

MEDIEVAL WOMEN: TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

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Volume 19

THOMAS OF CANTIMPRÉ:
THE COLLECTED SAINTS' LIVES

Abbot John of Cantimpré,
Christina the Astonishing,
Margaret of Ypres,
and Lutgard of Aywières

Edited and with an Introduction by

Barbara Newman

Translations by

Margot H. King and Barbara Newman



BREPOLS

Thomas, de Cantimpre, ca. 1200–ca. 1270

The collected saints' lives: Christina the Astonishing, Lutgard of Aywieres, Margaret of Ypres and Abbot John of Cantimpre. – (Medieval women : texts and contexts ; 19)

I. Christina, Mirabilis, Saint, 1150–1224 2. Lutgardis, Saint, 1182–1246 3. Margaret, of Ypres, 1216–1237 4. John, Abbot of Cantimpre

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THE LIFE OF CHRISTINA THE ASTONISHING

Translated by Margot H. King and Barbara Newman

CHRONOLOGY
THE LIFE OF CHRISTINA THE ASTONISHING
 (c. 1150–1224)

c. 1150	Christina born in the village of Brustem
1182	Miraculous 'death and resurrection' of Christina
1187	Jerusalem falls to Saladin; Christina exults and prophesies Third Crusade
1197	Louis II becomes count of Loon
1206	Christina counsels Lutgard to move from Flemish-speaking monastery of St Catherine's, Sint-Truiden, to French-speaking monastery of Aywières
c. 1210–18?	Christina resides with the recluse Jutta at Borgloon
1213	Battle of Steppes; Duke Henry I of Brabant defeated by Count Louis II of Loon and Hugh of Pierrepont, prince-bishop of Liège
1218	Death of Count Louis II of Loon; Christina hears his last confession
1224	Christina dies and is buried at St Catherine's in Sint-Truiden
1231	St Catherine's monastery moves to Nonnemielen; first translation of Christina's relics
1232	<i>The Life of Christina</i> written
after 1239	Thomas of Cantimpré interviews Thomas, abbot of Sint-Truiden, and adds Chapters 47–49 to the <i>vita</i>
1249	Second translation of Christina's relics; Chapters 57–59 added by an anonymous author
c. 1280–90	Middle Dutch translation of <i>The Life of Christina</i>

PROLOGUE

Here begins the prologue to the life of blessed Christina of the town of Sint-Truiden

I. When I was planning to write the life of the unforgettable virgin Christina, I first decided to put at the beginning of my discourse what James, the revered bishop of Acre (he who later became a cardinal in the Roman Curia),¹ related about her in *The Life of the Blessed Mary of Oignies*:

I saw another [understand that he means Christina] in whom God worked so wondrously that after she had lain dead for a long time — but before her body was buried in the ground — her soul returned to her body and she lived again. She obtained from the Lord that she would endure purgatory, living in this world in her body. It was for this reason that she was afflicted for a long time by the Lord, so that sometimes she rolled herself in the fire, and sometimes in the winter she remained for lengthy periods in icy water and at other times she was driven to enter the tombs of the dead. But after she had performed penance

¹ James of Vitry (c. 1160/70–1240) was ordained a priest in 1210 after receiving his Master's degree and licence to teach at Paris. From 1211–16, he was active in the diocese of Liège. It was during this period that he became an Augustinian canon and entered the monastery of Saint Nicholas at Oignies, where he became involved in the exuberant lay spiritual movement of which Mary of Oignies was an outstanding representative. In his *Supplement* to James's life of Mary, Thomas of Cantimpré says that it was Mary who was responsible for James's ordination, transferral to Oignies, and entrance into the canonical state. In 1213 he was commissioned by the papal legate to preach the crusade against the Albigensians and shortly thereafter he preached a crusade for the Holy Land. Towards the end of 1215 he was elected to the see of Acre in Palestine, where he served until 1227. After a short period back in the diocese of Liège, he was named cardinal bishop of Tusculum in 1229, a post he held until his death in 1240.

in so many ways, she lived in peace and merited grace from the Lord and many times, rapt in spirit, she led the souls of the dead as far as purgatory, or through purgatory as far as the kingdom of heaven, without any harm to herself.²

2. These words are, as I have said, those that the revered Bishop James of Vitry related about her. Therefore I, an unworthy friar of the Order of Preachers, have described these things, although in unpolished language, for the edification of readers and especially for the praise of Christ. I am quite certain of the account that has been reported to me. I do not say 'certain' without cause, for I have as many witnesses to most of the events I have described as there were rational persons living at that time in the town of Sint-Truiden. These things were not done in narrow corners³ but openly among the people. Nor has so much time elapsed that oblivion has swallowed up and buried these occurrences, for I wrote this *Life* not more than eight years after her death. I personally heard other things that no one could have known except Christina herself from people who swore they learned them from her own mouth.

3. Whoever reads these things should bear in mind that I have believed them on the testimony of witnesses who would by no means deviate from the truth even at the risk of losing their heads. I admit — and it is true — that my account surpasses all human understanding, inasmuch as these things could by no means have occurred according to the course of nature, yet they are possible to the Creator. Furthermore, I would never have presumed to have written this if the revered Bishop James had not previously testified to most of these events. For this reason, then, let me fulfil the task by approaching it in this way: first of all I will describe how she was nourished, then how she was educated, and finally

² VMO Prologue 8, in *Mary of Oignies*, pp. 48–49.

³ Acts 26. 26.

I will describe her deeds,⁴ just as I have learned from most truthful and indisputable accounts.

Birth of the saint; how, after her death and her vision of purgatory, she was led back to life so that she might aid those souls who were detained there; and how harshly she suffered for them, but remained unharmed in body

Here begins the life of the holy Christina, called the Astonishing

4. Christina, the unforgettable virgin of Christ, was born of respectable parents in the town of Sint-Truiden in Hesbaye. After her parents had died, she was left with two older sisters. Desiring to order their life in the manner of religious life, they arranged that the oldest sister would occupy herself in prayer, the middle one take care of the house, and the youngest — that is, Christina — watch the herds as they went to pasture.⁵ Without delay Christ did not fail as consoler to the girl allotted the lower and more humble office, but rather he gave her the grace of an inward sweetness and very often visited her with heavenly secrets. Nevertheless she remained unknown to all and the more hidden she was,

⁴ This passage is, I believe, very important for an understanding of the structure of the *vita* and clarifies some of the more bizarre details of Christina's behaviour. In William of Saint-Thierry's *Exposition on the Song of Songs* [*Expositio super Cantica canticorum*], we find an examination of the gifts God gives the soul in each of its stages of mystical growth: the animal, rational, and spiritual levels; nourishment in the animal stage, education in the rational, and freedom in the spiritual. In this context, I would interpret the terms *nurrita*, *educata*, and *gesta* as 1) the divine nutrition necessary for beginners; 2) the charismatic education given those who are labouring towards perfection; and 3) the working of God in and through his creatures and, by extension, that freedom which comes with the life of the spirit. See especially Louis M. Savary, *Psychological Themes in The Golden Epistle of William of Saint Thierry* (Salzburg: Analecta Cartusiana, 1973), and E. Rozanne Elder, 'The Way of Ascent: The Meaning of Love in the Thought of William of St Thierry', in *Studies in Medieval Culture*, ed. by John R. Sommerfeldt (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, 1964), pp. 39–47. Bernard McGinn disagrees with my interpretation that the tripartite structure of the *vita* is related to William's three stages of the spiritual life, but he gives no reason for his disagreement: *The Flowering of Mysticism*, pp. 399–400, n. 32.

⁵ Note the correspondence of this threefold division of labour to that found in the monastic life: 1) prayer (choir nuns); 2) housework (lay sisters); and 3) farm labourers. Just as Christina would operate outside society after she returned from the dead, so now she is relegated to a position outside her monastically oriented home. According to local legend, Christina lived in Brustem and her two sisters in Ordingen and Zefferen, now all suburbs of Sint-Truiden.

the more she was known to God alone. This is why she gloried with Isaiah, saying 'My secret to myself, my secret to myself'.⁶ For God is a modest lover.

How she died

5. It happened that after these events she grew sick in body through the exercise of inward contemplation and died. Her lifeless body was laid out by her friends and sisters, and they wept copiously over it. The next day it was borne to the church, and while her Requiem Mass was being said, suddenly the body stirred in the coffin and rose up and, like a bird, immediately ascended to the rafters of the church. All those present fled and only her older sister remained behind fearfully. Christina was immovable until mass was finished; then, kept in check by the priest with the sacrament of the Church, she was forced to descend.⁷ Some say that the subtlety of her spirit was revolted by the smell of human bodies.⁸ She soon returned home with her sisters and was reinvigorated by food. Her spiritual friends then hastened to her, asking what she had seen and wanting her to explain what had happened.⁹ She said to them:

⁶ Isaiah 24. 16.

⁷ This language strongly suggests exorcism. Christina's 'resurrection' would most likely have been interpreted at the time as the reanimation of her corpse by a demon. Cf. BUA II.49.6 and II.57.8, pp. 367–68, 452, and Nancy Caciola, 'Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in Medieval Culture', *Past & Present*, 152 (1996), 3–45 (pp. 10–15). [BN]

⁸ On the face of it, Thomas's explanation for Christina's revulsion with human smells is theologically suspect. If it was occasioned by the contrast between the stench of mortality and the sweet smells of heaven, this surely undermines not only the full dignity of humanity, but of the human Christ as well. However, if she was possessed, her diabolical powers could have been restrained by the sacraments, especially the eucharist. See Wolfgang Riehle, *The Middle English Mystics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 116, and Ernest Becker, *Medieval Visions of Heaven and Hell* (Baltimore: Murphy, 1899), p. 61. Most of Christina's apparently antisocial activities are, in fact, an acting-out of the purgatorial torments.

⁹ The 'spiritual friends' of this passage, informed of Christina's divine mission, should be distinguished from the hostile 'friends' (probably members of her extended family) who persecute her later on. [BN]

How she was led forth from the body and how she lived again after she had been brought back to the body

6. 'As soon as I died, angels of God, the ministers of light, received my soul and led me into a dark and terrible spot which was filled with the souls of men. The torments that I saw in that place were so many and so cruel that no tongue is adequate to tell of them. There I saw many dead men whom I had previously known in the flesh. Having not a little compassion on those wretched souls, I asked them what place this was. I thought it was hell, but my guides said to me, "This place is purgatory and it is here that repentant sinners atone for the sins they committed while they were alive". They then led me to the torments of hell and there also I recognized some people whom I had known while I was alive.'

7. 'After these events, I was carried into paradise, to the throne of the Divine Majesty. When I saw that the Lord was well pleased with me and wished me joy, I rejoiced above all measure, thinking that I would remain with the Lord forever after. At once the Lord answered my desire and said, "Certainly, my dearest, you will be with me here, but I now offer you two choices, either to remain with me now or to return to the body and undergo there the punishment of an immortal soul in a mortal body without damage to it, and by these your sufferings to deliver all those souls on whom you had compassion in that place of purgatory, and by the example of your suffering and your way of life to convert living men to me and make them turn aside from their sins, and after you have done all these things to return to me, having accumulated for yourself a reward of such great profit". I answered without hesitation that I wished to return under the terms that had been offered to me.'

8. 'The Lord immediately wished me joy in his response and commanded my soul to be led back to the body. And see how quick the angels were to obey the bidding of the Lord! At the same time that the Agnus Dei was being said for the first time while mass was being celebrated for me, my soul was standing before the throne of Divine Majesty, but by the time they said the Agnus Dei for the third time, I had been restored to the body by those swift angels. Thus was the manner of my returning and my departing, and I have been given back to life for the improvement of men. Now therefore do not let the things you are going to see in me trouble you, because the tasks with which God will charge me are above understanding. Indeed, such things have not been seen among mortals.' On hearing this, her friends marvelled and waited in amazement to see what would happen.

How she was captured by her friends and freed by the Lord and how she was nourished from her own virginal breasts

9. Then Christina fled the presence of men with wondrous horror into deserted places, to trees, or the tops of castle or church towers, or any lofty structure.¹⁰ Thinking her to be filled with demons,¹¹ the people finally managed to capture her with great effort and to bind her with iron chains, and although she endured much suffering and privation, yet she suffered even more from the stench of men. One night, with the help of God, her chains and fetters fell off and she escaped and fled into remote, deserted forests and there lived in trees after the manner of birds. Even when she needed food (for despite the extreme subtlety of her body, she could not live without food), and she was tortured by a most grievous hunger, by no means did she wish to return home, but she desired to remain alone with God in her hiding place in the desert. Therefore, pouring forth a prayer to the Lord, she humbly begged that he gaze on her anguish with the eyes of his mercy.

When she turned her eyes to herself, she immediately saw that the dry paps of her virginal breasts were dripping sweet milk against the very law of nature.¹²

¹⁰ Like the ancient stylites and dendrites (saints who preferred the unstable environment of trees to the relative security of pillars), Christina attempted to effect a complete material separation from the world. It would seem that she is also acting within the tradition of the 'fools for Christ' whose real or feigned madness acted as a running commentary on the folly of worldly concerns. See John Saward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); Nora Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 109–11; Hippolyte Delehaye, *Les Saints stylites, Subsidia hagiographica* (Paris: Picard, 1923; repr. Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1962); King, 'The Sacramental Witness', pp. 145–64.

¹¹ On the demoniac's flight from human society see Newman, 'Possessed by the Spirit', p. 738, and André Sigal, *L'Homme et le miracle dans la France médiévale (XI–XII^e siècle)* (Paris: Cerf, 1985), pp. 236–39.

¹² This is the first stage of Christina's spiritual development, her nutrition. In his life of Lutgard, Thomas refers to 'the milk of Christ's humanity' (VLA 1.13), and one is irresistibly reminded of the image of the milk of the Bridegroom's breasts found in many of the Cistercian mystical writers, notably William of Saint-Thierry. The milk that must be sucked for nourishment in the animal stage, he says, is 'the milk of all the mysteries (*sacramenta*) accomplished in time for our eternal salvation, in order to attain to the food which is the Word of God, God with God. For Christ, in his humility, is our milk; God, equal with God, he is our food. Milk nourishes, and food brings about growth' (*Exposition on the Song of Songs*, 1.46, trans. by Columba Hart (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1970), p. 36). See also Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs I*, Sermon 9.6, trans. by Kilian Walsh (Kalamazoo: Cistercian

Wondrous thing! Unheard of in all the centuries since the incomparable Virgin Mother of Christ!¹³ Using the dripping liquid as food, she was nourished for nine weeks with the milk from her own virginal breasts. In the meantime, she was being sought by her own family and was found, captured, and bound as before with iron chains — but in vain.

How she walked into the waters

10. After she had been freed by the Lord, she came to the city of Liège. Hungering for the most holy flesh of the spotless Paschal Lamb, she begged the priest of St Christopher's to strengthen her with Holy Communion against the anguish she was suffering from so many things. And when the priest promised he would do so, but said that he could not give her communion right then because he was busy, she was impatient at any delay, and went to a priest at another church and asked him for the Body of Christ. He immediately gave in to the prayers of the suppliant and gave her communion. With no delay, she was seized by a sudden impulse and fled the city. The priest wondered greatly at her flight and ran to the other priest at St Christopher's, and they both followed her as far as the rapidly flowing Meuse. When they reached the river's edge, they rejoiced because they thought they could seize her. But, stupefied, they observed the woman in front of them (in a real body) enter the deep streams of the water like a phantasm and come out untouched on the other side.¹⁴

How she was tormented in fire

11. Then Christina began to do those things for which she had been sent back by the Lord. She crept into fiery ovens where bread was baking and was tormented by fires — just like any of us mortals — so that her howls were

Publications, 1976), pp. 57–58; and Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), especially Ch. 4: 'Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother: Some Themes in Twelfth-Century Cistercian Writings'.

¹³ Thomas alludes to the miraculous lactation of the Virgin. Her milk, credited with healing powers, was venerated as a relic at Chartres, Walsingham, and other shrines. [BN]

¹⁴ Cf. Matthew 14. 25–27. Since she is endowed with a 'resurrection body', Christina is able to walk on the waters as Christ did. [BN]

terrible to hear. Nevertheless, when she emerged, no mutilation of any sort appeared in her body. When no oven was at hand, she would throw herself into roaring fires which she found in people's houses, or else she at least thrust her feet and hands into flames and held them there for so long that they would have been reduced to ashes had it not been a divine miracle. At other times she jumped into cauldrons of boiling water and stood there immersed either up to the breast or the waist, depending on the size of the cauldron, and poured scalding water over those parts of her body that were untouched. Although she howled as if she were suffering the pangs of childbirth,¹⁵ when she climbed out again she was quite unharmed.

How she was tormented in the waters

12. Often in cold weather she would remain for a long time under the waters of the Meuse; indeed, frequently she stayed there for six or more days at a time.¹⁶ But the priest who took care of her came and stood on the river bank and adjured her by the name of Christ, and thus she was forced to come out.¹⁷ In the winter she would stand upright beneath the wheel of a water-mill so that the water flowing through it ran over her head and limbs. Sometimes she would swim with the current and let the water carry her over the turning wheel, yet no hurt appeared on her body.

¹⁵ This expression was proverbial, but Thomas's frequent use of it (cf. Chs 24, 29, 37) emphasizes Christina's role as a spiritual mother. For other examples of maternal language see Ch. 9 (miraculous lactation) and 41 (Count Louis as Christina's spiritual son). [BN]

¹⁶ In the *Visio Lazari*, immersion in icy waters is the punishment for the sin of envy: 'Secondly, said Lazarus, I have seen in hell a flood frozen as ice, wherein the envious men and women were plunged unto the navel, and then suddenly came over them a right cold and a great wind, that grieved and pained them right sore. And when they would avoid and eschew the wonderful blasts of the said wind, they plunged into the water with great shouts and cries lamentable to hear': *The Kalendar & Compost of Shepherds: From the Original Edition published by Guy Marchant in Paris in the year 1493*; and translated into English c. 1518, ed. by G. C. Heseltine (London: Davies, 1930), pp. 58-67. For another contemporary account of the torments of purgatory, see the *Vision of the Monk of Eynsham* (dated 1196) in Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora*, ed. by H. R. Luard, 7 vols (London: Longman, 1872-83), II, pp. 423-37.

¹⁷ An exorcism, again suggesting that Christina was thought to be possessed. The priest assigned to her *cura* could have been either her parish priest and confessor, or a custodian for someone deemed mentally incompetent. [BN]

How she was tormented on wheels and gibbets

13. She also stretched her arms and legs on the rack, that instrument on which brigands are customarily tormented, acting the part of her own torturer.¹⁸ Yet when she descended, no fracture appeared in her limbs. She would also go to the gallows and suspend herself between the thieves who were hanging there and would so hang for one or two days.¹⁹ Often, too, she would enter the graves of dead men and there make lamentation for the sins of men.

Marvels concerning the subtlety and form of her body; and of how her shin-bone was healed; of her liberation from captivity; of the oil which flowed from her breasts; her more ordinary manner of living; the fruits of sacred communal prayer; a commendation of begging; prophecy

How she was tormented in thorn bushes and brambles and how she was attacked by dogs

14. On another occasion she rose up in the middle of the night and, provoking the dogs of the whole city of Sint-Truiden to bark, ran before them like a fleeing beast. The dogs pursued her and chased her through woods so thick with thorns that her whole body was covered in bloody wounds. Nevertheless, when she had washed off the blood, no trace of the wounds remained.

She used to torment herself in the same way with thorns and brambles so it seemed that her whole body was entirely covered in blood.²⁰ The many people

¹⁸ In the *Visio Lazari*, the prideful are tormented on rotating wheels: 'I have seen in hell wheels right high set on an hill, the which was to look on in manner like mills incessantly turning about by great impetuosity, roaring and whirling as it were thunder. And the wheels were fixed full of hooks and crampons of iron and steel, and on them were hanged and turned the proud men and women for their pride, with their prince, captain, and master Lucifer': *Kalendar & Compost of Shepherds*, p. 60. For this torment, see also the *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*, in *St Patrick's Purgatory*, ed. by Robert Easting, Early English Text Society, 298 (Oxford: New York, 1991), pp. 131-33.

¹⁹ A reminiscence of Christ on the cross; cf. Matthew 27. 38. [BN]

²⁰ The punishment meted out to the wrathful in the *Visio Lazari* bears a certain similarity to Christina's self-mutilation: 'I have seen in hell a great cave, tenebrous and obscure, full of tables like to butchers' stalls, or a great butchery, where as ireful men and women were through-pierced with trenching knives and sharp glaves and with long spears pierced their bodies, wherewith the most horrible and fearful butchers of hell hewed and detrenched them with their

who had frequently seen this happen were astonished that there could be so much blood in a single body. In addition to this bloodletting, on many occasions she bled a great quantity of blood from one of her veins.

The subtlety of her body

15. Her body was so subtle and light that she walked on dizzy heights and, like a sparrow, hung suspended from the most slender branches of trees.²¹

How she behaved when she prayed

16. When she wanted to pray, she had to flee to treetops or towers or any lofty spot so that, remote from everyone, she might find rest for her spirit. And again when she prayed and the divine grace of contemplation descended upon her, all her limbs were gathered together into a ball as if they were hot wax, and all that could be perceived of her was a round mass. After her spiritual inebriation was finished and her active physical senses had restored her limbs to their proper place, like a hedgehog her rolled-up body returned to its proper shape and the limbs that had been bent formlessly were once again spread out. Many times she would stand erect on fence palings and in that position chant the appointed Psalms,²² for it was very painful for her to touch the ground while she was praying.

glaves and knives impiteously without ceasing. [...] The wrathful man is semblable and like unto a demoniac, the which hath the devil within him, causing him to torment and strive with himself, foaming at the mouth and gnashing with his teeth for the intolerable pain the which the enemy doth to him': *Kalendar & Compost of Shepherds*, pp. 62–63.

²¹ In scholastic theology, subtlety was one of the four 'dowries' or divine gifts, along with impassibility, clarity, and agility, promised to the glorified body after the resurrection. See Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, pp. 100, 131–32. [BN]

²² *Psalmorum decantabat cursum*. This is evidence for Christina's Latinity, since a layman would normally have used only simple prayers such as the Our Father and Hail Mary. [BN]

How her shin-bone was broken and how she was captured and freed by the Lord

17. Her sisters and friends were greatly embarrassed because of these and similar things, for people thought she was possessed by demons. They made an agreement with a most wicked man who was very strong, whom they bribed to follow and capture her and to bind her with iron chains. Although this worthless man pursued her through the wilderness, he could not capture her with his hands, but he did finally catch up with her and broke her leg with a cudgel. She was then brought home and her sisters hired a physician who took care of her broken shin-bone. It was for this reason that she was carried to Liège in a cart.²³

18. The physician knew her strength, so he bound her firmly to a pillar²⁴ in a cellar where chains hung on all the walls, and locked the doors securely. He then attended to her broken shin-bone and bound it with medicated bandages. After the physician had left, she drew off the bandages, since she thought it shameful to have any doctor for her wounds but our Saviour Jesus Christ — and the Almighty did not fail her. For one night when the divine Spirit came upon her, the chains with which she was bound were loosed and, healed from all hurt, she walked around the cellar and danced, praising and blessing him for whom alone she had chosen to live and die.²⁵ Her spirit then felt itself to be shut up in a narrow dungeon, and she took a stone from the floor and in her impassioned spirit she threw it with such force that she made a hole in the wall. To use an analogy, just as an arrow is the more forcefully released the more strongly the bow is bent, so Christina's spirit, which had been restrained more than was just, flew through the empty air like a bird, carrying with it the fleshy weight of her body. For 'where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty'.²⁶

²³ Criminals were normally carried to execution in a cart, so this mode of transport was considered extremely shameful. In Chrétien de Troyes's romance of *Lancelot, or The Knight of the Cart* (contemporary with Christina's adventure), the hero is in such haste to rescue Guenevere that he rides in a cart after his horse is slain, knowing that the shame will destroy his reputation. [BN]

²⁴ A reminiscence of Christ's scourging at the pillar, one of the torments of his Passion. [BN]

²⁵ Cf. the miraculous prison breaks of Peter (Acts 12. 6–11) and Paul (Acts 16. 25–28). [BN]

²⁶ 11 Corinthians 3. 17.

How oil dripped from her breasts and how, in this way, she was freed and released by her friends

19. Nevertheless her sisters and friends never stopped their persecution, for after she had returned to a place where they could seize her, they bound her fast with a heavy wooden yoke and fed her like a dog with only a little bread and water. Christ allowed her to be overcome and to endure tribulation for a time in order to show in her the remarkable miracle of his strength.²⁷ The hardness of the wooden yoke crushed her shoulders and caused festering wounds, and she was so wasted by these pains that she could not eat her bread. No one there had compassion on her wretchedness, but the Lord marvellously had pity on her and wrought in her that great miracle, unheard of in all previous centuries. Her virginal breasts began to flow with a liquid of the clearest oil,²⁸ and she took that liquid and used it as a flavouring for her dry bread and ate it as food, and smeared it on the wounds of her festering limbs as an ointment.²⁹ When her sisters and friends saw this, they began to weep and struggled no more against the divine will in Christina's miracles. They released her from her chains and knelt down, begging pardon for the injury, and let her go.

²⁷ Cf. II Corinthians 12. 9: 'My strength is made perfect in weakness'. [BN]

²⁸ Cf. the mystical lactation of Ch. 9. On miraculous bodily exudings as a theme in the *vitae* of holy women, see Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, pp. 122–23, 211, 273–74. [BN]

²⁹ This portion of Christina's life can be considered the period in which she received her 'education' and hence can be called, to use William's terminology, the rational stage. Fed by the nourishing milk of Christ and the solid food of the eucharist which had promoted her spiritual growth, she now receives 'the unction of the Holy Spirit teaching the soul concerning all things' (*Exposition on the Song of Songs* 1.43, p. 33). The oil which flowed from her breasts recalls, as Pinius pointed out (AASS, 24 July, V, p. 654, e7), the oil which dripped from the fingers of Lutgard as a sign of spiritual consolation (VLA 1.16). It is, of course, also a reference to Song of Songs 5. 5: 'My hands dropped with myrrh, and my fingers were full of the choicest myrrh', and one cannot help but wonder if the oil which dripped from Christina's breasts might be an allusion to the 'bundle of myrrh' in Song of Songs 1. 12: 'A bundle of myrrh is my beloved to me: he shall abide between my breasts.' Whatever the reference, however, this oil certainly can be considered a sacramental sign, a symbol of the overflowing grace which God effects in the human. By means of this miracle, Christina was not only gladdened and consoled in spirit, but healed of her wounds as well, and her symbolic baptism effected her final healing with regard to society. Now, finally, she ministered to society in the way God had intended. She has been taught a salutary lesson: for the first time she shows an awareness of the potential scandal her actions might create and, in fact, did create when her sisters had thought her possessed.

How public prayers were said for Christina by religious people

20. Then, using her liberty as she pleased,³⁰ she suffered pains for people's sins as I mentioned above. Many people from far and near, even from the furthest regions, clustered around her every day to see the wonders God had wrought in Christina. When such crowds assembled, the religious men and women of Sint-Truiden were terrified that these supremely amazing marvels might exceed human reason, and that the beastly minds of men might convert these divine deeds into demonic activity — especially because Christina, fleeing the presence of humans, would ascend into lofty places like a bird and linger long in the waters like a fish. So they besought the Lord with earnest prayers that he moderate his miracles in Christina in accordance with the usual human state. Nor did the merciful God disdain the prayers of those who were weeping.

How her life was moderated with regard to humans

21. It happened one day that, violently stirred by a spirit,³¹ she took refuge in a church in the village of Wellen and, coming upon an uncovered baptismal font, completely immersed herself in it. It is said that after she had done this, her manner of life was more moderate with regard to society, and she behaved more calmly and was more able to endure the smell of men and to live among them.

How she was driven by the Spirit to live by begging

22. She frequently partook of the sacrament of the Lord's body and blood with holy devotion, especially on Sundays, and said that she received bodily

³⁰ Having thus been taught by 'the oil of gladness and the unction of the Holy Spirit' (*Exposition on the Song of Songs*, 1. 86, p. 70), Christina now finds that freedom which, according to William, 'accompanies illuminating grace [and which] comes when we are no longer under a tutor', because 'where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty' (II Corinthians 3. 17). Before the miracle of the dripping oil, Christina's freedom had been limited by her 'animal' understanding. Once she received the gift of illuminating grace, however, her liberated spirit found its pleasure in a vicarious and redemptive suffering for sinners.

³¹ *agitata a spiritu vehementissime*. The spirit in question is ambiguous; it could refer either to a demon possessing Christina or to the Holy Spirit, prompting her to self-exorcism through immersion in the sacred font. [BN]

strength and the greatest spiritual joy from it.³² Consequently she, who had nothing of her own and no inheritance to renounce for Christ's sake, abstained as she could in food and drink. She used to beg from door to door every day for common alms so that she might bear the sins of those people from whose alms she was fed. Indeed, she said that she was driven by the Spirit of God to beg the alms of sinners because they might thereby be called to a horror of their sins and a penitent life. Furthermore, she said that nothing might bend God to mercy for sinners more than when sinners are moved by mercy towards their neighbours. For as the wise man says, mercy and pity can never result in anything but good at the last day. And to clarify these things by an example, I will confirm what I have said with a certain deed of Christina's.

Of the man from whom she accepted a drink

23. It happened one day that, as she was stirred by God with an intolerable thirst, she ran to the table of a most wicked man who was feasting sumptuously and asked for something to drink.³³ Moved by an unaccustomed pity, he gave her a little wine and let her drink. Contradicting the opinion of everyone who knew this man, Christina said that at his death he would be called to the grace of repentance and contrition.

How alms given to her by unjust persons tormented her; her food and clothing; her sense of those who would be damned and saved; her ability to look into hearts; various predictions; ecstasies, etc.

What happened when she ate the food which she had begged from evildoers and what her food and clothing were like

24. This is why, as I have said, she was driven to beg for alms from publicans. But when she ate anything given to her as alms which had been wrongly acquired, it seemed to her that she was swallowing the bowels of frogs and toads

³² Frequent communion was rare at this time. These events occurred before the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 mandated annual communion for all believers, and even afterwards, few laymen or women would have communicated more than four times a year without special permission. Cf. VLA 11.14. [BN]

³³ Cf. the story of the rich man and Lazarus, Luke 16. 19–21. [BN]

or the intestines of snakes.³⁴ When she ate such things, she would cry out as if in childbirth: 'O Christ! What are you doing with me? Why do you torment me in this way?' She would beat her breast and her body and say: 'O miserable soul! What do you want? Why do you desire these foul things? Why do you eat this filth?' Thus it was torture for her to eat any unjust plunder.³⁵ Yet her tortures were no less painful if a guilty man denied her what she had requested. Once it happened that she snatched away with force something that a wicked man had denied her and said: 'Although now you do not wish it, yet later you will not grieve that it has been taken away. What does not profit you now will profit then.'

25. When a sleeve was missing from her gown or when her scapular lacked a hood, she would beg for it from anyone she met because she had been inwardly counselled in her spirit to receive it from that person. If it was given to her, she gave thanks. But if not, if the person were unwilling and refused her, she took it anyway and sewed it on her own garment. She was not ashamed if the sleeves of her gown did not match or were of different colours.³⁶ She wore a white tunic and a white scapular which covered her whole body down to her feet. Her garment was frequently sewn with thread made from the inner bark of the linden tree, or with willow twigs or little wooden spikes. She did not have shoes but walked with bare feet in all kinds of weather. The food she ate was vile and loathsome. She boiled in water bits of food that had been scraped from dirty dishes, fit only for the garbage. With this she ate bran bread so hard that it had to be first softened with water. She ate these things only after she had first fasted for two or three days at a time.

³⁴ In the *Visio Lazari*, Lazarus reports, 'I have seen in a vale a flood foul and stinking, at the brim of the which was a table with towels right dishonestly, whereat Gluttons been fed with toads and other venomous beasts and had to drink of the water of the same said flood [...]' And they that nourisheth well the flesh prepareth meat for worms, and so the glutton is cook of worms. A man of worship would be ashamed for to be a cook of a great lord. More ashamed should he be to be a cook for worms': *Kalendar & Compost of Shepherds*, pp. 65–66.

³⁵ The rejection of profits from usury is a common theme in *vitae* from Thomas's milieu. See the extensive discussion in VJC 11.14–18 and in Hugh of Floreffe, *The Life of Yvette of Huy*, IX.25–32, trans. by Jo Ann McNamara (Toronto: Peregrina, 2000), pp. 53–60. [BN]

³⁶ The sleeves of medieval garments were detachable and normally basted on with thread at the time of dressing. [BN]

Of her sorrow and lamentation for those who would be damned, and her joy for those who would be saved

26. She fled recognition and praise most energetically, saying it was for this especially that those to whom Christ had given knowledge of his truth in their lives were the most tormented in hell and purgatory. She always walked about as if she were dying or grieving, for God daily revealed to her whether those who were near death merited salvation or destruction. When one of the townspeople died whom she knew in spirit to be damned for his sins, she wept and twisted herself and bent herself backwards and bent and re-bent her arms and fingers as if they were pliable and had no bones. All who saw her found her sorrow so intolerable that even the hardest-hearted could not endure it without the greatest contrition and compassion. But for those who died and were destined to be saved, she danced so joyfully that it was a great marvel to see her so happy. From behaviour like this, people who knew the power of her spirit could easily mark by her joy or sorrow what would happen to the dying in the city.

27. She assisted the dying most willingly and gladly and exhorted them to a confession of their sins, to the fruit of penance, to a hope of everlasting joy, and to a fear of the destroying fire.³⁷ She showed solicitude and wondrous compassion not only to dying Christians, but also to Jews, of whom there was a very large company in the town. She said that Christ the Lord was full of mercy to those who wished to be converted to him, and so unwilling to take vengeance for sin that he was saddened whenever he was forced by people's sins to do so. Rather, he lovingly seeks opportunities by which he might grant salvation to sufferers. When she spoke in this way of Christ the Lord, she was filled with wondrous grace of speech.

28. She also said that there was a place near hell that was ordained by God for the purgation of those who were stained by great sins, but who had nevertheless repented at the end. This place, she said, was so fearsome because of its torments that there was no difference between these punishments and the pains of hell, except that there those who were suffering these pains sighed in the hope of pardon. Demons, she said, presided over those in torment, but those who were handed over to the demons to be tortured knew that the more cruelly they were afflicted by them, the shorter their torments would be.

³⁷ Hospice work, as we would now call it, was among the most common ministries of beguines. [BN]

How she was renowned for the spirit of prophecy

29. She was illumined with the spirit of prophecy in many things, admonished many to their salvation, and privately reprimanded many for their secret and hidden sins and recalled them to penance.

How she foretold a slaughter

At the time of that calamitous battle in October 1213 between the duke of Brabant and his enemies, when so many hundreds of men were killed in the place called Steppes,³⁸ on that very day this blessed woman cried out as if in childbirth, 'Alas! Alas! I see the air full of swords and blood! Hurry, sisters, hurry! Pray to the Lord! Shed tears lest he restrain his mercy in his wrath!' And she said to a nun at the monastery of St Catherine's in Sint-Truiden, 'Run, daughter, quickly run to prayer! Beg the Lord for your father because he is now in the greatest danger!'

How she foretold a nun's apostasy

30. When a nun at the same monastery was thinking of leaving, Christina said about her, 'O empty vessel! This will cause a very great scandal to the monastery.' Indeed, just as Christina had said, it soon happened that she apostasized from the order and caused great scandal to the monastery through her unrestrained behaviour. When the nun repented of her actions, the monastic community found it difficult to take her back and reinstate her. But Christina reproached them and said, 'Although you consider her damnation to be a minor thing, yet Christ did not pay so little for her soul. Rather, he poured out his blood for her and considered her worthy to die for.' Christina did not cease repeating these words until the repentant nun was reinstated.

³⁸ At this battle Duke Henry I of Brabant was defeated by the allied forces of Hugh of Pierpont, prince-bishop of Liège, and Count Louis II of Loon, Christina's patron. [BN]

How, by her prayers, she protected a certain nobleman who was on pilgrimage

31. When a nobleman wanted to go on pilgrimage to the Lord's tomb, his wife begged and pleaded with Christina to bring him back safe and sound by her prayer. Christina took her plea seriously and offered many prayers, labours and vows to the Lord for the knight that he bring him back safely. But she said as if angrily to his wife, 'Behold, I have brought your husband back safely because of your insistent pleading, but know now that you will not long rejoice in his presence'. The truth of these words soon became clear, for a few days later the nobleman died and left his wife and children in grief and desolation.

How she foretold the taking of Jerusalem and announced the day when it was captured

32. On another occasion, she foretold long before the event that Jerusalem in the Holy Land would be taken by the ungodly Saracens. On the day that Jerusalem was captured by Saladin, king of the Persians,³⁹ along with the Lord's tomb and the cross of Christ, she was in the castle of Loon and knew the event in the spirit. She exulted with great passion over this deed and those who were present asked her why she exulted so much. 'Rightly', she said, 'I exult, because today Christ the Lord rejoices with the angels, and he exults because he has given so many men the occasion by which they might be saved'.

33. When the bystanders asked what this occasion might be, she said, 'Know that today the Holy Land has been given into the hands of the ungodly, and through this event a great opportunity for salvation has been given.'⁴⁰ For Christ has seen fit, because of the shame he has suffered, to let the land consecrated by his passion fall into disgrace. Although it shall perish with the world at the end of time, yet by its recovery immortal souls redeemed by his blood shall be turned to the path of justice from the path of ungodliness. Men shall shed their blood in this affair of the Holy Land and they, in turn, shall repay the death of Christ with great devotion.'⁴¹ All who were there marvelled. Some of them noted the

³⁹ This took place in 1187. Saladin was actually the sultan of Egypt. [BN]

⁴⁰ Cf. the account of Christ's betrayal in Matthew 26. 45. [BN]

⁴¹ A prediction of the Third Crusade in 1189. [BN]

time and found that on the same day — that is, after the time required for the journey — the news could have reached those across the sea.

How she foretold the coming great famine

34. She also predicted a great famine, which took place around 1170, a long time before it occurred.⁴² Christina prophesied many other things as well that have now been fulfilled, and others that we believe will be fulfilled in the future.

Of how she was rapt in spirit and of her wondrous song at the aforesaid monastery

35. Now she was very familiar with the nuns of St Catherine's outside the town of Sint-Truiden.⁴³ Sometimes while she was sitting with them, she would speak of Christ and suddenly and unexpectedly she would be ravished in the spirit and her body would whirl around like a hoop in a children's game. She whirled around with such extreme violence that the individual limbs of her body could not be distinguished. When she had whirled around for a long time in this manner, it seemed as if she became weakened by the violence of the rolling and all her limbs grew quiet. Then there sounded between her throat and her breast a wondrous harmony that no mortal man could understand, nor could it be imitated by any artificial instrument.⁴⁴ That song of hers had only the pliancy and the tones of music. But the words of the melody, so to speak — if they could even be called words — sounded together incomprehensibly. No sound

⁴² This date must be erroneous, as Christina would have been only twenty years old in 1170 and her public ministry did not begin until 1182. [BN]

⁴³ Lutgard of Aywières was a Benedictine nun at this convent from 1194–1206; some time after 1200 she became prioress. In 1206 Christina encouraged her to move to the Cistercian monastery of Aywières. See VLA 1.22. In 1231 the convent was moved to Mielen (Nonnemielen), a move that occasioned the translation of Christina's grave. See Ch. 54 below, and J. Grauwels, 'Abbaye de Mielen à Saint Trond', MB 6, Province de Limbourg (1976), pp. 89–90.

⁴⁴ On music as an expression of mystical ecstasy, see Carolyn Muessig, 'Prophecy and Song: Teaching and Preaching by Medieval Women', in *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity*, ed. by Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela Walker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 146–58, and Wiethaus, 'The Death Song of Marie d'Oignies', pp. 153–79. [BN]

or breath came out of her mouth or nose during this time, but a harmony of the angelic voice resounded only from between her breast and throat.⁴⁵

36. While all this was happening, all her limbs were quiet and her eyes were closed as if she were sleeping. Then after a while, restored to herself somewhat, she rose up like one who was drunk — indeed she was drunk — and cried aloud, 'Bring the nuns to me that together we might praise Jesus for the great liberality of his miracles'. Shortly thereafter the nuns of the convent came running from all sides (for they greatly rejoiced in Christina's solace) and she began to sing the *Te Deum laudamus*. All the convent joined in as she finished her song. Afterwards, when she was fully restored to herself and learned from the others what she had done and how she had invited the community to praise Christ, she fled for shame and embarrassment, and if anyone forcibly detained her, she languished with a great sorrow and declared herself stupid and foolish.

How she reproached those who did not recognize their Creator

37. At other times when she had returned to herself from the state I have just described, she would say in great bitterness of heart, 'O wretched and miserable world that does not recognize its Maker! Why do you not serve him? Why do you not consider the forbearance of his patience? If you could see his goodness

⁴⁵ In the first stage of Christina's ascent to God — that is to say, in the animal stage — she had been nourished with the food of Christ's body and did penance. In the second stage (the rational) she had been taught by the unction of the Holy Spirit that dripped from her breasts. In this stage, the spiritual, her body is entirely taken over by God, and in her worship her song is united with the music of the spheres, an expression of the identification of the sacramental universe with its Creator. Thus does Christina's material and spiritual life mirror the eternal cosmic harmony which obeys those 'laws of equality, unity and order' found in music: just as God unites all things in the universe, so too does number or proportion, the basis of music. Thus should human action reflect the cosmic order of 'the hymn of the universe' which obeys 'the laws of equality and unity and order': Augustine, *De musica liber VI*, 11:29, ed. and trans. by Martin Jacobsson (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2002), p. 67. See Kathi Meyer-Baer, *Music of the Spheres and the Dance of Death: Studies in Musical Iconology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), and 'Psychologic and Ontologic Ideas in Augustine's *De Musica*', *Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism*, 11 (1953), 224–30. The thorax (*pectus*) was considered to be the place where the ark of the heart was placed: the point of the intersection of the arms of the cross, the centre, the origin of the world. Thus was the heart of Christ lanced and it is to this location that Thomas refers in his life of Lutgard (VLA 1.2). Christina's song is thus a sign of her complete identification with the cosmic order. See M.-M. Davy, *Initiation à la symbolique romane (XII^e siècle)* (Paris: Flammarion, 1977), p. 177.

even from another, you could not be turned away from loving him, even if the world opposed you. But you, O wretched world, have turned aside. You have closed your eyes and do not wish to understand.' When she said these things, she cried out with great lamentations as if in childbirth and twisted her limbs and rolled around on the ground and, redoubling her cries, asked why the world did not recognize its Creator.

How the saint withdrew to Jutta the recluse; her singing and knowledge of Scripture; the esteem she rightly deserved from the Count of Loon in his lifetime, and after his death, her participation in his purgatorial punishments; her love of solitude

How she left her own home and came to Loon

38. After these events, she left her own home and kin⁴⁶ and went to a castle on the border of Germany called Loon. There she stayed for nine years with a recluse called Jutta, who led a very religious life, and the Lord wrought wonders through her. It was from this recluse that I received many of the revelations I have written concerning Christina. Indeed, this was the reason I came to her from the far parts of Gaul.⁴⁷

How she understood Scripture by divine inspiration

39. While she was in that place Christina went to the vigils of matins every night. Then, after everyone had left the church and the doors were locked, she would walk around the church floor and utter a song so sweet that it seemed to be angelic rather than human singing. This song was so marvellous to hear that it surpassed the music of all instruments and the voices of all mortals. Nevertheless, this song was less sweet and much unequal to the jubilant harmony⁴⁸ which, during her ecstasies, resounded incomparably from between

⁴⁶ Like Abraham; cf. Genesis 12. 1. [BN]

⁴⁷ 'Germany' and 'Gaul' refer to Dutch-speaking and French-speaking regions, rather than ancient or medieval political entities. [BN]

⁴⁸ *Jubilus*, originally a wordless chant following the Alleluia at mass, had by the thirteenth century become a quasi-technical term for ecstatic, mystical song. [BN]

her throat and breast. The song [that she sang in church] was in Latin and wondrously adorned with harmonious phrases.⁴⁹

40. Although she had been completely illiterate from birth, yet she understood all Latin and fully knew the meaning of Holy Scripture. When she was asked very obscure questions by certain spiritual friends, she would explain them very openly. But she did this most unwillingly and rarely, for she said that to expound Holy Scriptures belonged to the clergy and not to the ministry of such as her.⁵⁰ Because of her very great love of Christ, she wondrously venerated the clergy and especially priests, even though for her part she had suffered many injuries from them.⁵¹ She would gently admonish sinning priests or clerics lest they blaspheme the good name of Christ through their public excesses, but she did so in great secrecy and with a wondrous reverence as if they were her own fathers.

How greatly she was venerated by Count Louis

41. When Louis, count of Loon and a most noble man,⁵² learned of her famous sanctity through hearsay, he began to love her in his heart and to follow sincerely her counsels and advice. Wherever he saw her, he would rise and run to her and call her 'mother'. When he had done anything against justice or against the Church of Christ or its ministers, she would weep for him like a mother weeping for her son. She would go to him in his palace and reprimand him with a mother's confidence, and obtain from him whatever was owing for the satisfaction of justice.

What stirring words she possessed

42. One day when Count Louis was reclining in the churchyard, surrounded by many soldiers, she arrived unexpectedly and came close to the count's head. She raised her eyes and hands and began to say with a wondrous grace of speech,

⁴⁹ *mirisque consonantium clausulis*; the reference could be either musical or rhetorical. [BN]

⁵⁰ This pious sentiment was probably added by Thomas to give Christina respectability in the eyes of the hierarchy.

⁵¹ An indication that not all priests shared James of Vitry's and Thomas of Cantimpré's view of Christina as a holy woman. [BN]

⁵² Louis II, count of Loon (1197–1218), and victor in the battle of Steppes (Ch. 29). [BN]

'O Lord, how beautiful you are!' When the knights heard this, they said to the count, 'Do you not hear, Lord Count, how this holy woman praises you?' The count, however, said, 'I know who it is that she is praising. I am not he. She praises her heavenly Lord who is the creator of all beauty and the most beautiful of all.' She then said, 'You have spoken truly. Why therefore do you not love him?'

How she foretold treachery to the same count

43. One summer afternoon the count was staying in his palace at Loon (which is now destroyed), talking with the Duke of Limburg and another count as they sat on a quilt. Christina ran unwaveringly to them and cried out to Count Louis, 'O most wretched one! Who are you talking to? Behold, he who is acting like a friend to you is no friend; the hand he is stretching forth is the hand of a traitor!' Fearing the woman's voice, the traitor immediately fell silent for a time and dissimulated the truth by his words, but the outcome proved the truth of the prophecy.

How she behaved at the death of the aforesaid count

44. When Count Louis was near death, he had Christina called to him and most persistently begged her to stay with him until the hour of death. She very obligingly granted this, and the count commanded all who were with him to leave the bedchamber and kept Christina alone with him in the chamber. Without delay, the count pulled himself up with all the strength he could summon and lay fully prostrate before Christina's feet and, with much weeping, recited to her all his sins from his eleventh year right up to that very day. He did this not for absolution, which she had no power to give,⁵³ but rather that she might be moved by this atonement to pray for him. After this the count called

⁵³ This famous passage indicates Christina's assumption of what later would be seen to be the sole prerogative of priests. Official absolution seems not to have been the point; what was at issue was that the laity (and women at that!) heard confessions. This obviously distressed Thomas. See Jean Leclercq, 'Medieval Feminine Monasticism: Reality Versus Romantic Images', in *Benedictus: Studies in Honour of St Benedict of Nursia*, ed. by E. Rozanne Elder (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1981), pp. 53–70 (p. 61): 'If the 1228 General Chapter of the Cistercian Order, and then, in the early fourteenth century Boniface XIII, forbade abbesses to hear confessions, it is because they were hearing them'.

his whole household into the bedchamber and disposed of his goods, following Christina's advice, and then he died. She saw his soul being carried to purgatory to be tormented with the most bitter punishments.

How she shared the punishments of purgatory with the soul of the count

45. The merciful woman was not a little compassionate towards him and obtained from the Lord that she might share with him the punishments to be exacted in purgatory. When therefore he appeared to her after his death and asked for help, Christina said to him, 'Well then, go hence and fulfil the punishments due your sins according to the divine judgement. As for me, I will accept in my own body a half part of your purgatorial torments which must be exacted.' Having taken on these burdens, for a long time afterwards you might have seen Christina in the middle of the night being tormented with burning smoke and at other times with freezing cold. Indeed she suffered torments in turn according to what the soul of the count was suffering.⁵⁴ She also watered with inconsolable tears the places where the count had been accustomed to sin, and she grieved in the places where he had rejoiced in empty pleasures.

How she behaved in the last year of her life

46. In the last year of her life, solitude and the wilderness were frequently her home. She returned, although most rarely, when she was driven by the spirit, either for the salvation of men or for the partaking of food. No mortal man could, at that time, restrain her when she wanted to go into the desert. When she returned no one dared greet her, no one dared ask her anything. Once she returned at vespers and passed above the ground right through the middle of a house like a spirit. People could scarcely tell whether a spirit or a material body had passed by, since she barely seemed to touch the ground. Indeed in the last year of her life, the spirit so controlled almost all the parts of her corporeal body that scarcely could human minds or eyes look at the shadow her body cast without horror and a trembling of the spirit. She then returned to the town of Sint-Truiden and more frequently dwelt in the monastery of St Catherine's.

⁵⁴ These purgatorial torments, suffered in the spirit, echo the literal and bodily torments of fire and water that Christina undergoes earlier. [BN]

The quality of her life before her death; her sickness; her second and third death; her burial and translation; exhortation by the author; the removal of her corpse; a miracle

The narrative about her by Thomas, Abbot of Sint-Truiden

47. A venerable man whom I remember, Thomas, now abbot of Sint-Truiden⁵⁵ but then a priest in that city, told me a very edifying story about Christina. One day at dawn he was returning home from matins with a companion when, all of a sudden, he saw her impulsively entering a church. They followed her surreptitiously and observed her secretly from behind a pillar of the church to see what she would do or how she would pray.⁵⁶ Immediately, she threw herself before the altar as if she were a sack filled with dry bones. Then, wailing bitterly, she began to beat her breast and her body most often and said, 'O miserable and wretched body! How long will you torment me, miserable as I am? What are you doing with me? Why do you keep my wretched soul in you for so long? Why do you delay me from seeing the face of Christ? When will you abandon me so that my soul can return freely to its Creator? Woe to you, most miserable one! And woe to me who am united to you!'

48. As she said these and similar things, she would beat her body. But then, taking the part of the body, she would say, as if to the spirit, 'O miserable soul! Why are you tormenting me in this way? What is keeping you in me and what is it that you love in me? Why do you not allow me to return to the earth from whence I was taken, and rest until I am restored to you on the last day of judgement? Why do you not go to your rest, so that you might enjoy more desirable things in heaven?'

As she said this, she would sigh and gasp and weep. She then rested a little in silence and, burning most purely with a holy thought directed toward God, she dissolved into a most sweet smile. Then, taking her feet with both hands, she kissed the soles of her feet with the greatest affection and said, 'O most beloved

⁵⁵ Thomas was abbot of Sint-Truiden from 1239–48.

⁵⁶ Christina here acts out a debate between body and soul, a popular literary genre. For some Middle English examples see *Middle English Debate Poetry*, ed. by John Conlee (East Lansing: Colleagues Press, 1991), pp. 7–49. On the performative character of beguine spirituality see Walter Simons, 'Reading a Saint's Body: Rapture and Bodily Movement in the *Vitae* of Thirteenth-Century Beguines', in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. by Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 10–23, and *Performance and Transformation*, ed. by Suydam and Ziegler. [BN]

body! Why have I beaten you? Why have I reviled you? Did you not obey me in every good deed I undertook to do with God's help? You have most generously and patiently endured the torments and hardships the spirit imposed on you.'

49. Then doubling her kisses, she said, 'Now, O best and sweetest body, endure patiently. The end of your labour is at hand. Now you will rest in the dust and sleep for a little and then, at last, when the trumpet blows, you will rise again, purified of all corruptibility, and be joined in eternal happiness with the soul you have had as a companion in the present sadness.' After gentling her body with such words and kisses for an hour, she uttered that wondrous, jubilant sound I have already described and was inwardly filled with such joy that one would have believed her exterior body would burst. Truly God is wonderful in his saints,⁵⁷ and in this one, if I may say so, his wonders pass all admiration.

Her manner of life before her death

50. At the end of her life, she ate little and very rarely. No longer did she wish to sit and talk with the sisters and nuns as she used to do, but would eat only a scrap of food and sleep only a little before midnight and then go into the wilderness. In those days, no one ever saw a smile on her lips: she was like one who has gone mad from excessive sorrow. She would wander around praying, weeping, and mourning and, for this reason, some people believed that the Lord had shown her even more than usual about the condition and malice of the world. The one thing for which she mourned most frequently with wondrous outcries was that almost all mankind was corrupted by an explosion of licentiousness.⁵⁸ It was because of this that the anger and vengeance of God would swiftly threaten all Christendom.

Of her sickness before her death

51. When the time approached for her to be gripped by the sickness of death, she was overtaken by such an unbroken grace of contemplation that she found it very difficult to direct the attention of her mind anywhere else. At the very end, untroubled by anything, she gently asked Beatrice, a nun at St Catherine's, to prepare a bed for her secretly in one of the rooms because her final sickness

⁵⁷ Psalm 67. 36.

⁵⁸ in *effusionibus seminum*; the reference could also be to original sin. [BN]

was at hand. Beatrice quickly did what she was asked, and Christina lay down and was overcome by an increasingly serious illness. After three days of this sickness, she asked for the communion of the body of the Lord and anointing with holy oil. When this was done, the Beatrice of whom I have spoken fell down on her knees and begged her to make certain things known before she died. When Christina did not answer, Beatrice thought that her attention was on other things and, postponing her question, left the room to do something else and left her alone for a time.

Of her second death and of how she once again lived, and of how she died a third time

52. Some people say that, while she was alive, Christina often prayed to the Lord that he not honour her in death by any miracles, but allow her to die the common death of men. In this also, the Lord heard her, for before Beatrice could return, Christina gave up her spirit at the call of Christ. As soon as Beatrice returned with a certain sister, she found her lifeless body stretched out on the ground after the manner of corpses — truly, I believe, laid out by angels. Beatrice was fearsomely impatient at this and fell upon the body of the dead woman and began to wail violently. She often interrupted her shouts by asking the dead woman why she had gone to the Lord without permission and without leave of the sisters. Nevertheless, in the vehemence of her spirit, she took confidence and, gazing fixedly on the face of the dead woman, said: 'O Christina! You were ever obedient to me in life! I now therefore beseech you and admonish you earnestly through the Lord Jesus Christ, whom you loved with ardent desire while you lived, that you obey me even now. For you are powerfully able, through him to whom you are now joined, to do whatever you want.'⁵⁹ So return to life and tell me what I begged you to reveal to me with great desire while you were alive.'

53. Wondrous event! As soon as Beatrice had cried these words into the ears of the dead woman, Christina returned to her body and, heaving a great sigh, opened her haggard eyes. Turning her grief-stricken face to the one who had called her back, she said, 'O Beatrice! Why have you disturbed me? Why have you called me back? Just now I was being led to the face of Christ! But now, my

⁵⁹ See Elizabeth Petroff's article on the power which emanated from medieval women mystics and which so impressed those around them: 'Medieval Women Visionaries: Seven Stages to Power', *Frontiers*, 3 (1978), 34–45.

sister, quickly ask me what you want and then, I beg you, allow me to return to the Lord for whom I have longed so eagerly.' Then Beatrice asked Christina her question and received a reply from her. In the meantime the sisters of the monastery gathered together from all sides and Christina blessed them with a word and with the sign of the cross. In this way, she who had experienced death three times and died three times, passed to the immortal age of ages.

Of the burial of blessed Christina and of the translation of her body

54. She lived for forty-two years after she had first risen from the dead and died around the year 1224. She was buried in the monastery of St Catherine's just outside the town of Sint-Truiden, and there she rested for seven years until they transferred the whole monastic complex to a more fitting place that was close at hand. Then all the citizens, together with the clerics and nuns of the convent, gathered together at the grave of the holy and revered Christina. When they opened the lid and laid it on the side, a grace of such sweetness seized everyone both collectively and individually that they all cried out together with one mind and one voice, 'Christina! You were marvellous in life and now after death you are no less glorious!' No one doubts the grace of healing bestowed on those who had come to her tomb with due faith. We cannot, however, pursue these matters.

The conclusion of the book

55. See then, reader, to how many people we ourselves may be indebted, having seen Christina suffer so many torments and punishments not for herself, but for her neighbours. And yet we fear to do penance even for ourselves and our own transgressions! A day will surely come — it will come and not delay — when we would gladly try to do even greater things than these⁶⁰ if an occasion for penance were given to those who asked, and it were permitted to make up for lost time. Woe to those who want to buy the oil of mercy after the time of trading has passed! With empty lamps they will beat on the door and will not be allowed to enter. Rather, the bridegroom will say to them, 'Amen, I say to you, I know you not. Watch therefore, because you know not the day nor the hour.'⁶¹

⁶⁰ John 14. 12.

⁶¹ Matthew 25. 12–13.

56. Necessarily, therefore, the sleepers are locked out, because, neglecting the day and the hour, they were not willing to keep vigil with a lamp filled with the oil of good works, bearing fruits worthy of penance.⁶² Watch therefore, because you know not the day nor the hour when your Lord will come. What else did Christina cry out during her entire life except to do penance and be ready at every hour? This she taught with many words, with tears, with lamentations and boundless cries, and with the example⁶³ of her life. This, indeed, she taught more insistently and shouted louder than anyone we have heard of before or since, whether through writings or by report, to the praise and glory of Christ who, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns as God forever and ever. Amen.⁶⁴

⁶² Cf. Matthew 25. 1–12.

⁶³ 'Example' is a weak translation of *exemplum*. The medieval use of the *exemplum* has been examined by Claude Bremond, Jacques Le Goff, and Jean-Claude Schmitt in *L'Exemplum*, *Typologie des sources du Moyen Âge occidental*, 40 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1982) and defined as 'a brief tale presented as truth and destined to be included in a discourse (usually a sermon) to edify the audience by the utilization of a salutary lesson' (pp. 37–38). They break down the *exemplum* into nine elements: 1) its narrative character; 2) its brevity when delivered orally, although they add that in written form, it frequently manifests 'une certaine longueur'; 3) its historicity; 4) its subordination to a broader theme; 5) its frequent utilization in a sermon; 6) its persuasive tone and its relation to the rhetorical arts; 7) the relationship between speaker and a particular audience whom the speaker 8) teaches (the *exemplum* derives from pedagogical rhetoric and is therefore didactic); and 9) its eschatological perspective. Its end is neither good behaviour nor entertainment nor even the earthly well-being of the listener. Rather, the *exemplum* is characterized by its emphasis on the last things and by a preoccupation with eternal salvation. Unquestionably, the VCM is eschatological in nature. In my article 'Sacramental Witness', I applied the phrase 'living sermon' to describe it, a phrase I only later discovered that Jo Ann McNamara had already applied to medieval religious women who 'speak their messages of peace by this living witness, or by being living sermons of the gospel message': *Distant Echoes*, ed. by John A. Nichols and Lillian Thomas Shank (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1984), p. viii.

⁶⁴ Thomas's *vita* ends at Ch. 56 in the AASS, but three more paragraphs were appended at the end by an unknown hand. Although this later ending seems to follow logically upon Christina's inability to remain dead, it does not compare with the artistry of Thomas's original ending.

About the second translation of her body

57. Afterwards it happened one day, in the year of the Lord 1249, that just as the day had dawned, one who seemed like an aged woman dressed in white knocked at the door. Once she was admitted, she asked for the monastic priest and, when she had been led to him, she said, 'I have been sent by divine revelation to make known to you that, inasmuch as the body of a most holy woman named Christina lies neglected, you must translate it from its location. If you do, this house will obtain grace and glory through her merits and prayers. But if you are negligent, you will incur the displeasure of the divine power.' And when the monk asked her if she should not rather be telling this to the prioress of the convent, she refrained from speaking.

The first miracle; the events after the exhumation of the holy body

58. At once the monk ran to bring the prioress and the community, but when he returned, he did not find the aforesaid person. He therefore dashed through many streets and inquired, but he did not find anyone who had seen her either departing or remaining. Yet many people testified that they had seen her going in through the door. This was not inappropriate, for the angel Raphael did not see fit to reveal heavenly secrets to the multitude, but only to [Tobit] and his son,⁶⁵ and we judge that it fell out the same way in this affair. When the convent heard this report, they were afraid lest, as stated above, they incur the displeasure of the divine power. So they hastened with joy to remove the sacred bones from the grave, diligently washed and dried them, and set them beside the altar in an honoured place.

59. Immediately after the body of Christina the Astonishing was raised from the grave, a woman in the vicinity of the monastery, who had been sick for a long time, was lying with her limbs so completely wasted that even had her house been on fire, she would not have been able to rise from her bed. Roused to greater confidence by the rumour of this grand event, she begged her husband to carry her to the monastery. Moved by his wife's tears, he placed her in a vehicle which in the vernacular is called a grass cart and brought her there. After she had been led by the hand to the grave, she rose up completely healed in all

her limbs and, blessing God and his bride Christina, she walked back home by her own strength.

⁶⁵ Cf. Tobit 12. 11-20. The text reads 'Tobias' (the son) for 'Tobit' (his father).