun might be seen as anomalous. See Lewis, *By Women, for Women, about Women*, and Garber, *Feminine Figurae*, chap. 3 (see above, n. 63).

75 Hadewijch and Mechthild of Magdeburg are the most celebrated visionary beguines, but see also Agnes Blannbekin of Vienna (d. 1315), *Life and Revelations*, trans. Ulrike Wiethaus (Woodbridge, Eng., 2002).
visionary scripts is now a common practice of neo-pagans, who use them for the invocation of spirits and deities, for the esoteric exercise known as “pathworking,” and even for past-life regressions. By way of cross-cultural comparison, here is one directive from the Wiccan priestess Starhawk’s instructions for casting a circle, taken from her popular handbook The Spiral Dance:

Ground and center. Face East. Visualize your athame [sacred knife] in your strongest hand, and draw an Invoking Pentacle. . . . See it burning with a pale, blue flame. Say, “Hail, Guardians of the Watchtowers of the East, Powers of Air.” Walk through the pentacle, and see a great wind sweeping across a vast plain of waving grass. Breathe deeply, and feel the air on your face, in your lungs, through your hair. The sun is rising, and in its rays a golden eagle shines as it flies toward you. When you are filled with the power of air, say, “Hail and farewell, Shining Ones.” Walk back through the pentacle.76

Compare these instructions for meditating on the life of Christ, addressed by the Cistercian monk Aelred to his sister, a recluse:

Now that your mind has been cleansed from all defiling thoughts by the practice of virtues, turn your purified eyes back to the past. First enter the chamber with the blessed Mary, and read the books that prophesy the virgin birth and the coming of Christ. Wait there for the angel to arrive so that you may see him enter and hear him greet her, and so, filled with amazement in ecstasy, greet your most sweet Lady together with the angel. Cry out and say, “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you, blessed are you among women.” Repeat this frequently, contemplating what this fullness of grace may be.77

Both spiritual writers assume a state of focused concentration or entrancement: the devotee must first be “grounded and centered” or have her mind “cleansed from all defiling thoughts” before beginning the exercise. The four skills that Starhawk represents as central to magical training—relaxation, concentration, visualization, and projection—were also essential to the meditative prayer of medieval religious, but monastic writers rarely go into detail about matters that would have been taught in person by a novice master.78 Both assume prior religious knowledge: the witch already knows about the elemental spirits and their domains, just as the anchoress already knows about the lives of Christ and Mary. Aelred, like Starhawk, encourages the devotee to make use of all her senses, especially sight and hearing, as she actively moves about her imagined space and greets the figures who appear there. Both writers thus conceive the vision as a relational encounter, opening into dialogue between the meditator and the sacred persons. Finally, both assume that the visionary trance will be a pleasurable experience. “In trance we

78 Starhawk, Spiral Dance, p. 72; see also pp. 166–84 on the theory and practice of trance.
find revelation," Starhawk writes. "We experience union, ecstasy, openness. The limits of our perception . . . dissolve."79 Aelred expects his sister to weep as she beholds the dying Christ, yet he also reminds her to drink joyfully from his bleeding wounds, for "your lips, stained with his blood, will become like a scarlet ribbon and your word sweet." At the end of the vision, when the risen Christ embraces Mary Magdalen, Aelred's advice is to "linger here as long as you can, virgin. Let no sleep interrupt these delights of yours, nor outer tumult disturb them."80

Aelred's how-to manual for producing visions was among the first experiments in what would become an extremely popular genre of guided meditations. Even in monastic hands, works of this type encouraged readers to cultivate visions quite different from those that grew out of free-form meditatio or inventio. Unscripted visions presuppose a well-stocked memory that is free to range at liberty over scriptural, liturgical, and classical texts and images. Given the ancient place of mnemotechnics in the art of rhetoric, visions of this kind are intimately tied to the prospect of fresh literary creation. But scripted visionary guides such as Aelred's require the reader to consult only one book, and their vernacular offspring do not even presume direct knowledge of the Gospels. Many such works are dedicated to women, whose devotional reading was expected to result in the experience of new visions but not necessarily in the creation of new texts. For every visionary text that comes down to us, there must have been hundreds of mute inglorious Margery's content with their devout meditations, who felt no need—or had no capacity—to write them down.

The blockbuster success in this genre was enjoyed by the pseudo-Bonaventuran Meditations on the Life of Christ, a mid-fourteenth-century Franciscan work ascribed by its editor on rather tenuous grounds to Johannes de Caulibus.81 Like Aelred, the Franciscan addressed his meditations to a woman, a Poor Clare of San Gimignano, and like Aelred he gave explicit instructions for their use. In his prologue he explains that his graphic retelling of Christ's life is meant, not as an exercise in historical reconstruction, but as a script to awaken the reader's visionary imagination:

If you wish to exercise yourself with diligent meditation on these things, you will have as your teacher the Lord Jesus himself, of whom we speak. But you should not believe that everything we could imagine he had said or done is written here. Rather, to make a firmer impression, I will narrate these events to you as if they had taken place in this way, as we can piously believe that they happened or might have happened, in accord with certain imaginary representations that the mind can grasp in a variety of ways. For

79 Ibid., p. 171.
we can expound, understand, and meditate on the divine Scripture in as many ways as we see fit, so long as it is not opposed to the truth of [Christ's] life, righteousness, or teaching—that is, not against faith or good morals. So when you find me saying that the Lord Jesus, or other characters who are introduced, said or did such and such, if it cannot be proven by Scripture, you should not take it otherwise than devout meditation requires. Receive it, then, as if I were to say: Imagine that the Lord Jesus said or did such and such. And the same goes for the rest. But if you want to gain the fruit of these meditations, you should make yourself as present to these sayings and deeds recounted of the Lord Jesus as if you heard them with your own ears and saw them with your eyes, engaging the whole affection of your mind, attentively, delightfully, and at leisure, having put aside for a time all other cares and worries.82

These instructions could hardly be clearer. Pseudo-Bonaventure offers the reader a set of “imaginarias representaciones,” or dramatic scenarios, and her task is to “make herself present” within them—not merely as a spectator, but as a participant. These directives are reinforced at the end of the lengthy volume: “it is sufficient to meditate on a single act that the Lord Jesus performed, . . . making yourself present then and there (te ibidem presente exhibendo) as if this event were happening in your presence (in tua presencia), just as it occurs in all simplicity to the meditating soul.”83 This emphasis on presence should be read in light of the author’s frank admission that the graphic detail of his narrative is only an imagined representation of what might have happened, a kind of novelistic history, which the meditator herself is free to alter. “Seeing” in short means visualizing, with a certain measure of imaginative freedom. Yet some version of these events did once occur, so the exercise has its limits: even though authorized visions do not require scriptural proof, they cannot overtly contradict the sacred text. In this sense the Meditations on the Life of Christ differs from the visualizations practiced in the course of rhetorical inventio, which are more likely to evoke fictive landscapes and allegorical figures. The Meditations afforded opportunities for a reader to create her own variants on a standard script, but not for free-form visionary invention.

While performing the exercises, the author specifies, the devotee should divide Christ’s life into segments, visualizing it as far as the flight into Egypt on Monday, through his inaugural sermon on Tuesday, and so forth, “so that by doing this

82 “[S]i te in exercitare sedula meditacione uolueris, ipsum Dominum Iesum de quo loquimur Magistrum habebis. Non autem credas quod omnia que ipsum dixisse uel fecisse meditari possimus scripta sint. Ego uero ad maiorem impressionem ea sic ac si ita fuisses tibi narrabo prout contingere uel contingisse pie credi possunt, secundum quasdam imaginarias representaciones quas animus diuer-simode percipit. Nam circa diuinam Scripturam meditari, exponere et intelligere multihar or, prout expedire credimus possimus: dummodo non sit contra veritatem uite, iusticie aut doctrine, id est non sit contra fidem uel bonos mores. Cum ergo me narrantem iuenies: Ita dixit uel fecit Dominus Iesus, seu ali qui introducuntur, si id per Scripturam non posint probari, non aliter accipias quam deuota meditacio exigat. Hoc enim inde accipe ac si dicerem: Meditieris quod ita dixit uel fecit Dominus Iesus. Et sic de similibus. Tu autem si ex his fructum sumere cupis, ita presentem te exhibeas his que per Dominum Iesum dicta et facta narratur ac si tuis auribus audire et oculis ea uideres, toto mentis affectu diligentem, delectabiliter et morose, omnibus aliis curis et sollicitudinibus tunc omissis”: Meditaciones vite Christi, prologue, p. 10.
83 “Igitur scire debo quod meditari sufficit solum factum quod Dominus Iesus fecit, . . . te ibidem presente exhibendo, ac si in tua presencia fierent prout simpliciter anime cogitanti occurrit”: ibid. 108, pp. 349–50.
every week, you will familiarize yourself with these meditations; the more often you do them, the more easily and pleasantly they will come to you. You will happily converse with the Lord Jesus, and you will zealously carry his life in your heart at all times, just as the blessed Cecilia carried the Gospel in her bosom.”

The same directives are preserved in Nicholas Love’s *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, the best known of several Middle English adaptations. Writing explicitly for a lay audience, Love abridged or deleted many of Pseudo-Bonaventure’s *auctoritates*, but he translated a key sentence from the prologue quite literally:

> Wherefore þou þat coueytest to fele treuly þe fruyt of þis boke; þou most with all þi þought & alle þin entent, in þat manere make þe in þi soule present to þoo pinges þat bene here writen seyd or done of oure lord Jesu, & þat bisily, likyngly & abydyngly, as þei þou herdest hem with þi bodily eres, or sey þaime with þin eyen don; puttyng away for þe tyme, & leuyng alle oper occupacions & bisynesses.

In this form of meditation the boundary between “I visualized” and “I saw” is porous indeed.

The hoped-for crossing of that borderline is well described in a twentieth-century account by the priestess Dion Fortune, who explains how she and a fellow adept magically “constructed” the temple of Isis by visualizing it:

> We pictured the temple of Isis as we had known it near the Valley of the Kings in the great days of the cult. We pictured it in its broad outline, and then we pictured it in all its detail, describing what we saw till we made each other see it more and more clearly. We pictured the approach through the avenue of ram-headed sphinxes; the great pylon gate in the temenos wall; the court with its lotus pool; shadowed colonnades, and the great hall with its pillars. . . . And as we did this, alternately watching and describing—the phantasied scenes began to take on the semblance of objective reality and we found ourselves in them—no longer looking at them with the mind’s eye, but walking about in them. After that there was no more effort of concentration, for the astral vision took charge.

For the Christian practitioner, too, if all goes well, visualizing becomes seeing, while stiff, formal dialogue gives way to spontaneous conversation: “libenter conuerseris cum Domino Iesu.” Anyone who performed such meditations as directed and failed to have visions would have been seriously lacking in imagination.

Nicholas Love’s ideal reader may well have been a woman like Margery Kempe, whose lack of personal literacy could not prevent her from learning and following his directives. Kempe is often and rightly labeled a “visionary.” But when we read her book expressly to see what it has to tell us about visionary experience, what we find may surprise us. In determining what is most original about any text, it is useful to ask what lingers longest in the memory after a first reading—or a third

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84 “Et sic per singulas ebdomadas facias ut ipsas meditaciones tibi reddas familiares quod quanto facies tarto facilius tibi concurrent, et iucundius. Libenter conuerteris cum Domino Iesu, et uitam ipsius tanquam Evangelium ad imitationem beate Cecilie in corde studeas inseparabiliter collocare”: ibid., p. 350.


Margery Kempe. Her marriage was of this-worldly concern. We will consider Margery Kempe as an example of a woman who has become, like Hamlet, a compendium of famous quotations:

Alas, that evyr I dede synne, it is ful mery in hevyn.87
Forasmech as thu art a mayden in thi sowle, I schal take the be the on hand in hevyn and my modyr be the other hand, and so schalt thu dawsyn in hevyn.88
I preche not, ser, I come in no pulpyt. I use but comownycaycon and good wordys, and that wil I do whil I leve.89
What, woman, art thu come aegen? I wolde fayn be delveryd of the.90

As these zingers suggest, what we remember best about this intensely oral book is its dialogue. The repartee has as sharp a tang as anything in Malory; and if more medievalists were filmmakers, the book would yield an excellent screenplay. This is not something that can be said of many saints’ lives, let alone visionary texts. If we go on to ask what visual scenes are most memorable, chances are they will be vignettes of the heroine herself. Here we see a leaden-faced Margery writhing on the ground at Calvary, screaming like a woman in labor (chap. 28). There we find her in white clothes at Hessle, pursued by a troupe of angry women with distaffs shouting “Burn this false heretic!” (chap. 53); and there at last is the much-chastened wife, scrubbing her senile husband’s diapers and fretting about the cost of firewood (chap. 76). Kempe’s self-portraits tend to be far more striking than her holy meditations. Even when we consider her actual visions, the most unforgettable are this-worldly experiences. Sightseeing in Rome, Margery bursts into tears, thinking of Jesus, every time she sees a mother with an infant son (chap. 35); and whenever she hears a man beating a horse, the sound of the whip renews her lament over the Passion (chap. 28). Later on, after she had encountered the novel cult of St. Joseph, Margery could not see a wedding without recalling the marriage of Joseph and Mary and how it signified “the gostly joynynge of manny sowle to Jhesu Crist.”91 Much like her older contemporary William Langland, Margery “saw” most vividly when her gaze encompassed the sacred in the present world.

Nevertheless, Kempe also had more conventional visions, which have received less critical attention than any other aspect of her text.92 For these visions are strictly “by the book,”93 and their scripted, formulaic character contrasts sharply with the candid, unconventional narrative that intrigues Kempe’s latter-day admirers. Despite their seemingly artless chronology, Margery’s scripted visions are strategically placed to create a desired hagiographic effect. Visual meditations on

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88 Ibid. 22, p. 62.
89 Ibid. 52, p. 126.
90 Ibid. 54, p. 131.
91 Ibid. 82, p. 189. On the top-down introduction of St. Joseph’s cult see Newman, God and the Goddesses (see above, n. 8), pp. 284–87.
93 For this term I am indebted to Elaine Scarry, Dreaming by the Book (New York, 1999). Scarry gives a fascinating account of how the mind uses the instructions contained in prose fiction to construct visual imagery that mimics the vivacity of actual perception. The process envisaged in medieval texts is more conscious and deliberate than the semiautomatic responses Scarry describes.
the Virgin’s birth and childhood and the Nativity come soon after the account of Margery’s conversion, for these were considered appropriate subjects for beginners. Later, once she is well established (at least in her own eyes) as a saintly woman, she sees “wyth hir gostly eye” the parting of Christ and Mary, the Ascension, and the death of the Virgin. Near the end of her narrative, she recounts a detailed set of Passion visions, from Gethsemane through the Resurrection and “Noli me tangere.” After an interlude in which she is tested by clerics and congratulated by God, who promises her sainthood, Kempe’s self-portrait as mystic culminates in a Trinitarian vision narrated by Christ himself, playing the role of hagiographer to his beloved daughter. These meditations follow an accepted pattern of spiritual ascent, beginning with the tender joys of Christ’s infancy, proceeding through sorrowful scenes of parting, to the central Passion sequence in which Mary Magdalen joins the cast of characters, to the exalted sight of the Trinity.94

Thoroughly orthodox in theology and devotional practice, such visions are surely meant to set a seal of approved piety on Kempe’s exceptional narrative. It would be possible to demonstrate her debt to Nicholas Love, and thus to Pseudo-Bonaventure, in some depth. Gail Gibson has shown that even the homely detail of Margery’s offering the bereaved Virgin a hot “cawdel” to drink derives from a passage in the Mirror—although Love does not go so far as to provide the recipe for this “chicken soup for the soul” that appears on the last folio of Kempe’s manuscript.95 Since Love’s work was commissioned by Archbishop Arundel, the archrepressor of Lollardy, Kempe could hardly have chosen a more effective way to demonstrate her orthodoxy than by studious observance of the meditative practice Love teaches. In the process of modeling her approved devotions, Margery also provides an invaluable account of how she “learned to see,” progressing from beginner to proficient to adept in the art of constructing visions. Early in her mystical career, Christ assigns her to a spiritual director and tells her to give up lengthy vocal prayers in favor of meditation: “thynk swych thowtys as I wyl putt in thi mend.” As a novice in the meditative art, Margery at first asks in bewildement, “Jhesu, what schal I thynke?”96 Christ tells her to think of his mother, and “anoon” she has her first intentional vision, beginning with the birth of Mary. In fact, Margery completes the full set of meditations recommended for Monday, ending with Love’s first Tuesday meditation on the flight into Egypt.97 Years later, recalling this initiation for her scribe, Kempe seems awed not so much by the mysteries of the Incarnation as by the intensity of her own experience—“wyth gret reverns wyth many swet thowtys and hy medytacyons and also hy contem-

94 The Nativity visions can be found in chaps. 6–7, the Ascension and death of the Virgin in chap. 73, the Passion cycle in chaps. 79–81, and the Trinity visions in chaps. 85–86.
95 “And þou also by deuoute ymagination as þou were þere bodily present, confort oure lady & pat felawshiphe praying hem to ete sumwhat, for zit þei bene fastying”: Love, Mirror 48, p. 190. Cf. Book of Margery Kempe 81, p. 186; Gail McMurray Gibson, The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages (Chicago, 1989), p. 51.
96 Book of Margery Kempe 5–6, pp. 31–32.
97 Kempe skips Love’s “prologue in heaven,” a meditation on the four daughters of God, since she had no use whatsoever for allegory.
placyons, sumtyme duryng in wepyng two owyres and ofryn lengar in the mend of owyr Lordys Passyon wythowtyn sesyng.”  

As Margery advances in her visionary practice, she stresses her obedience to the directives of Pseudo-Bonaventure and Nicholas Love. The Meditations and the Mirror prescribe that the meditator should relive the sacred scenes in her imagination as vividly as if she had been present in the flesh. Thus Margery writes, “Sche had many an holy thowt of owr Lordys passyon and beheld hym in hir gostly syght as verily as he had ben afor hir in hir bodily syght.”  

Again, after seeing the priest elevate a crucifix on Palm Sunday, “sche saw owr Lord Crist Jhesu as verily in hir sowle wyth hir gostly eye as sche had seyn befor the crucifix wyth hir bodily eye.” From her spiritual reading, which was extensive despite her need for clerical mediation, she knew about other types of visionary experience as well. In chapter 85 she records a number of sacred dreams and trances, all taking place appropriately while she prays or meditates in church: “On a tyme, as the sayd creatur was knelyng befor an awter of the cros and seying on an orsyn, hir eyne wer evyr togedirward as thow sche schulde a slept. And at the last sche myth not chesyn; sche fel in a lityl slomeryng, and anon aperyd verily to hir syght an awngel.”

“Visyons and felyngys” of this type, Margery says, were characteristic of the period soon after her conversion, when she virtually lived in her parish church. Their somewhat nebulous, dreamlike character distinguishes them from her scripted visions, in which every detail remains clear and distinct. Margery notes that in her early years, she sometimes doubted, and these experiences ceased; but when she believed firmly that it was God who sent them, “than had sche so many holy thowtys, holy spechys, and dayyawns in hir sowle” that she could never remember them all.

Although Kempe’s life and her Book are both works of stunning originality, her piety is pure imitation. In addition to her visual meditations, she seems self-consciously to have experimented with every spiritual practice she encountered in every book she could persuade her clerical friends to read to her. Under the influence of her beloved “St. Bride” (Birgitta of Sweden), she began to prophesy more harshly concerning divine judgment. Learning of St. Catherine of Siena’s experiences in Rome, she underwent a mystical marriage to the Godhead. Inspired by Richard Rolle, she perceived sweet smells, celestial melodies, and ardent fires of love in her breast. This mimetic mysticism has often been read as a sign of insecurity and unpleasing ambition: Kempe practiced spirituality as a competitive sport, never confident of her holiness until she had outwept and outprayed every saint in her repertoire. In the eyes of theologians, too, this self-consciousness has been the bane of Margery’s reputation. No matter how absorbing her visions, she remained perpetually fascinated by her own reactions to them—a trait that has

98 Book of Margery Kempe 7, p. 33.
99 Ibid. 78, p. 176.
100 Ibid., p. 179.
101 Ibid. 85, p. 195.
102 Ibid. 83, p. 191.
103 For the Birgittine-style prophecy see chap. 20; for the mystical marriage and paranormal sensations, chap. 35.
provoked many accusations of narcissism or low-grade affective piety, as opposed to what Walter Hilton called “true contemplation.” ¹⁰⁴

Part of this self-preoccupation may be a consequence of genre. As Amy Hollywood has shown, one generic difference between mystical writing and hagiography is that, in the latter, all signs of devotion and sanctity have to be externalized, made visible to the saint’s public, so that what might have begun as internal experience is represented as outward bodily performance.¹⁰⁵ Kempe found herself in the awkward position of composing her own Vita, so—like Henry Suso, another mystic who is often charged with exhibitionism—she stressed the visible, audible tokens of her spiritual life, even or especially when they resulted in the persecution she seemed to crave. But after due allowance has been made, it seems hard to deny that Kempe was fascinated by her own experience: her visions “wer so holy and so hy that sche was abaschyd to tellyn hem to any creatur, and also it weryn so hy abovyn hir bodily wittys that sche myth neyr expressyn hem wyth hir bodily tunge liche as sche felt hem. Sche undirstod hem betyr in hir sowle than sche cowde uttyr hem.”¹⁰⁶ It is an extraordinary complex of motives and feelings that she expresses here: claims to religious authority, yes, but also sacred awe, a delighted satisfaction with her own sainthood, the pride of an artist who has mastered a difficult craft, the fulfillment of her “singular love,” and sheer wonder at what it is possible for a human being to know of God. In comments such as this, which are sprinkled liberally throughout the Book, we encounter Margery Kempe not as an “original mystic” but as a grateful reader, telling us exactly why visionary guidebooks enjoyed the enormous and lasting popularity that they did.

**Ambiguous Visions: The Discernment of Spirits**

Kempe’s scripted visions would have been invaluable to anyone wishing to make a case for her orthodoxy, since the normative piety of these meditations formed a reassuring contrast with the strangeness of her behavior. But even if their content was unimpeachable, the meditational practice underlying them was far from universally approved. Within the broader context of late-medieval Christianity, scripted visions can be seen as one aspect of a comprehensive and profoundly ambivalent trend toward domestication of the sacred, along with vernacular Bible translations, books of hours, indulgenced prayers, and devotions “by number” such as the rosary.¹⁰⁷ On the one hand, this democratizing movement liberated the expressions of a formerly elite piety from their original home in the cloister,


¹⁰⁶ *Book of Margery Kempe* 83, p. 191.

making them accessible to a wider public enjoying newfound access to literacy.  

On the other hand, such burgeoning lay piety ran the risk of a routinized mysticism: if divine grace could be had on demand, so to speak, was it still grace? In the case of visionary experience, the cultivation of scripted visions posed a sharp challenge to the theology of spontaneous divine intervention. Even some relatively tolerant clerics felt that meditations like Margery’s, no matter how well intentioned, presumed too far on the grace of God, for they encouraged the devotee to seek special favors when it would be safer to practice humble obedience.

For others, the intentions of such devotees were automatically suspect because even spontaneous visions ought to be feared, given the devil’s propensity to disguise himself as an angel of light. To cultivate visionary experience on purpose was asking for trouble: the only possible motives for such an exercise were self-delusion (often ascribed to female emotionality) or a malicious will to delude others. Exemplum collections abounded in cautionary tales of believers who fell prey to Satan’s wiles because of a presumptuous desire for visions.

Worse yet, scripted visions might be sought directly from evil spirits. I have cited the visionary directives of Dion Fortune and Starhawk advisedly, for they descend at some distance from a tradition of ritual magic that employed similar techniques. A fifteenth-century necromancer’s handbook, for example, tells the reader how to conjure sixteen demons with the aid of a sacrificial hoopoe, after which he can enjoy a visionary banquet:

When you have [performed the conjuration], you will see sixteen splendid and stalwart knights. They will say to you, “You summoned us and we have come, obedient to your will. Ask what you will, confident that we are ready to obey.” Say in reply, “Make me see your power, that I may behold tables with many people reclining at them, with an infinite array of dishes.” . . . At once many pages will come, carrying three-legged tables, towels and other necessary equipment. Then the most noble of folk will come and recline, and butlers to serve, carrying an infinite array of dishes. And you will hear singing and music-making, and you will see dancing and innumerable games.

108 The routinizing of religious exercises did not always serve a “democratizing” purpose but could also be used to curtail expressions of spontaneous piety and place more control in the hands of clerics. Even exorcisms were transformed in the fifteenth century from relatively unstructured, charismatic performances by saints into tightly controlled liturgical scripts: Caciola, Discerning Spirits (see above, n. 4), pp. 225–73.

109 For example, Johannes Tauler warns devotees who “choose their own techniques in prayer and meditation, or perhaps imitate what other people are doing” in the hope of being “drenched with sweet consolations,” that the peace they obtain by these means is false, for true peace comes only through obedience and detachment: Sermons 5 and 21, trans. Maria Shardy (New York, 1985), pp. 47 and 75.


While this spectacle is explicitly demonic, other magical texts are more canny, telling practitioners how to summon up visions of the Virgin Mary or the crucified Christ for the purpose of gaining privileged information from them. The monk John of Morigny, having experienced many visions while practicing the forbidden *ars notoria,* ultimately renounced this magical art only to devise his own, suspiciously similar practice for conjuring visions of Mary. John promises that “if the intact heart of the operator is fixed and set on her, then prayer, figure and visualisation (*ymaginatio*) obtain the desired effect as a gift of God.” He goes on to describe various aspects in which the Virgin is likely to appear—as a “venerable and religious matron,” a “queen of lovely and wondrous beauty,” and so forth—but adds that unfortunately Satan may also appear in the Virgin’s likeness. Not surprisingly, John’s text was condemned and burned at Paris in 1323.

Given the potential danger of visions, it is small wonder that many who experienced them lived in dread of delusion. Despite frequent reassurances from God, Angela of Foligno became convinced from time to time that she was possessed by demons, “their daughter even.” Margery Kempe, even as she exulted in Christ’s favors, felt a continual need to ask her spiritual advisers “yf sche wer dysceyved be any illusyons.” One of those comforting advisers, Julian of Norwich, had initially doubted her own spontaneous visions, believing that she had “raved” in the grip of a life-threatening illness. Even after she had come to accept the visions, Julian assured her readers that by the time of the illness, she had long since abandoned her youthful prayer for a sight of Christ’s Passion: “in this I desired never no bodily sight ne no maner shewing of God, but compassion, as methought that a kind soule might have with our lord Jesu.”

Some of this negative attitude toward visionary experience appears to have been rooted in a deeply skeptical strain peculiar to English Scholasticism. In particular, the Franciscan William of Ockham (d. 1347) and his Dominican follower Robert Holkot (d. 1349) broke with a thirteenth-century consensus by privileging absolute power, rather than goodness or love, as the primary attribute of God. This emphasis led them into some alarming inquiries concerning God’s ability and will to deceive. Ockham maintained that God could delude human senses by making an absent object appear to be present, and Holkot went much further, declaring

115 *Book of Margery Kempe* 18, ed. Staley, p. 52. Her adviser in this case was William Southfield, a Carmelite friar of Norwich who was himself a noted visionary.
116 *A Revelation of Love* 3, in *Writings of Julian of Norwich,* ed. Watson and Jenkins (see above, n. 14). For her “raving” see chap. 66.
God to be the cause of all error as well as all truth.\textsuperscript{118} Moreover, divine deception was not merely a theoretical possibility but a biblical fact. Thus, according to Holkot, God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son under false premises; Jesus at the age of twelve deliberately misled Mary when he remained behind in the Temple; and the Holy Spirit deceived Peter through a vision in which he mistook a net full of illusory animals for real ones (Acts 10.11–12).\textsuperscript{119} This theology scarcely required the intervention of demons to account for the human propensity to err. Yet if even God could and did deceive even saints, then diabolical wiles must be feared all the more. Nominalist thought can hardly bear full responsibility for the oft-noted insular aversion to visionary spirituality, but it surely exacerbated that trend.

Even among devotional writers, Walter Hilton (d. 1396) would remark that visions, dreams, and other paranormal experiences were not truly contemplation and could be the work of either angels or demons, just as Augustine had warned.\textsuperscript{120} Therefore it is better to have a true longing for Jesus, “though y myghte not seen of His Godhede with my goostli iye,” than to have the sum of “alle visious or revelacions of angels apperynge, songes and sownes, savours or smelles, brenynge and ony likynynges, bodili felande.”\textsuperscript{121} The Cloud of Unknowing states even more sharply that in fallen humanity, the imagination can do nothing but err: “This inobedyence of the ymaginacion may clerly be consevyned in hem that ben newlynges tornid fro the worlde unto devocion in the tyme of here preier. For . . . thei move in no wise put awey the wonderful and the diverse thoughtes, fantasies and ymages, the whiche ben mynysted and preentid in theire mynde by the light and the coriouse of ymaginacyon. And alle this inobedyence is the pylne of the original synne.”\textsuperscript{122}

On the Continent, by contrast, the hugely influential Geert Grote (d. 1384) cautiously endorsed visual meditations. He noted that there was indeed some danger of mistaking imagination for reality: “it is in the nature of images and species firmly pressed upon the mind, especially when they are consciously projected as present, to return to their origins in the external senses. Then the visualized image is made real, as if it were in our very presence, and the phantasy is taken up by our external sense organs. Thus a simple man will believe that he can sense the very corporeal presence of Christ, or seem to see him with his eyes or hear with his ears, or touch some saint he has imagined. Such deceptions are not without

\textsuperscript{118} “Preterea quod ita est de facto quod omnis rei deus est prima et summa causa, secundum Augustinum, iii De Trinitate cap. vi. Deus est inquit prima causa omnium rerum atque motionum. Sed error est una res atque operatio, ergo de facto omnis error est a deo sicut a prima causa et summa”: Robert Holkot, Super quatuor libros Sententiarum questiones, bk. 3, q. 1, art. 8, ad 2, 2 (Lyons, 1497).

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., bk. 3, q. 1, art. 8, ad 3, 1–3. Interestingly, Holkot does not challenge the moral or theological point of Peter’s vision but its physical reality: a phantasm appeared to Peter as a material object, as in the case of any Augustinian \textit{visio spiritualis}.

\textsuperscript{120} Hilton, Scale of Perfection 1.10, ed. Bestul (see above, n. 104), p. 40.

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid. 1.47, p. 85. Hilton here criticizes the spirituality of Richard Rolle, whose \textit{Incendium amoris} was one of Margery Kempe’s favorite books.

danger." Nevertheless, Grote regarded visual meditation as so useful to beginners in the devout life that "no infant would shrink back" from it, if only some "wise and discrete person" were at hand to warn against errors. In short, the "simple" could meditate safely so long as they did not mistake cultivated visions for spontaneous ones, that is, for divine revelation or prophecy.

Skeptical and devotional attitudes toward visionary experience clashed most sharply in the rival assessments of Birgitta of Sweden, whose revelations provoked competing tracts on discernment through the late fourteenth and much of the fifteenth century. Margery Kempe may have been, by her own account, an intensely controversial figure, yet no medieval narrative but her own so much as mentions her. The case is strikingly different with Birgitta, the most important of Kempe's role models and the most contested visionary of the Middle Ages. She was also the only woman to be canonized in the fourteenth century, an accolade she won from Pope Boniface IX in 1391, less than twenty years after her death (1373). The turbulent politics of the age were such that her sainthood needed to be reaffirmed by John XXIII at the Council of Constance (1415), around the time of Kempe's visit to Birgitta's house in Rome, and again by Martin V after the end of the schism (1419). Among the authoritative voices raised in defense of Birgitta's visions and her sanctity were those of her first spiritual director, Master Mathias of Linköping; her confessors, Prior Peter of Alvastra and Master Peter of Skånninge; Magnus Petri, author of a tract against her "calumniators"; the Spaniard Alfonso Pecha, former bishop of Jaén and editor of Birgitta's Revelations; the Swedish bishops Birger Gregersson and Nils Hermansson; Adam Easton, an Oxford-trained cardinal residing in Rome; Margery Kempe herself; and the Do-

\[\text{\emph{De quattuor generibus meditabilium,}}\]


124 Lynn Staley cites this lack of corroborating evidence, even for such significant events as Kempe's heresy trial in York, to support her radical view of \emph{The Book of Margery Kempe} as a work of "prose fiction": Book, ed. Staley, p. 10; and eadem, \emph{Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions} (University Park, Pa., 1994).

125 For Birgitta's life and the controversies surrounding her see Bridget Morris, \emph{St Birgitta of Sweden}, Studies in Medieval Mysticism 1 (Woodbridge, Eng., 1999); Claire L. Sahlin, \emph{Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy}, Studies in Medieval Mysticism 3 (Woodbridge, Eng., 2001); Voaden, \emph{God's Words, Women's Voices} (see above, n. 4), chap. 3; and Ulla Williams and Werner Williams-Krapp, "Expertis crede! Birgitta von Schweden als Maßstab für wahre Heiligkeit," in \emph{Studien zur deutschen Sprache und Literatur: Festschrift für Konrad Kunze zum 65. Geburtstag}, ed. Václav Bok, Ulla Williams, and Werner Williams-Krapp, Studien zur Germanistik 10 (Hamburg, 2004), pp. 211–32.

126 Catherine of Siena (d. 1380) was not canonized until 1461 by the Siensese Pope Pius II. Alfonso of Jaén, Birgitta's confessor and editor, had also championed Catherine's cause.
minican cardinal Juan de Torquemada, uncle of the grand inquisitor.127 Yet not even a threefold declaration of sanctity could silence Birgitta’s detractors. Before her canonization these included Henry of Langenstein, a German theologian teaching in Paris, and an anonymous Italian master whose lost anti-Birgittine tract is known from Adam Easton’s rebuttal of it. After the papal decree, Birgitta’s most famous opponent was Jean Gerson, who vigorously attacked her revelations in two of his three treatises on the discernment of spirits, De probatione spirituum (1415) and De examinatione doctrinarum (1423). The posthumous impact of Gerson’s assault was such that, in 1436, the Council of Basel issued a judgment against the divine authority of the Revelations, and its presiding cardinal, Louis d’Allemand of Arles, forbad its further promulgation. Although the council stopped short of rescinding Birgitta’s sainthood, its decree was allowed to stand until Pope Sixtus IV finally revoked it in 1484.128

Admittedly, the nature of Birgitta’s visions was not the chief issue at stake in this controversy. Politics played an even greater role: the saint’s prophecies concerning the Hundred Years’ War were perceived as pro-English, and she staunchly advocated the papacy’s return from Avignon to Rome. Those positions won her supporters in England and Italy, as well as her native Scandinavia, but they antagonized the French.129 Gender as always figured prominently: Birgitta’s opponents ridiculed the idea of God revealing his wisdom to a muliercula and attacked her for violating the norms of meekness proper to her sex. Defenders countered with arguments long familiar in women’s hagiography, claiming that Birgitta’s “manly” spirit had exalted her above feminine frailty or else (more frequently) that her gender marked her as one of those weak vessels so often chosen by God to confound the strong (1 Cor. 1.27). But within this welter of polemics, the character of Birgitta’s visionary experience did emerge as a crucial question. I wish here to highlight only one dimension of that controversy, which we have already seen adumbrated in the vision texts from Helfta. The very frequency, one might almost say predictability, of Birgitta’s visions fueled suspicions that she had concocted them herself out of her imagination and that they were therefore not to be trusted.

There is indeed evidence that some of Birgitta’s visions were cultivated. Although her multivolume Revelations refers repeatedly and formulaically to her trance states (raptus, elevacio mentalis, excessus mentis), the prologue to her Sermo angelicus suggests that these ecstasies were confidently awaited. In this prologue, probably by Alfonso of Jaén, Birgitta’s daily routine is described: she would read from her book of hours, then sit down at her writing desk next to a

127 The most important defense of Birgitta is Alfonso of Jaén, Epistola solitarii ad reges. For the Latin text see Arne Jónsson, Alfonso of Jaén: His Life and Works, Studia Graeca et Latina Lundensia 1 (Lund, 1989); for the Middle English see Voaden, God’s Words, Women’s Voices, pp. 159–81.
128 Sahlin, Birgitta, pp. 222–23.
window overlooking the adjacent church, where she could see the body of Christ on the high altar. Having prepared her pen and writing tablets beforehand, "she waited for the angel of the Lord," who faithfully arrived before long to dictate a portion of the lectionary for her Vadstena nuns. The angel’s authenticity was assured by his gaze, which he always directed not to Birgitta but to the host. Likewise, the authenticity of her text was assured because the angel did not always come: on some days, as she told her spiritual father, she wrote nothing because he had failed to appear. This detail is important because it implies that too much regularity would be suspect; grace could not be grace unless it reserved the right to withhold itself.

While Alfonso sanctioned this vigorously supernatantalist account of Birgitta’s working methods, he suppressed a passage that described the human element in her writing more fully than any other text in her corpus. The vision now known as Revelaciones extravagantes 49 was found among Alfonso’s papers only after his death. In it Birgitta first acknowledges the role of her editors: Christ tells her that he is like a carpenter who chops wood in the forest to carve and paint a beautiful image, but later his friends come along and repaint the statue in “still more beautiful colors.” Even so “I, God, have precut my words from the forest of my divinity and placed them in your heart. But my friends have reduced them to books in keeping with the grace given them, and colored and adorned them.” As if it were not bad enough to admit that her confessors had dared to paint over the work of God’s hand, Birgitta goes on to acknowledge that she herself often revised her texts. Significantly, Christ asserts that not only she, but even the evangelists and doctors of the church, made errors, which they later had to correct, because all humans are fallible and no one can be constantly possessed of divine inspiration:

My Spirit sometimes leaves my chosen ones to themselves so that they can weigh and ponder my words in their heart as in a balance, and after much thought, expound them more clearly and improve on them. For just as your own heart is not always fervent and capable of proclaiming and writing the things you perceive, but sometimes you turn them over and over in your mind, and sometimes you write and rewrite them until you arrive at the proper understanding of my words, so, too, my spirit ascended and descended with the evangelists and doctors, for sometimes they wrote down things that had to be emended or retracted, and sometimes they were judged by others and found wanting.  


132 “Quia spiritus meus dimittit quandoque electos meos sibiipsis, vt ipsi more staterre diuident et discuciant verba mea in corde suoe et post multos cogitatus exponat clarius et eliciant meliora. Nam sicut cor tuum non semper est capax et feruidum ad proferendum et scribendum illa, que sentis, sed...
Inevitably, this commonsense acknowledgment of human agency is itself cast in the form of a revelation. Even so, Birgitta’s admission in *Extravagantes* 49, so uncharacteristic of her official corpus edited by Alfonso, leads us to wonder how many other visionaries would gladly have conceded, if they dared, that their own intelligence (and their editors) had cooperated with the divine Spirit to produce their books. The author of the prologue to Gertrude’s *Legatus divinae pietatis*, as noted above, managed to suggest such collaboration even as she denied that it had occurred. But the clerical editors of such works preferred to insist on a pure supernaturalism, which, if given credence, had the dual benefit of safeguarding both the absolute validity of the text and the myth of female incapacity. Conversely, however, this claim for exclusive divine agency was readily challenged and converted to its opposite—indignant dismissal on the ground of exclusive human (or diabolical) agency.

One of Birgitta’s early detractors, Henry of Langenstein, explicitly opposed her canonization with the claim that there were too many saints already, a position he took in 1381. But he hinted at a more profound reason in his treatise *De discretione spirituum* (1383), one of the earliest of its kind. He argues there that “spiritual people” who spend too much time in contemplation are prone to a category mistake: “In such matters it is hard for mortals to know and distinguish what may be supernaturally inspired . . . from what occurs to them naturally for some other cause. Clearly, then, one should not quickly or easily believe a spiritual person who labors continually in fantasy and contemplation (*phantasiando et contemplando*), imagining that she is supernaturally moved by a good or evil spirit in all the impulses she feels, or in everything that happens to her unexpectedly. Anyone who is found gullible in such things seems to suffer from a vain greed for supernatural revelations and miraculous events.”

In other words, one who deliberately seeks to induce visions through imaginative techniques, like those consistently recommended from Aelred of Rievaulx to Pseudo-Bonaventure, may very well succeed. But it would be a grave, if common, error to mistake such self-induced fantasies for prophetic revelation or supernatural grace. Henry implies that it is grandiose even to blame the devil for the fruits of the unaided but fallen imagination. Although he does not mention Birgitta by name, it seems likely that he had her in mind.

A generation later, during the Council of Constance, Gerson agonized over the

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133 “Inter haec itaque difficulter cognoscere et distinguere potest mortalis homo, quid sibi inspireret supernaturaliter, et quid alio unde . . . ei naturaliter occurrat. Patet ergo non esse cito et leviter creденendum homini spirituali, qui laborat et contemptando, quod in omnibus impulsibus quos sentit vel in omnibus, quae ei quasi inopinata occurrunt, a bono vel malo spiritu supernaturaliter moveatur. Qui igitur in talibus levis inveniretur esse credulitatis, videtur esse quasi vane cupidus supernaturalium revelationum et circa se miraculosarum motionum”: Henry of Langenstein, *De discretione spirituum* 2, in Heinrichs von Langenstein ‘Unterscheidung der Geister,’ lateinisch und deutsch, ed. Thomas Hohmann, Münchener Texte und Untersuchungen zur deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters 63 (Munich, 1977), pp. 58–60.
Swede’s now widely circulated texts. To condemn the writings of a canonized saint would scandalize the faithful, yet to approve them would be to risk accepting “false, illusory, or frivolous visions as true and solid revelations.” The chancellor’s general distrust of visionary women was exacerbated in Birgitta’s case by the sheer number of her revelations, for the saint had grown “accustomed (assueta) to visions that she claimed to have received divinely, not only from angels, but also from Christ, Mary, Agnes, and other saints in never-ending intimacy (familiaritatem jugi), just as a bridegroom speaks to his bride.” Custom and habit were the prime sources of suspicion: in these all-too-familiar, chatty conversations, what place could be left for holy awe, for authentic transcendence?

In this lengthy tour of clashing medieval discourses, I hope to have shown that the tangled debate over visions did not focus exclusively on visionaries’ gendered claims to authority but also on profound disagreements about the nature of religious experience, the possibility of human collaboration with grace, the role of the imagination, and not least, the advisability of lay involvement in elite spiritual practices. The position that finally triumphed was, not surprisingly, a version of the already ascendant supernaturalism that gave maximal authority to clerics charged with the discernment of spirits. By their standards the vast majority of reported visions would be judged inauthentic, while those that eventually passed muster as “private revelations” had to meet a daunting set of criteria designed to assure precisely that they had not been cultivated and did not stem from the visionary’s imagination. In his treatise De probatione spirituum (1415), Gerson not only voiced his doubts about Birgitta but supplied a list of persons whose visions should be held automatically suspect: the mentally ill, people under the sway of strong passions, and recent converts, “especially adolescents and women, whose ardor is excessive, greedy, changeable, unbridled, and therefore suspect.”

A visionary should be immediately disqualified by any sign of heresy, spiritual pride, disobedience, singularity, or excessive intimacy with her confessor. In the last of his three tracts on discernment, De examinatione doctrinarum (1423), Gerson recommended that bishops and theologians approach all visionary claims with the greatest skepticism because even popes, canonized saints, and doctors of the church could err in matters of doctrine. How much less, then, is the authority of women, and especially those who presume to write books: “The female sex is banned by apostolic authority from teaching in public. By this understand any teaching published in her own name, whether orally or in writing, especially if it were addressed to men—and not just any men but the wise and learned, or men eminent in devotion and religion.” Writing vision texts only exacerbated the char-


135 “Quaeritur ergo si persona sit novitia in zelo Dei, qui novitius fervor cito fallituri si regente caruerit; praesertim in adolescentibus et foeminis, quorum est ardur nimius, avidus, varius, effrenis, ideoque suspicatus”: ibid. 7, 9:180.
acteristically female sin of cultivating visions in the first place, for “no man or woman has any more efficacious remedy against illusions than to shun visions with determined humility.”136

In 1735 Cardinal Prospero Lambertini, the future Pope Benedict XIV, reinforced Gerson’s skepticism in his classic treatise *De servorum Dei beatificatione et beatorum canonizatione*. While admitting that visions and prophecies can play a role in the canonization of saints, he maintained that belief in such private revelations, even those approved by the church after thorough investigation, is a matter for individual judgment rather than an article of faith.137 This remains the official teaching of the Roman magisterium, which still strongly discourages any desire for visions.138 Interestingly, however, the normative establishment of this theology worked to the ultimate advantage of lay visionaries. Although religious orders continued to practice medieval meditational techniques, notably the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola, the fruits of such practices were increasingly distinguished from visionary and prophetic claims. Devout meditations might be good for the soul, but they were by no means to be confused with divine revelation. Instead, the need to authenticate visions by proving that they *could not* have been fabricated by the seer, either intentionally or unwittingly, led to a demand for less and less spiritual preparation on the part of visionaries. By the standards of a later period, laywomen like Birgitta and even Margery Kempe would have been far too well instructed, for the post-Reformation church came, in effect, to define the ideal visionary as an uneducated peasant child living in abject poverty.139

The two most famous officially approved visions of the modern era, the Marian apparitions at Lourdes and Fatima, represent the endpoint of this trajectory. In fact, one key argument for the authenticity of Mary’s appearance at Lourdes was that, when the Virgin identified herself to Bernadette Soubirous as the Immaculate Conception, the girl did not understand and claimed never to have heard of the recently defined dogma.140 It is almost impossible to imagine a medieval visionary claim being advanced on that basis. Rather, such ignorance of Catholic doctrine would have militated against the seer and led to an outright dismissal of her claims.

136 “Postremo sexus muliebris ab apostolica prohibetur auctoritate ne palam doceat; doctrinam intellege, seu verbo seu scripto, nomine su publicatam, maxime si fuerit ad viros, nec qualescumque, sed sapientes, sed eruditos, sed status in devotione et religione praeellentis. . . . [N]ullum vir vel mulier efficacius habet remedium pro illusionibus evitandis quam visiones cum humilitate sedula fugere”: Jean Gerson, *De examinatione doctrinarum* 2.2–3, ed. Glorieux, 9:467 and 469.


Moreover, although Bernadette and her counterpart at Fatima, Lucia dos Santos, eventually became nuns, it is both typical and significant that they were not nuns at the time of their world-shaking visions. A centuries-long struggle to disambiguate the varieties of visionary experience that jostle each other in medieval texts had come finally to this: the clergy and religious retained their hold on theological learning, meditational techniques, and the discernment of spirits but surrendered their place on the front lines of charismatic experience; the laity kept their ignorance and their visions.

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