



Si grant ardor: Transgression and Transformation in the Pühavaimu Altarpiece

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In a well-appointed room, several people gather around an ornate bed. Stretched on it is an almost naked miniature man, his hands nailed to a piece of wood, his penis erect under a transparent loincloth, his body a map of bleeding sores. A woman pulls the bedclothes away, revealing this vulnerable yet virile body to a tall, fully-clothed aristocrat who stands at the foot of the bed, his downturned sword a visual and conspicuous antithesis of an erection. The naked man is a leper under an aspect of Christ; the woman is St. Elisabeth of Thuringia (d. 1231) responsible for inviting the leprous man into her marriage bed; the nobleman is the woman's husband, Landgrave Ludwig, who returned to his Nuremberg castle to be shown the fruit of his wife's transgressions. To the modern viewer, the image is charged with sexual tension—but was it so for the medieval beholder who stood before it in a hospital church? Both Leo Steinberg and Caroline Walker Bynum, in their now legendary debate over the nature of such divine sexuality, ultimately resolved to view the many late medieval figurations of Christ's naked body through a doctrinal lens: for Steinberg, Christ's procreative nudity indicated his humanity; for Bynum, it signified divine subsistence and salvation.^[1] Conversely, Michael Camille has suggested the appropriateness of a concupiscent response to the feminized images of the disrobed Christ, and more recently, engaging with current research in gender and queer studies, Martha Easton has interrogated the eroticism of late medieval religious imagery, and specifically its female subjects, problematizing its theological

underpinnings, and suggesting the wide range of responses—carnal as well as devotional—it engendered.[2]

The present plethora of studies in medieval sexuality stands witness to the tireless and groundbreaking work performed by such scholars as Vern L. Bullough, Ruth Mazo Karras, James Brundage, and Joyce Salisbury. All of them engage, in one way or another, with Michel Foucault's three-part *magnum opus*, in which he defines sexuality as "a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power." [3] The constructed-ness of "sexuality," at least in its connection to the notion of pleasure as opposed to the reproductive function, is a modern concept, one for which, as Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James Schulz write, "there is no medieval equivalent. 'Sexuality' designates a domain that is of interest to us today and that interest has led us to look back to the Middle Ages to find phenomena that answer to it." [4] Gendering this domain, moreover—as the present volume strives to do—is a complex affair: scholars have questioned, for example, whether such a thing as "female sexuality" could really be defined for medieval culture, in which the concept of gender identity was fluid and unstable at best. [5] Engaging images in quest of excavating these complex phenomena is a delicate task, inasmuch as their multivalence is firmly rooted in the constantly shifting domain of perception, both past and present. This paper attempts to explore one such phenomenon as it was visualized in a late-fifteenth-century altarpiece commissioned for the Pühavaimu Kirik (the Church of the Holy Spirit) in Reval, and dedicated to the life of St. Elisabeth. The panel, I propose, interrogates Elisabeth's sexuality, suggesting the indecent and immoral body of the leper transmogrified into the diminutive, bleeding Christ as an object of Elisabeth's desire. Leprosy was the disease of the promiscuous and the deviant: Elisabeth's invitation to the leper to lie in her spouse's bed was not only charitable, but also transgressive and presumably sexually-charged. In the end, the paper suggests how the visualization of Elisabeth's behavior functions within the context of the hospital complex to which the Pühavaimu church belonged, promising forgiveness, cleansing, and transformation through the active performance of seeing and incorporation.



Fig. 1. Workshop of Bernt Notke, *The Miracle of the Pentecost with Saints and the Coronation of the Virgin*, third view of the Holy Spirit altarpiece, 1483. Church of the Holy Spirit, Tallinn, Estonia (Photo by the kind permission of Gustav Piir, Church of the Holy Spirit, Tallinn)

St. Elisabeth in Reval

The Pühavaimu altarpiece, created in Bernt Notke's workshop in 1483, consists of three views, each of which includes Elisabeth.[6] The sculpted *corpus* features the scene of the Pentecost, where the Virgin, in her role as the patron saint of Livonia, receives the Holy Spirit along with the apostles (fig. 1). The altarpiece stood in the church associated with Reval's hospital complex for which the image of the Pentecost was particularly appropriate: healing was regarded as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit ("to another, the grace of healing in one Spirit," 1 Corinthians 12:9). Elisabeth's presence—she stands with three other saints flanking the main scene—is more appropriate still: this Hungarian princess, first as the Landgravine of Thuringia

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and later as a Franciscan tertiary, dedicated much of her short life and not inconsiderable wealth to ministering to the destitute sick. Images of Elisabeth, contemporary to the Pühavaimu altarpiece, are frequently found in hospital churches and chapels, many based on the popular and slightly sensationalist account of her life by one Dietrich von Apolda, a Dominican hagiographer from Erfurt also responsible for a biography of St. Dominic.[7] It is Dietrich's version of Elisabeth's *vita*, amended by an anonymous monk from the Reinhardsbrunn monastery, that supplied medieval readers with some striking miracles—which, although not to be found in the more orthodox accounts of her life, came to define the saint. This version of the *vita*, as we shall shortly see, provided the inspiration for the Pühavaimu altarpiece as well.

Elisabeth, along with Christ as the Man of Sorrows, also appears on the painted exterior of the altarpiece. The two stand within open stone niches, with the coat of arms of Reval, a white cross on a red background, hanging from each niche (fig. 2). Their stances and gestures echo one another: head tilted to the viewer's left, eyes closed, right hand raised to the ribs with the thumb and little finger extended. Where Christ pulls at his skin with his fingers, enlarging and directing the viewer's gaze to his side wound, Elisabeth holds a plate with fish, indicating her ministrations to the poor. Elisabeth's cloak, which covers her body in capacious folds, draws attention to Christ's bare skin. Just as Christ's body is dotted with droplets of blood, and the city behind him is sprinkled with miniature inhabitants, so is Reval's coat of arms suspended before him marked by the Instruments of the Passion, and signifying, as I have argued elsewhere, Christ's own tortured body.[8] Conversely, Elisabeth's space—the coat of arms, the body, the sky—remains unblemished, suggesting, perhaps, a body healed. The remarkable parallels and juxtapositions between the two bodies foreground visual tension: Christ and Elisabeth stand guard, certainly together, yet emphatically separate.

But when the altarpiece unfolds, the lives of Christ and Elisabeth become closely intertwined (fig. 3). Christ's Passion is figured on the four central panels: he is brought before Pilate, carries the cross, is beaten, and finally crucified. The four panels that focus on Elisabeth serve as visual parentheses to the Passion scenes. In the left upper panel, Elisabeth prays at the elaborately decorated altar on which a crucifix stands; yet, her gaze is directed at Christ in the adjoining panel, where he turns his head away from the crowd and inclines it towards Elisabeth. Below, Elisabeth lies on her death bed, and again Christ carrying the cross turns his head towards her. The two right-most panels finally bring the encounter between Elisabeth and Christ to the fore: above, she washes the feet of a man with a cruciform halo (a direct reference to

Matthew 25: 40, “Amen I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me”),[9] and below the saint and her household gather around the small Christ who, exposing a sizeable erection, lies bleeding between the bedcovers.[10]

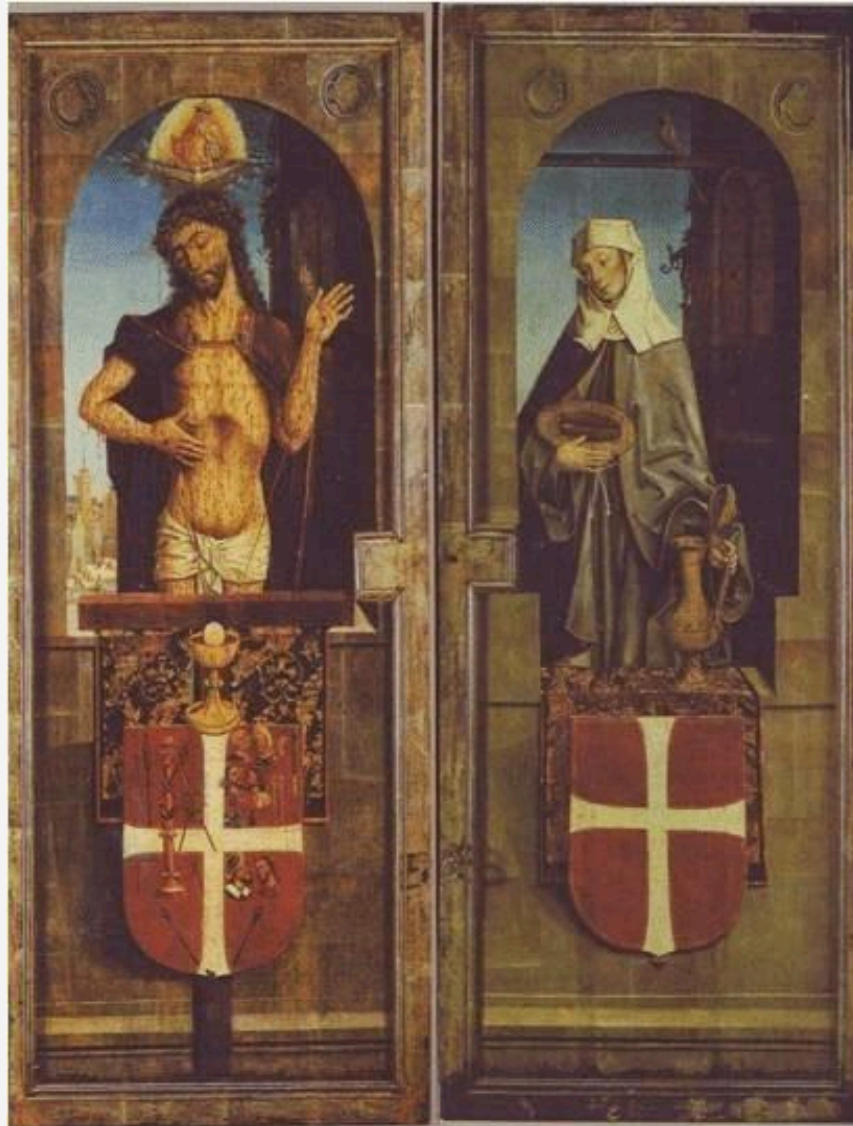


Fig. 2. Workshop of Bernt Notke, *Christ as the Man of Sorrows and St Elisabeth of Thuringia*, first view of the Holy Spirit altarpiece, 1483. Church of the Holy Spirit, Tallinn, Estonia (Photo by the kind permission of Gustav Piir, Church of the Holy Spirit, Tallinn)



Fig. 3. Workshop of Bernt Notke, *Christ as the Man of Sorrows and St Elisabeth of Thuringia*, first view of the Holy Spirit altarpiece, 1483. Church of the Holy Spirit, Tallinn, Estonia (Photo by the kind permission of Gustav Piir, Church of the Holy Spirit, Tallinn)

This last image most certainly refers to the most famous narrative about Elisabeth's ministrations to the sick to appear in the revised version of Dietrich of Apolda's *vita*.^[11] With her husband away, the Landgravine finds a leprous man, washes him, and puts him into her marital bed. Ludwig, informed about his wife's suspect deed, rushes into the bedroom—dragged in by his furious mother—and indeed sees the leprous body where his own should be. It is understood that he is there to confront Elisabeth's promiscuity, her rampant sexuality, which not only embarrasses, but also endangers him and his home. But God grants Ludwig the inner sight, and instead of the naked man he beholds Christ.^[12] As a result, the stunned Ludwig insists that Elisabeth should bring more lepers to the bed as frequently as she wishes.

The miracle is not performed by Elisabeth, but in the Pühavaimu image she is God's accomplice, pulling back the sheets to reveal the naked man (fig. 4). What she is showing to her husband is the leper. What her husband sees is Christ. What the viewer sees is the contrast between Elisabeth's terrestrial spouse, rendered visually impotent by the drop of the obviously phallic blade, and her celestial husband whose

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sexuality is made apparent. So whose erection is it: Christ's or the leper's? And where does this leave Elisabeth, who compromises her happy and fecund marriage by taking in a leprous man—that is, a lecherous, libidinous, lascivious sinner—and putting him in her husband's place?

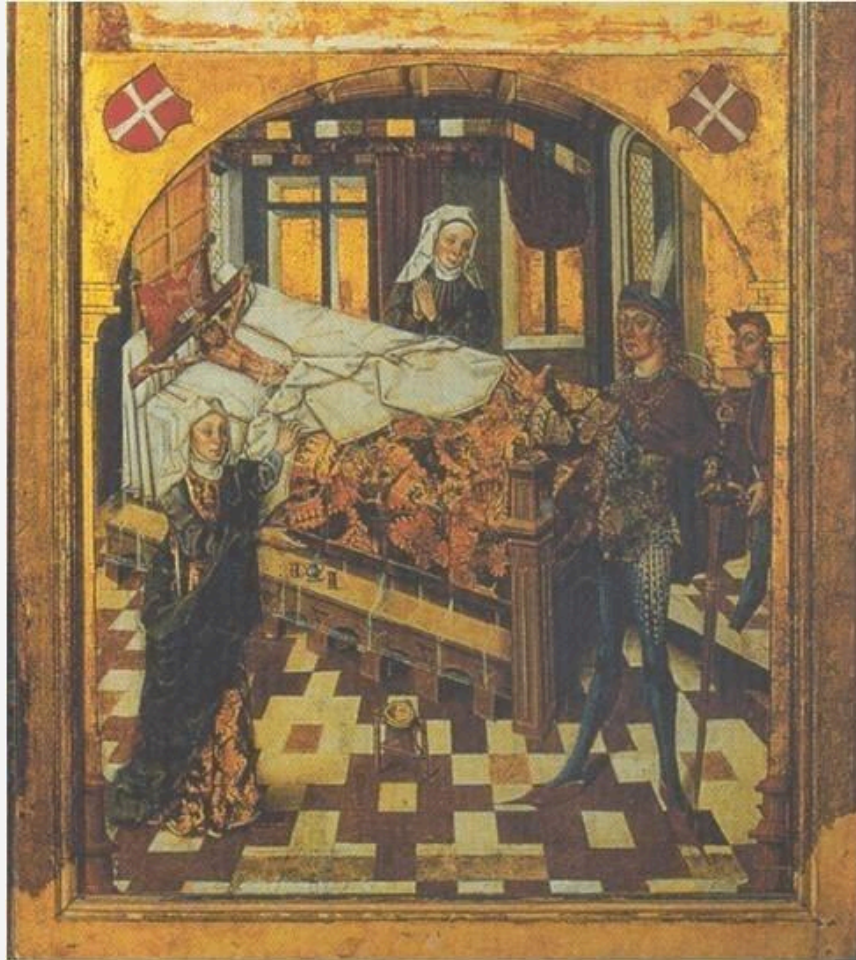


Fig. 4. The Holy Spirit Altarpiece, detail with the leprous Christ

Si grant ardor: Sex and Lepers

Although the causes of leprosy were debated throughout the Middle Ages, the disease, at least by the late thirteenth century, had attained a pronounced stigma as a venereal infection, and so was commonly seen as the domain of the promiscuous and the deviant.[13] It was among the most feared and abhorred afflictions during Elisabeth's lifetime, when its incidence seems to have peaked before ebbing away in the wake of the Black Death. Leprosy was an acquired otherness, terrifying because always at hand for a Christian: it required no loss of faith, it was not due to an inborn

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monstrosity. It was, in some ways, a matter of the extent to which one could impel God to act; in the words of David Nirenberg, leprosy embodied “the somatization within individuals of God’s punishment of sins that, to a greater or lesser degree, affected all people.”[14] Lepers were walking corpses, symbolically pronounced dead, segregated, and often expelled from their houses and their towns. Like corpses they decomposed; they rotted; they became disfigured; they smelled. Physical decay reflected moral rot. As Jeffrey Richards puts it, “leprosy was the outward and visible sign of a soul corroded by sin and in particular by sexual sin.”[15] Here, “sexual sin” largely implicates women, even healthy women, as agents of the disease that afflicts the (unquestionably profligate) man. One, for instance, could acquire leprosy by having sex with women at the time of their menstruation, a terrible act that carried dire consequences. The author of the astonishingly misogynist handbook on women’s health, *De secretis mulierum*, suggests that “a man should be especially careful not to have sexual intercourse with women who have their periods, because by doing so he can contract leprosy, and become seriously ill.”[16] Children conceived during the time of a woman’s period were certain to have leprosy as well. Menstrual blood was a somatic surfeit that transgressed bodily boundaries; as Susan Zimmerman suggests, in commenting on *De Secretis*, this “fluid with a mysterious power of generation that was ordinarily not needed for reproductive purposes. . . . moved insidiously between the inside/outside body boundary as a form of refuse, a poisonous residue of the female insides.”[17] Another way to contract leprosy, according to Mayno de’ Manyeri (d. 1368)—a physician who taught in Paris and practiced medicine at the Visconti court in Milan—was to have sex with two women simultaneously.[18] Still another was to have relations with a prostitute, who may have had a sexual encounter with a leper, and who would then become contagious even if she remained uninfected herself—a point we will shortly reprise.[19]

Prostitutes and lepers frequently appear together in late medieval ordinances that bring to the fore the perceived carnality of the diseased. In the Bristol decree of 1344 that expelled two types of persons, prostitutes and lepers, from the city, the reference to the uncontrolled sexuality of the leprous is oblique.[20] More directly, in ordering the elimination of lepers from city streets, Edward III of England (d. 1377) put forth the ordinance that mentioned the spread of leprosy “by carnal intercourse with women in stews and other secret places.”[21] For lepers were lusty: not only was leprosy, in its outward manifestation of moral disfigurement, a result of sinful desires, but it also kindled these unbridled wicked desires still further. It is not an accident that the fourteenth-century physician Guy de Chauliac mentions that lepers take on a satyr-like appearance: they were both agents and living consequences of licentious behavior. The promiscuity of lepers, its flames fanned by the disease, has pride of

place in literary imagination as well. For example, as early as the twelfth century, Bérout's *Le Roman de Tristan*—in which, incidentally, Tristan is disguised as a leprous man who blames his disease on an adulterous affair—describes a band of lepers lusting after Yseut and suggesting that she be given to them as punishment for her adultery: “Sire, en nos a si grant ardor / Soz ciel n'a dame qui un jor / Peüst soufrir nosttre convers” (lines 1195-1197).[22] No woman will be able to withstand such an assault of immoderate lust.

Le Roman de Tristan presages the dominant attitude to be taken by later medieval society towards the disease. In discussing the imagery of the sick in the collegiate church of the prosperous twelfth-century town of Saint-Aignan, Marcia Kupfer offers a sweeping synthesis of the findings on the socio-religious dimension of leprosy, concluding that “by the late thirteenth century, the medicalized stereotype of the irascible leper, derelict, foul, and lascivious, drowned out the competing paradigm of the poor Lazarus, whose sores preachers and doctors of the Church licked with the word of God.”[23] The change in attitude seems to have taken place after the Third Lateran Council, which stipulated the isolation of the diseased in their own communities. Even though by virtue of their ongoing suffering, and so unwitting *imitatio Christi* (they were called *pauperes Christi*), lepers—physically and morally filthy, and unsettlingly virile—were decidedly *not* like Christ. Matthew 19:12 attributes to Jesus some of the more disquieting words that address male Christian identity in terms of virility, or lack thereof: “For there are eunuchs, who were born so from their mother’s womb: and there are eunuchs, who were made so by men: and there are eunuchs, who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven. He that can take, let him take it.” This language of castration has proven challenging to antique as well as modern commentators, who variously interpret Christ’s words literally and figuratively. Ultimately, as Halvor Moxnes suggests, it is the basic tenets of masculinity, including sexuality and power, that “were challenged by the figure of the eunuch. . . eunuchs were men who were permanently out of place, in a liminal position where there was no possibility of integration into the order of masculinity.”[24] Christ’s own liminality—his self-imposed emasculation, as it were—was very different from the liminality of the leper, at least as perceived in the fifteenth century when the Pühavaimu altarpiece was completed: an outcast burning with desire, who strives to sexually and morally corrupt by virtue of his sordid *grant ardor*. Which begs again the question: in the Reval image, who is it that lies in Elisabeth’s bed?

Subjects of Desire

The leper as the subject of (charitable) desire pervades the discourse on Elisabeth. In

discussing the saint's attentions to the sick, Jacobus de Voragine seems to single out leprosy without explicitly naming it when he refers to her patients' scarred and lacerated skin: "she did not shrink from the smells and sores of the sick, but applied remedies to their wounds, dried them with the veil from her head, and treated them with her own hands." [25] Caesarius of Heisterbach—who, incidentally, left us a most shuddersome story about an anonymous bishop licking the dangling skin on a leper's nose—wrote in Elisabeth's *vita* that she gathered lepers in her own house, ministered to them, and kissed their sores and scars, seeing them as the embodiment of Christ's suffering ("Christum in illis aspexit et fovit"). [26] As a group, lepers lose their gender identity, but when a female saint decides to interface with them one on one, it is only appropriate that the chosen invalid is a woman. Jacobus records an incident in which one specific leper was singled out by Elisabeth: "She cared for a woman with a dreadful leprosy . . . bathing her, putting her in bed, cleansing and bandaging her sores, applying her salves, cutting her finger-nails, and kneeling at the sick woman's feet to loosen the laces of her shoes." [27] When Elisabeth's advisor and confessor, the sadistic Master Conrad, raves against Elisabeth's strange attachment to lepers, he likely refers to the same woman: "She took on, without my knowledge, the care of a leprous girl and hid her in her own quarters... feeding her, laying her down, washing her, and even removing her shoes." [28] Conrad sends the girl away and, as is his wont, punishes Elisabeth severely. [29] Essentially, because she ministers to the suffering bodies of lepers, she has to endure bodily suffering herself.

The desires of Elisabeth's body, and the many ways to encourage and curb them, take center stage in every version of her life narrative. Jacobus, for example, spends a great deal of time engaging with the reluctant-virgin trope: Elisabeth is forced into marriage to the landgrave Ludwig of Thuringia by her worldly station, "in obedience to her father's order" and "not out of libidinous desire but . . . in order to procreate and to raise children for the service of God." At night, she exhausts herself with prayer—so much so that, as Jacobus tells us, "her husband begged her to spare herself and give her body some rest." Furthermore, throughout her brief life, Conrad imposes tremendous punishments upon her—including violent whipping—to which she eagerly submits, all the while promising that after her husband's death she will perpetually "practice continence." Despite initial resistance to marriage, Elisabeth comes to be happy with her betrothed, and after his death indeed remains chaste for the rest of her life. In death, her flesh proves to be incorruptible: "Although her venerable body lay unburied for four days, no unpleasant odor came from it, but rather a pleasant aroma that refreshed everyone." [30] In this, she was like many other saints and very much unlike the lepers she seems to have favored her entire life.

Elisabeth's proclivity to touch the lepers had a long and robust precedent. Several medieval saints were attracted by the leprous body as the most abject and so most in need of care. Two seemed particularly important for Elisabeth, a Thuringian noblewoman turned Franciscan tertiary. One is St. Francis, who mentions lepers as an espèce of a conversion vehicle in his Testament: "When I was in sin the sight of lepers was too bitter for me. And the Lord himself led me among them, and I pitied and helped them. And when I left them I discovered that what had seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness in my soul and body. And shortly afterward I rose and left the world." [31] The episode, incidentally, is subsequently re-spun in biographies of Thomas of Celano and St. Bonaventure, where Francis's contact with a flesh-and-blood leper is eventually substituted by the much less abhorrent encounter of a miraculous sort, the leper—obviously, a holy phantom—disappearing in the wake of the saint's kiss. [32] Another key figure is St. Radegund, the sixth-century Thuringian princess who was, clearly, Elisabeth's model. Radegund, who refused marriage and retreated from the world to found a monastery in Poitiers, famously took a group of lepers into her convent, feeding and bestowing gifts upon them. Venantius Fortunatus, who recorded this episode in the *Life of Holy Radegund* (d. 586), also describes, with a proper degree of abjection, the nun fearlessly embracing leprous women. [33] For the ostensibly heteronormative hagiographic discourse, it is important for the lepers to be women, "mulieres variis leprae," in order to underscore that it is Radegund's charity, and not her sexuality, that transgressed the basic social decorum. When leprous men do appear in queens' bedrooms in their husbands' absence, as happened to Queen Matilda (d. 1118), the first wife of King Henry I of England, relatives are summoned by these charitable women to witness the sexual propriety of the socially improper deed. [34] When Matilda kisses lepers' feet, her brother David's only concern is that she will spoil her pure lips, making them unfit to touch her husband's.

The leper-in-the-marriage-bed legend did not originate with Elisabeth's vita. It is found, for example, in Jacques de Vitry's *Sermones vulgares* (ca. 1230), where the episode takes on an outright sexual connotation. [35] A noble woman, whose husband detests lepers, puts one in his bed. The leper begs and pleads ("ecce hic crucior vehementissimo solis ardore"), and she, unable to withstand his pitiful insistence ("non potuit planctus ejus sustinere"), takes him in her arms and carries him into her house. The jealous husband, whose suspicion is aroused by his wife's vain attempts to keep him away from the bedroom, bursts in to find nothing but sweet fragrance filling the air. As Ottó Gescer has argued, the leper's "motivation was to be completed by the association between leprosy and increased libido," and his

“wish to lie in the husband’s bed inevitably suggests the desire of adulterous love.”[36]

Women, as Catherine Peyroux points out, were made particularly “vulnerable to social rejection” by touching lepers.[37] One likely cause was the easily corruptible female nature: women were lustful, women were susceptible. Female anatomy made it all the worse: after having sex with a leper, a woman could go for a long time without contracting leprosy herself, in the meantime infecting others. Her cold and wet nature would constrain the putrid liquid of a leper’s semen in her uterus, not allowing it to spill out and infect her blood; monthly menstrual purging would keep her doubly safe.[38] Men who came in sexual contact with such a woman, however, were doomed. There was, of course, a limit to how much even a coarse female body could bear. In *Compendium medicine*, Gilbertus Anglicus (d. 1250) warns that frequent sexual contact with lepers would break the woman’s natural immunity, compromising even the strongest of uterine walls, releasing the poisonous liquid into her blood stream and causing an infection.[39] Another cause for social vulnerability, then, was that women and lepers were joined in the medieval imagination as those who pollute and contaminate; yet, it is clear that the incontrovertible connection between leprosy and menstrual blood, between leprosy and prostitution, and between leprosy and the greatly suspect *menage à trois*, implicated even healthy women in the dreaded disease. It is hardly surprising that neither Conrad’s reminiscences nor any miracle depositions mention the leprous man brought into Elisabeth’s bed without her husband’s knowledge and of her own volition, and that the Reinhardsbrunn monk writes about it only after the saint is safely canonized. The episode is disquieting precisely because it foregrounds Elisabeth’s susceptible female body and her sexuality, and within the framework of leprosy, a woman’s body was read as the site of physical and moral contamination, and a woman’s sexuality as an unequivocal threat.[40]

The Pühavaimu altarpiece, moreover, in eliding the bodies of the tormented man and the tormented Christ, of the lustful leper and the self-proclaimed eunuch, brings to the fore Elisabeth’s body by emphasizing the mechanisms of desire. The crucified man in her husband’s bed is diminutive: yet, it is not a crucifix that Ludwig sees but a real man. The miniaturization of Christ’s body is made conspicuous by the left-most lower panel directly across, in which action also takes place in a bedchamber, where Elisabeth, rendered perfectly to scale, lies on her deathbed. Cultural historians have suggested that miniaturization points to the need to possess and manipulate. In discussing Master Francke’s *Man of Sorrows* panel in Leipzig, contemporary to the Pühavaimu altarpiece, Michael Camille proposed that Christ’s diminutive size makes

him into a defenseless and therefore magnetic object of desire.[41] In turn, Susan Stewart has argued that the undersize body loses “the danger of power. The body becomes an image and all manifestations of will are transferred to the position of an observer, the voyeur.”[42] Stewart suggests that such a body, although itself robbed of agentive sexuality, displaces desires upon the onlookers: here, Elisabeth, her husband, and the beholder who looks at Elisabeth who looks at Ludwig who looks at Christ. In the additions to Dietrich’s version, Sophia, Ludwig’s mother, points out Elisabeth’s misdeed, exclaiming: “Recognosce modo, quod his solet Elysaeth stratum tuum inficere.”[43] The problematic appearance of the leper beyond the threshold of the bedchamber, however, has little to do with hygiene; as Katharine Park has suggested, the isolation of the lepers “aimed to set [them] apart as foci of moral and ritual defilement rather than as threats to public health.”[44] Elisabeth’s choice to place a leper in her husband’s bed is questionable not because of contagion, although that is the ostensible danger mentioned by Dietrich, but because the man suffers from the illness that embodies perverted lust. “Inficere” is an ambiguous word, which in this context suggests not only physical but also sexual corruption.[45] Even though Elisabeth’s choice proves, in the end, to have been a successful one, at Pühavaimu the beholder is made sharply aware of the temporal gap between the act itself—the invitation to the immoral man burning with *grant ardor* to lie in her marital bed—and Ludwig’s vision that vindicates it. Elisabeth body, unlike that of her spiritual spouse, may be fully clothed, but it nonetheless constitutes a charged erotic site that sets in motion the action of the panel: the transformation of the sickly, sinful body into a sickly, holy one.

Exteriorizing Vision

The iconography of such bodily transformation has long been implicated in therapeutic regimes of hospital institutions. Access to the image was of utmost importance: in the Beaune hospital, for example, provisions were made for the patients to be able to see Rogier van der Weyden’s Last Judgment altarpiece directly from the chamber that housed their beds.[46] In discussing Matthias Grünewald’s panels for the Isenheim altarpiece, Andrée Hayum has suggested that the first state of the altarpiece, which focuses on Christ suffering from the same disease that was prevalent among the patients of the Antonite monastery where the altarpiece was used, has to be read in conjunction with the second state, which features the resurrected and manifestly cured Christ, and so “shows us a gloriously imagined estate of the future.”[47] While the Isenheim retable, placed in the monastic choir and blocked by the rood screen, may not have been immediately available to the patients, the Pühavaimu altarpiece, located in the small urban parish church,

appears to have been conveniently at hand for the city dwellers and the hospital patients alike.

The significance of the altarpiece imagery for the sick is hard to overestimate. In discussing the overall iconography of the altarpiece, Elina Räsänen and I have argued that its “pronounced stress on bodily suffering, the consistent comparison between the bodies of the infirm and Christ’s own flesh, [and] the exultation of the Virgin and the apostles at Pentecost... promise the healing of the body and soul by the Holy Spirit,” if not in this world, then the next.[48] But the Christ-leper image is particularly efficacious, because, in tracing the transformation of the sick body into a holy body, it augurs and effects relief. Ludwig may have perceived the leper turning into Christ with his *interiores oculos*, his inner sight, but beholders in Reval saw the metamorphosis with their fleshly eyes. And what they saw, as they well knew, imprinted their minds and bodies, and reformed their souls.

By the thirteenth century, the theory of intromission—which postulated that species of every visible object bombarded and stamped themselves on the receptive eye—was generally accepted by philosophers, including Roger Bacon, whose work remained influential at least until the sixteenth century.[49] The wax-like memory received impressions through the eyes, impressions that physically and spiritually molded and altered the beholder. The implication for the medical sciences was considerable. In postulating, for example, that leprosy corrupted the eye, Gilbertus Anglicus suggested, as Carole Rawcliffe writes, that “the ‘species’ or the image of leprosy will enter the eye of anyone who looks upon one of its victims... and eventually suffuse the entire venous system.”[50] Elisabeth, by inviting the leper into her bed and displaying him to her husband, endangers her spouse directly: not only does the leper’s foul flesh press itself on Ludwig’s sheets; not only does his unseemly desire press itself upon Elisabeth’s body; but the very sight of his disease physically impresses itself on the Landgrave, tainting and infecting him. But if Elisabeth’s deed invites the danger of illness, her sanctity provides an immediate cure for Ludwig, whose eyes and, as Gilbertus would have it, the entire venous system, are suffused not by the species of the sick man but the species of God. And so it is for viewers: it is not the image of leprosy and unbridled sexuality that enters their eyes but the image of Christ and his curative suffering. That this is *an image* is significant. The miniaturization of Christ transforms him into an object—a crucifix—and Ludwig’s beholding of this crucifix thus appears as a meta-commentary on the remedial efficacy of beholding devotional images in general, and the Pühavaimu altarpiece in particular.

But the question of Elisabeth's desire remains unresolved, tugging at the elision of devotional and sexual longing. The *Golden Legend* hints at this worrisome elision: Elisabeth often "had her servingwomen flog her in her bedroom, in return for the scourging her Savior had borne for her and to quell all carnal desire."^[51] The acknowledgment of her carnality, which must be beaten out of her, and the twofold function of this beating—physiological and devotional—place Elisabeth into a small constellation of female saints who battled their bodily drives. Virginia Blanton draws attention, for instance, to the Anglo-Norman poem *La vie seinte Audrée* written at the end of the twelfth or beginning of the thirteenth century, which concerns the seventh-century Anglo-Saxon queen Æthelthryth. Unlike Elisabeth, Audrée lives in chaste marriage with her first husband, but just like Elisabeth, she battles her carnal drives through mortification of her flesh. These drives, like those of Elisabeth, are innate: Blanton points out that two other female saints who struggled with their inappropriate desires, Christina of Markyate and Justina of Antioch, in reality struggled with the devil who inflamed their bodily passions in the first place.^[52] The recognition of the Landgravine's carnality, therefore, sits uneasily in the framework of the leper-in-the-marital-bed narrative: we know what her husband sees, but what does she see? At Pühavaimu beholders are invited to follow the trajectory of gazes, from Elisabeth to her husband to Christ: the trajectory that suggests that Ludwig's inner vision becomes exteriorized for the sake of the viewers, although not necessarily for the sake of his wife. The identity of the man in her husband's bed is both known and unknown to Elisabeth, and the revelation of Christ's body to Ludwig, although facilitated by Elisabeth, is not explicitly seen by her.

The Pühavaimu image, then, simultaneously foregrounds Elisabeth the woman whose drives and motives are suspect, and Elisabeth the saint whose charitable deed is redeemed and rid of all suspicion by a miracle. Her choice of tending to the leper is fraught: in any account that points to the association of the disease with uncontained sexuality, sexuality is structured, per force, as a disease. And yet, Elisabeth, without a doubt, is untainted: her household may think her nature has been corrupted, but the beholder does not; Ludwig may need proof that the desires of his wife are ardent but spiritual, but the viewer, of course, already knows. The altarpiece, in other words, worries the facile, undemanding interpretation of this singular episode in the saint's life: the image retains the sexual charge of the narrative, just as Elisabeth's suspect sexuality is wiped clean, along with the disease and the desire, whose traces—visible in Christ's pockmarked skin and erect member—are there to remind the viewer that the ostensibly transgressive nature of a woman's act can, in the end, provide physical as well as spiritual relief to those who witness it.

References

- 1 Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983); Caroline Walker Bynum, "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg," *Renaissance Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (1986): 399-439, rpt. in Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 79-117; and Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), which adds a special section to respond to Bynum's critique. But see also Richard Trexler's "Gendering Christ Crucified," in *Iconography at the Crossroads: Papers from the Colloquium Sponsored by the Index of Christian Art Princeton University 23-24 March 1990*, ed. Brendan Cassidy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 107-119. In addition, for a significantly different take on medieval sexuality and the heterosexist theories of scholars who address it, see, for example, Diane Wolfthal, "Picturing Same-Sex Desire: The Falconer and his Lover in Images by Petrus Christus and the Housebook Master," in *Troubled Vision: Gender, Sexuality, and Sight in Medieval Text and Image*, ed. Emma Campbell and Robert Mills (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 17-46; Robert Mills, "Ecce Homo," in *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women and Saints in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. Samantha J.E. Riches and Sarah Salih (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 154-8, and Karma Lochrie, "Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies," in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James Alfred Schultz (Minnesota: Minnesota University Press, 1997), 180-200.
- 2 E.g., Michael Camille, "Seductions of the Flesh. Meister Francke's Female 'Man' of Sorrows," in *Frömmigkeit im Mittelalter. Politisch-soziale Kontexte, visuelle Praxis, körperliche Ausdrucksformen*, ed. Klaus Schreiner and Marc Müntz (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2002), 243-69; and Martha Easton, "Was It Good For You, Too?" Medieval Erotic Art and Its Audiences, *Different Visions: A Journal of New Perspectives on Medieval Art* 1 (2008): 1-30, <https://differentvisions.org/was-it-good-for-you-too/>. See also Martha Easton, "The Wound of Christ, the Mouth of Hell: Appropriations and Inversions of Female Anatomy in the Later Middle Ages," in *Tributes to Jonathan J.G. Alexander: The Making and Meaning of Illuminated Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts, Art and Architecture*, ed. Susan L'Engle and Gerald B. Guest (London/Turnhout: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2006), 395-414. For a similar question interrogated in the field of medieval mystical writings see Nancy F. Partner ("Did Mystics Have Sex?" in *Desire and Discipline: Sex and Sexuality in the Premodern West*, ed. Jacqueline Murray and Konrad Eisenbichler [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996], 296-31) who argues that we can read in them "the heavy weight of sexual restriction, sexual guilt, and conformity to difficult

rules of self-constraint carried by monks and nuns, and by all women” (307). But see Sarah Salih for the critique of this approach and the discussion of “the self-conscious opposition between theological and pathological readings of mysticism” in “When is a Bosom Not a Bosom? Problems with ‘Erotic Mysticism’,” in *Medieval Virginites*, ed. Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans, and Sarah Salih (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 21.

- 3 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (1976; New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 105-6.
 - 4 Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James Alfred Schultz, “Introduction,” in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ix. For the argument of cultural rather than biological model of sexuality, see, in addition to Foucault, the now-classic Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London, 1990); and Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: 1990). But see Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1993) for challenging the one-sex approach as it pertains, at least, to medieval culture.
 - 5 See Sarah Salih’s contribution to the current volume. For the gender identity slippage among popular medieval saints, see Samantha J. E. Riches, “Virtue and Violence,” in *Medieval Sexuality: a Casebook*, ed. April Harper and Caroline Proctor (New York: Routledge, 2008), 59-78.
 - 6 For the up-to-date bibliography on the altarpiece as well as the discussion of the identity of its creators, see, Kerstin Petermann, *Bernt Notke: Arbeitsweise und Werkstattorganisation im späten Mittelalter* (Berlin: Reimer, 2000), 94-111, 243-45. In particular, see Gerhard Eimer, *Bernt Notke: Das Wirken eines niederdeutschen Künstlers im Ostseeraum* (Bonn: Kulturstiftung der deutschen Vertriebenen, 1985), 91-102. For the discussion of the altarpiece in terms of identification between the body of Christ and the body of the city, see Elina Gertsman and Elina Räsänen, “Locating the Body in Late Medieval Reval,” in *Locating the Middle Ages: the Spaces and Places of Medieval Culture*, ed. Julian Weiss and Sarah Salih, King’s College London Medieval Studies, 23 (London: Centre for Late Antique & Medieval Studies, King’s College London, 2012), 137-58.
 - 7 For a the recent collection on St. Elisabeth, which includes several art historical studies, see *Elisabeth von Thüringen – Eine europäische Heilige*, ed. Dieter Blume and Matthias Werner (Petersberg: Imhof, 2007). For the pictorial cycles dedicated to Elisabeth and associated with hospitals, see Ernst Bacher, “Die Bürgerspitalskirche in Weitra und ihre Restaurierung,” *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Kunst und Denkmalpflege* 3-4 (1973): 176-81; E. Lanc, “Die
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- 28 Conrad, *Summa vitae* (1232), reprinted in *The Life and Afterlife of St. Elizabeth of Hungary: Testimony from Her Canonization Hearings*, ed. and trans. Kenneth Baxter Wolf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 94.
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- 30** *Golden Legend*, 690, 698.
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- 31** Testament of St. Francis, trans. David Burr, The Internet Medieval Source Book, hosted by Fordham University Center for Medieval Studies, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/stfran-test.html>, accessed July 20, 2011.
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- 34** Aelred of Rievaulx, *Genealogia regum anglorum, Patrologia Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris, 1844-1903), 195: col. 736.
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- 35** *The Exempla or Illustrative Stories from the Sermones vulgares of Jacques de Vitry*, ed. Frederick Crane, Publications of the Folk-Lore Society 26 (London: David Nutt, 1890), XCV: 44-45. On the interpretation of this exemplum, see Sharon Farmer, "The Leper in the Master Bedroom: Thinking Through a Thirteenth-Century Exemplum," in *Framing the Family: Narrative and Representation in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods*, ed. Rosalynn Voaden and Diane Wolfthal (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005), 79-100.
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- 36** Ottó Gescer, "Miracles of the Leper and the Roses: Emblems of Charity in Medieval Imagination," with more on the permutations of this legend, especially in connection with St. Elisabeth. Many thanks to Dr. Gescer for sharing with me his unpublished paper.
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- 37** Peyroux, "Leper's Kiss," 183.
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- 38** See discussion of sources in Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England*, esp. 82-83.
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- 39** Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England*, n. 160.
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- 40** See Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto Others* (New York: Routledge, 2005), esp. 116-19.
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- 41** Camille, "Seductions of the Flesh," esp. 245-49.
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- 42** Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 124.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822378563>
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- 43** Rainer, *Vita*, 40.
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- 44** Katharine Park, "Medicine and Society in Medieval Europe, 500-1500," in *Medicine in Society: Historical Essays*, ed. Andrew Wear (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 72.
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- 45** I wish to thank Dr. Gescer for confirming this interpretation of "inficere."
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- 47** Andrée Hayum, "The Meaning and Function of the Isenheim Altarpiece: The Hospital Context Revisited," *Art Bulletin* 59, no. 4 (1977): 501-17, at 516.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00043079.1977.10787476>; article reprinted with little changes as Chapter 1 in *The Isenheim Altarpiece: God's Medicine and the Painter's Vision* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). Critics have pointed out that the Isenheim altarpiece stood in the monastic choir, partially blocked by the rood screen, and so the possibility of visual access of the sick to the altarpiece remains questionable. See Christiane Andersson, review of *The Isenheim Altarpiece*, in *The Burlington Magazine* 133, no. 1062 (1991): 625.
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- 50** Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England*, 94.
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- 51** *Golden Legend*, 691.
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- 52** Virginia Blanton, "Chaste Marriage, Sexual Desire, and Christian Martyrdom in *La vie seinte Audrée*," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 19, no. 1, special issue: *Desire and Eroticism in Medieval Europe, Eleventh to Fifteenth Centuries: Sex without Sex* (2010): 94-114, discussion of Christina and Justina on 103. The disclosure of carnal urges need not be implicit: in her article "The Chaste Erotics of Marie d'Oignies and Jacques de Vitry," published in the same issue of *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Jennifer N. Brown points to a passage in Jacques de Vitry's *vita* of Marie d'Oignies that describes Marie wearing a bound rough cord under her clothes at night, while in bed with her husband, "because she clearly did not have power over her own body" (82). Brown suggests that "Marie's physical self-punishment implied a kind of rebuke for her body's physical acts or urges... while she may not have had power over the man to whom she was married (or even that she was married at all), Marie clearly found power 'over her own body' in her self-mutilation" (83).