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The Politics of Mysticism: Elisabeth of Spalbeek in Context

Jesse Njus

Elisabeth of Spalbeek (fl. 1246–1304) was one of the *mulieres religiosae* who flourished in the Low Countries during the thirteenth century.[1] Although she is known today almost exclusively for her stigmata and her performance of Christ's Passion, I will argue that she provides an exceptional example of the spiritual networking described by scholars such as John Coakley and Anneke Mulder-Bakker.[2] As they have shown, medieval holy women—recluses and anchoresses included—functioned only within tightly woven spiritual networks that connected other *mulieres religiosae*, sympathetic clerics, and powerful nobles who provided economic and political support in return for the women's prayers and spiritual authority. No one has analyzed Elisabeth's network in this light in part because the chief source for her life—the text written by Abbot Philip of Clairvaux, who visited Elisabeth in 1266/7—omits the proper names of most people surrounding Elisabeth and fails to mention many of the people with whom she must have come in contact.[3] In addition, major documents

[1]These dates are uncertain. See Philip, Abbot of Clairvaux, "Vita Elizabeth Sanctimonialis in Erkenrode, Ordinis Cisterciensis, Leodiensis Dioecesis," *Catalogus Codicum Hagiographicorum Bibliothecae Regiae Bruxellensis*, vol. I (Brussels, 1886), 362–378. All translations from this text are my own. Philip of Clairvaux visited Elisabeth in 1266/7 when, he writes, she was about twenty years old. Philip mentions the year 1266 in his text ("anno MCCLXVI" [376]), and it seems to be the year of—or the year before—his visit. Philip also writes that "it is said that now she has reached twenty years" ("nunc attigisse dicitur vicennalem" [364]), and Elisabeth's birth has consequently been deduced from Philip's evidence. For the year of Elisabeth's death, see Amandus Bussels, "Was Elisabeth Van Spalbeek Cisterciënserin in Herkenrode?" *Cîteaux in de Nederlanden* 2 (1951): 43–54, and Simone Roisin, *L'hagiographie cistercienne dans le diocèse de Liège au XIIIe siècle* (Louvain: Bibliothèque de l'Université, 1947), 71 n. 5.

[2]John Coakley, "Friars as Confidants of Holy Women in Medieval Dominican Hagiography," in *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. R. Blumenfeld-Kosinski and T. K. Szell (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 222–246; Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, *Lives of the Anchoresses: The Rise of the Urban Recluse in Medieval Europe*, trans. M. H. Scholz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

[3]The suppression of proper names and a holy person's connections is not by any means uncommon in hagiographical writings, and the decision relies entirely on the needs or inclinations of the author (see note 17).

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concerning Elisabeth have, until now, escaped any collective analysis, so we have been unable to place Elisabeth in any context. Through a painstaking review of all the pertinent documents, however, I have succeeded in uncovering Elisabeth's political and spiritual alliances, allowing me to study her in her milieu and to provide a detailed analysis of her possible secular and religious influence. I argue that she was actively engaged in building and extending her own network, and in my consideration of the evidence for this "politics of mysticism," I offer a perspective on Elisabeth that has led me to reinterpret her role in the last recorded event of her life, the French court battle between Queen Marie of Brabant and the chamberlain Pierre de la Broce.

Elisabeth offers a unique case because the heterogeneous sources we have present her at different periods in her life and from very different angles. For Philip, the young Elisabeth is a spectacle—a mesmerizing performer and a powerful sign of God's grace, enabling the Cistercians to challenge the Franciscans on their own ground. The second text—a relic inventory by William of Ryckel, the abbot of Sint-Truiden (Saint Trond)—presents us with a more "normalized" view of Elisabeth. Like other devout persons of means, she participates in relic exchanges as both giver and recipient, with the added benefit that, because of her divine charism, she could authenticate the relics as well. Finally, there are several French court documents that show how powerful men might attempt to manipulate a well-known *mulier religiosa* for their own ends—although in this case I believe they failed. Unlike other holy women whose reputation was based in part on their prophetic gifts, we see Elisabeth in this instance resolutely refusing the prophetic role that others attempted to thrust upon her.

Elisabeth's practice was not itself wholly unique. Topoi from the *vitae* of other holy women clearly influenced Elisabeth's spiritual practice, which consisted of two primary elements: performance and divine inspiration.[4] Elisabeth's unusual ability to contribute to this tradition was largely due to her awareness of the political networks in which she operated. While she borrowed religious materials from the lives of others, her familial affiliations

[4]Excluding her fairly unique Passion performance, Elisabeth's spirituality—her ability to authenticate relics, to divine the spiritual state of others, her mystic knowledge of feast days—was similar to that of other women such as Marie d'Oignies (ca. 1177–1213), Elisabeth of Schönau (1129–1165), and Christina Mirabilis or the Astonishing of Sint-Truiden (1150–1224) who had lived in the same area as Elisabeth. Elisabeth was certainly aware of the spiritual legacy to which she aspired, and she was equally well aware of the contemporary community of women religious as my article demonstrates later in the discussion of Marie of Lille. Nonetheless, these *topoi* were common enough for holy women as well as their hagiographers to use and adapt continuously; I do not imply that Elisabeth was imitating any specific group of women, though I will provide possible evidence for such an act in the relic discussion below concerning Elisabeth of Schönau.

supplied her with religious networks involving the circulation of holy people and relics. Elisabeth's relative William of Ryckel, the abbot of Sint-Truiden, supplied her with an expanding network of religious clients whose support Elisabeth might gain for spiritual favors such as prayers or the gift of an authenticated relic. My analysis of the primary documents demonstrates that Elisabeth's religious practice was political in the sense that she organized her adapted spiritual exercises into a system of circulation and exchange whereby her divine authority provided people such as Philip and perhaps Marie of Brabant with a valuable service for which Elisabeth in turn received support.

I. Family Politics

Born into a noble family, Elisabeth began her career with connections through her relative William of Ryckel[5] to such powerful men as William II of Holland, Henry III of Brabant, and Henry of Guelders, all three of whom were cousins, as the genealogical chart demonstrates (see Fig. 1). William of Ryckel was secretary and chaplain to William II of Holland,[6] who was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 1247 with the aid of his two first cousins: Henry, the future Duke Henry III of Brabant,[7] and Henry of Guelders, the younger brother of the duke of Guelders. William II repaid this service by having his cousin Henry of Guelders elected prince-bishop of Liège in 1247 and his chaplain William of Ryckel appointed abbot of Sint-Truiden in 1249.[8] William of Ryckel remained a close ally of all three men until their respective deaths, and Elisabeth's political and religious associations stem primarily from him.[9]

Once all of these men were in power, William of Ryckel was an ally and occasional arbitrator for Henry of Guelders, while William of Holland and Henry of Guelders remained mutual supporters in all things martial and civil.

[5]William of Ryckel's precise relationship to Elisabeth is uncertain. Though he may have been no more than a distant relative, he seems to have figured prominently in Elisabeth's life as a woman religious, and while the impact of his attention might be overstated, it nonetheless seems to have been considerable.

[6]Henri Pirenne, ed., *Le livre de l'abbé Guillaume de Ryckel (1249–1272), Polyptyque et comptes de l'abbé de Saint-Trond au milieu du XIIIe siècle* (Brussels, 1896; reprint, Geneva: Megariotis, 1981), vii.

[7]Henry became Duke Henry III in 1248, when Duke Henry II died. Henry II had also supported William II, although Henry II's wife (mother of Henry III) was the first cousin of Frederick II, William's rival.

[8]Pirenne, *Le livre de l'abbé Guillaume de Ryckel*, vii–xi.

[9]The cartulary of Sint-Truiden testifies to the fact that William of Ryckel maintained his connection to William of Holland, for several documents appear from the Holy Roman Emperor to Abbot William. See Charles Piot, ed., *Cartulaire de L'abbaye de Saint-Trond*. 2 vols. (Brussels: F. Hayez, 1870–74), 250–251. On Abbot William's continued connection to Henry of Guelders, see Alain Marchandisse, *La fonction épiscopale à Liège aux XIIIe et XIVe siècles: étude de politologie historique* (Geneva: Diffusion Librairie Droz, 1998), 371–372.

Although Henry of Guelders was generally disliked as prince-bishop,[10] close ties to him did not hurt Abbot William, who was by all accounts a good abbot and restored the finances and reputation of his abbey. However, his election was somewhat atypical; he took the habit, professed his vows the very next day, and was elected abbot within the week.[11] There was apparently some concern over the election, and on May 4, 1249, a bull from Innocent IV[12] to Henry of Guelders confirmed the election of William of Ryckel to the abbacy of Sint-Truiden, a confirmation perhaps sent at the request of William of Holland.[13] Although such connections were politically advantageous for William of Ryckel, the connection to Henry of Guelders, at least, was not beneficial to his religious standing. In particular, Henry was not necessarily known as a friend of beguines, perhaps most famously causing the flight of Juliana of Mont-Cornillon.[14] William, on the other hand, founded the beguinage of Saint Agnes at Sint-Truiden in 1258, and on November 27, 1267, Clement IV wrote the privilege for Saint Agnes, a document that demonstrates both William's ability to gain protection for unaffiliated laywomen in the area and his real interest in supporting them.[15] His support of Elisabeth, who was actually a relative of his, was thus by no means out of character, although the same is not necessarily true of Henry of

[10]Henry of Guelders did not necessarily endear himself to his diocese or to the religious with whom he interacted. He had several disputes with Teobaldo Visconti, who was the archdeacon of Liège (Marchandisse 152), and when Teobaldo Visconti became Pope Gregory X, he managed to remove Henry from office (Marchandisse 150). On the history of animosity between Henry and Teobaldo and the friendship between Teobaldo and Henry's successor—Jean d'Enghien—see Marchandisse 150–155 and 243 n. 136. Although Henry may not have been as evil as he has been painted (see note 16), Richard Southern uses Henry as an example of the quintessential corrupt cleric. See R. W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 199–202; 212.

[11]Pirenne, *Le livre de l'abbé Guillaume de Ryckel*, xi.

[12]Communication between Innocent IV and the abbot of Sint-Truiden had already been established, however, for there was a bull from Innocent IV on 28 April 1249 that in essence forgave the debts of the abbey. Several bulls followed that allowed Sint-Truiden to escape the payment of debts or required the return payment of money or land to Sint-Truiden (Piot 231–241). William's ability to network was obviously among the qualities that ensured that he was well-suited to his position, and it explains his ability to rebuild the finances of his abbey. On 27 July 1252, Pope Innocent IV issued a bull that granted indulgences to all pilgrims visiting the abbey within the octave of the feast of Sint-Truiden, an occurrence that no doubt helped bring in revenue and may help explain William's interest in expanding Sint-Truiden's collection of relics (Piot 257).

[13]Pirenne, *Le livre de l'abbé Guillaume de Ryckel*, x–xi.

[14]Juliana was forced to flee from her community in Liège but was eventually reinstated by Robert de Thourote who was elected bishop of Liège in 1240. However, upon his death and the election of Henry of Guelders in 1247, the deposed prior who had forced Juliana to flee was reinstated, forcing Juliana to begin her final flight from the diocese. See Ernest W. McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture, with Special Emphasis on the Belgian Scene* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1954), 301–303.

[15]Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200–1565* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 296 n. 94.

Guelders's apparent support.[16] Philip's comment that "the care of this same virgin had been commended by the bishop of the place . . . to the abbot of Sint-Truiden of the Order of Saint Benedict, her neighbor and relative"[17] is most likely evidence of the alliance between William of Ryckel and Henry of Guelders. The partnership was extremely beneficial to Elisabeth, who, unlike Juliana, was freely allowed to follow her spiritual practice.

With such support, there were apparently no immediate external obstacles for Elisabeth to struggle against—no forced marriage, no embarrassed friends or family, and no suspicious local clergy. While this cannot be confirmed, Philip's text does not recount any of these difficulties although they were well-known hagiographic *topoi*. One of the few obstacles Elisabeth did face was her complete lack of physical strength and mobility. William of Ryckel may have provided her with excellent connections, but she was an invalid, and according to the report of Philip of Clairvaux, it was well-known locally that even when her house caught fire she had been unable to leave without help.[18] Only the divine possession she experienced during her Passion performances could give her the physical strength she otherwise lacked and provide her with the ability to fulfill the rigorous demands of her religious practice. This strength was not, of course, her own, but was the power of the divine working through her. When the possession reached a high point—usually the end of a "scene" in her performance—Elisabeth would become fully entranced. Philip's preferred term by far is *raptus*; as Barbara Newman explains, "*raptus*, from *rapere* 'to snatch or seize,' in legal Latin denotes a range of crimes including robbery, seizure, abduction, and especially rape. Its only positive meaning is the mystical sense of 'rapture' or 'ravishing.'"[19] In these moments, when Elisabeth was snatched up and ravished by God, the same awesome power that moved her during her performance held her completely immobile and

[16]While it is true that Henry of Guelders did concern himself with beguines, primarily with administrative affairs, the evidence of Juliana of Mont-Cornillon suggests that Henry was not fond of religious women whose spirituality provided them with any form of authority that might potentially challenge or question his. In fact, Henry does not seem to have dealt well with anyone who may have questioned his authority (see note 10). For an overview of Henry of Guelders's dealings with beguines, see McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards*, 162, 164, 167–68, 171, 174, 176, 180–81, 186 (business also involving William of Ryckel), 272–73 n. 21, 411.

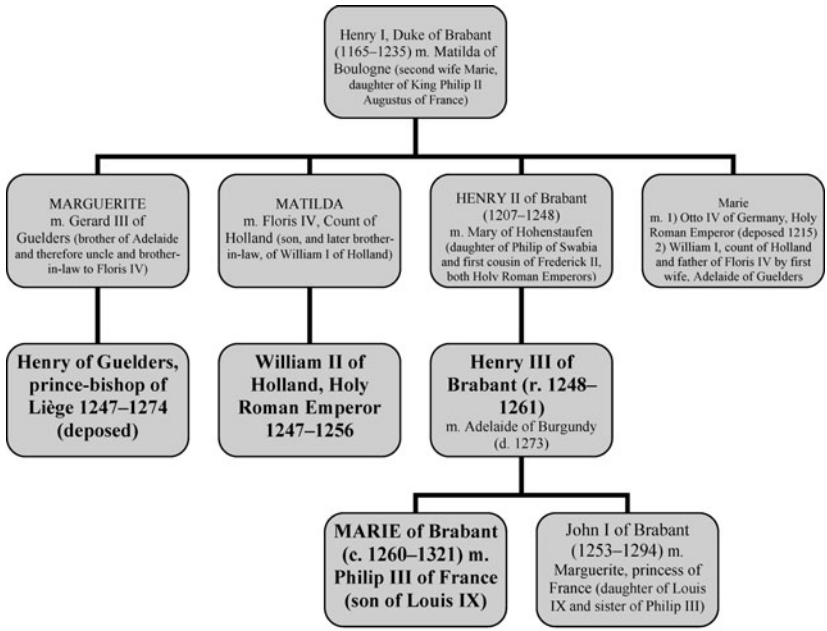
[17]"Abbati scilicet Sancti Trudonis, de Ordine S. Benedicti, ejusdem virginis, vicinae suae et secundum carnem cognatae, dudum fuit a loci Diocesano cura sive custodia commendata" (373). Philip never names the bishop—Henry of Guelders—or the abbot, William of Ryckel. Philip names himself almost immediately and rarely states that he is withholding names for purposes of people's privacy; there is no way of knowing whether the immediate audience for his text would have been familiar with the abbot of Sint-Truiden or the prince-bishop of Liège (see note 3).

[18]Philip 364.

[19]Barbara Newman, "What Did It Mean to Say 'I Saw'?: The Clash between Theory and Practice in Medieval Visionary Culture," *Speculum* 80:1 (January 2005): 1–43; 9.

made her impervious to outside stimuli. When dispossessed after her performance, however, she once more collapsed into extreme frailty. Thus, while divine possession granted her the strength for her spiritual exercises, it did not provide her with true physical mobility.

HOUSE OF BRABANT



WILLIAM of RYCKEL: Chaplain and secretary to William II of Holland; ally of Henry of Guelders, Henry II of Brabant, Henry III of Brabant, and John I of Brabant; Abbot of Sint-Truiden 1249–1272; relative of Elisabeth of Spalbeek.

PHILIP of CLAIRVAUX: Abbot of Clairvaux 1262–1273; visited Elisabeth in 1266/7; wrote the document describing his visit 1268–1272.

FRENCH COURT SCANDAL:

DRAMATIS PERSONAE: the **Chamberlain** (Pierre de la Broce) and his relative **Pierre de Benais** (the Bishop of Bayeux) AGAINST the **queen, Marie of Brabant**

ACCOUNTS written by: **Jean d'Enghien** (the bishop of Liège) and **Simon de Brion**, papal legate to France and the future Pope Martin IV

Fig. 1. For genealogical sources, see "Genealogia Ducum Brabantiae Heredum Franciae," *MGH SS* XXV: 390–392; "Gesta Abbatum Trudonensium: Continuatio Tertia II," *MGH SS* X: 392.

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The *vitae* of the women who seem to have influenced Elisabeth offered numerous examples of spiritual community, which could be created through personal friendships—such as the one between Juliana of Mont-Cornillon and Eve of Saint Martin[20]—or through the circulation of people on pilgrimage to see living saints, sacred places, and relics. Elisabeth, who was unable to travel, needed a method that would allow her to become part of a similar religious network without leaving her house. Her spiritual practice began to affiliate her with the *mulieres religiosae* as the report of her stigmata and Passion performances spread, and on account of this fame she herself eventually became a site of pilgrimage. However, Elisabeth also used her visitors to enable her own active participation in the constant flow of religious patronage created by the circulation of religious people and sacred objects.

Mulieres religiosae such as Marie d'Oignies, Juliana of Mont-Cornillon, Christina Mirabilis of Sint-Truiden, Hadewijch,[21] and Beatrice of Nazareth demonstrated that women could hold positions of religious importance on account of their charismatic gifts even if the paths of preaching and clerical training were closed to them. These women—nuns and laywomen alike—often profoundly affected the beliefs of clerics who began to promote the women's spirituality and to spread the knowledge of their deeds. One of the consequences of such circulation was the network of spiritual friendships[22] between those male and female religious who admired or practiced extra-liturgical devotions. Elisabeth too attempted to forge religious networks that spread far beyond her own diocese of Liège, although as an invalid she spent most of her life in Spalbeek. Elisabeth probably ended her life in the nunnery at Herkenrode, though it is unknown whether she ever became a nun.[23] While not the best remembered of the *mulieres religiosae*, her influence was strong enough that a local cult continued, if fitfully, after her

[20]See Mulder-Bakker, *Lives of the Anchoresses*, 78–147.

[21]For the somewhat unlikely possibility that Hadewijch of Brabant knew Elisabeth, as demonstrated through a dubious portion of Hadewijch's "list of the perfect," see G. Hendrix, "Hadewijch benaderd vanuit de tekst over de 22e volmaakte," *Leuvense Bijdragen* 67:2 (Spring 1978): 129–145.

[22]For more on spiritual friendship, see Coakley, "Friars as Confidants."

[23]Bussels, "Was Elisabeth"; Roisin, *L'hagiographie cistercienne*, 71 n. 5. Herkenrode certainly took an interest in Elisabeth. The nuns mentioned her to Philip of Clairvaux when he arrived on visitation (see note 44 and the sentence it follows in the text), and Herkenrode may have acquired the land on which Elisabeth's chapel stands, probably becoming responsible for its continued preservation. The relationship between Elisabeth and the abbey makes it likely that she joined them when her protectors had died, but whether she simply took refuge there or actually became a nun is complete speculation. She may even have remained at her chapel under their auspices.

death, eventually culminating in the seventeenth century when the Cistercian Order created her feast on October 19.[24]

II. The Textual Politics of Philip of Clairvaux's Hagiographic *Probatio*

The records of Elisabeth's life fall into three distinct categories. The first is a *probatio* (often mistakenly called a *vita*) written by Abbot Philip of Clairvaux. As the work of Dyan Elliott demonstrates, a *probatio* is a test, or—as in this case—the *record* of a test of authenticity, a test usually performed and recorded as part of an *inquisitio* or inquisition.[25] A *vita*, however, is essentially a biography of a holy person, meant to serve as an exemplar and perhaps as evidence in a canonization procedure. While the last portion of Philip's document is a partial *vita*, the first half is essentially an eyewitness description of Elisabeth's performance that includes a record of the tests Philip performed on Elisabeth. In one scene, he saw a feather placed under Elisabeth's nose to prove that she stopped breathing during trance, thus demonstrating her authenticity and the strength of the divine power possessing her.[26] An entirely different aspect of Elisabeth is visible in the second document, a list of relics written by William of Ryckel.[27] This list records the exchange of relics from roughly 1270–1272. While some entries merely name the specific relic, some contain extensive information including the date, the sender, and the recipient, thus demonstrating the broad extent of the network built by William and Elisabeth. The final set of documents consists of a confusing

[24]Elisabeth's local feast is 19 November, but elsewhere her feast is celebrated on 19 October. See Bussels, "Was Elisabeth," 53; and Walter Simons, "Reading a Saint's Body: Rapture and Bodily Movement in the *Vitae* of Thirteenth-Century Beguines," in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1994), 10–23; 10, 20 n. 3. On the evolution of Elisabeth's cult, see Walter Simons and Joanna E. Ziegler, "Phenomenal Religion in the Thirteenth Century and Its Image: Elisabeth of Spalbeek and the Passion Cult," *Studies in Church History* 27 (1990): 117–126.

[25]Dyan Elliott, *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 3–4, 18, 236.

[26]Philip 366.

[27]The list is in MS 366 at the Bibliothèque de l'Université de Liège. For a nearly complete transcription, see Ursmer Berlière, "Guillaume de Ryckel, Abbé de Saint-Trond, et les reliques des Saints de Cologne," *Revue Benedictine* 16 (1899): 270–277. For a discussion of the relics, see Maurice Coens, "Les saints particulièrement honorés a l'abbaye de Saint-Trond," *Analecta Bollandiana* 72 (1954): 397–426; and Philippe George, "A Saint-Trond, un import-export de reliques des Onze Mille Vierges au XIIIe siecle," *Bulletin de la Société Royale Le Vieux-Liège* (1991): 209–228.

group of texts concerning a 1276–1278 intrigue at the French court.[28] These records describe extensive interviews with Elisabeth and the attempts of one court faction to manipulate her prophetic powers and use them against the queen. All three sets of documents stem from different periods in Elisabeth's life, though altogether they span only ten years. Nonetheless, they provide three very different views of her spirituality and, it seems to me, three different forms of practice that Elisabeth apparently followed over the years.

The majority of recent studies on Elisabeth analyze Philip of Clairvaux's description of her embodied spirituality, an entranced solo performance of Christ's Passion made all the more distinct by Elisabeth's possession of stigmata. This performance took place in a chapel that William of Ryckel built especially for Elisabeth. The renovated chapel, complete with frescoes dating from between 1350 and 1500, still stands, and Walter Simons and Joanna Ziegler have written an excellent overview of its history.[29] The essay by Susan Rodgers and Joanna Ziegler, "Elisabeth of Spalbeek's Trance Dance of Faith," is perhaps the most thorough analysis of Elisabeth's performance to date and stems from the dual perspectives of anthropology and art history.[30] Walter Simons's article "Reading a Saint's Body" also provides an excellent discussion of her embodied performance,[31] but it is intriguing to note that no analysis to date has made full use of performance theory. Several essays focus on the Middle English version of Elisabeth's *probatio* in MS Douce 114,[32] but these essays tend to examine solely

[28]J. de Gaulle, "Documents historiques," *Bulletin de la société de l'histoire de France* 1 (1844): 87–100; Guillaume de Nangis, "Gesta Philippi Tertii Francorum Regis," vol. 20 of *Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France*, ed. J. Naudet, P. C. F. Daunou, and Martin Bouquet (Paris, 1840), 502, with facing page anonymous Old French translation, 503. For an analysis of Elisabeth and her connection to the French court scandal, see Remco Sleiderink, "Een Straf van God: Elisabeth Van Spalbeek en de Dood van de Franse Kroonprins," *Madoc* 11 (1997): 42–53. Sleiderink focuses on the homophobic aspect of the scandal; for more on his argument, see the final section of my paper. My thanks to Mr. Sleiderink for bringing his article to my attention.

[29]Simons and Ziegler, "Phenomenal Religion," 120. The frescoes are of the trinity, a pieta, and a number of saints tangentially related to Elisabeth. For more on the frescoes, see Dany Jaspers, *Elisabeth van Spalbeek en de Onze-Lieve-Vrouw van Lourdeskapel* (Hasselt: Erfgoedcel Hasselt, 2006). My thanks to Mr. Jaspers for showing me Herkenrode and Elisabeth's chapel.

[30]Susan Rodgers and Joanna E. Ziegler, "Elisabeth of Spalbeek's Trance Dance of Faith: A Performance Theory Interpretation from Anthropological and Art Historical Perspectives," in *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality*, ed. Mary A. Suydam and Joanna E. Ziegler (New York: St. Martin's, 1999), 299–355. Also see Joanna E. Ziegler, "On the Artistic Nature of Elisabeth of Spalbeek's Ecstasy: The Southern Low Countries Do Matter," in *The Texture of Society: Medieval Women in the Southern Low Countries*, ed. Ellen E. Kittell and Mary A. Suydam (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 181–202.

[31]Simons, "Reading."

[32]Carl Horstmann, ed., "Prosalegenden: die Legenden des Ms. Douce 114," *Anglia* VIII (1885): 102–196. Life of Elisabeth of Spalbeek 107–118, Middle English version.

Philip's description and to ignore issues of translation and altered cultural context.[33] However, Jennifer Brown's work on MS Douce 114 may help alter this trend.[34] Scholarly interest in the performance aspect of Elisabeth's spirituality is understandable, given the striking nature of Elisabeth's Passion reenactment and the presence of stigmata in a woman a mere forty years after the death of Saint Francis.[35] Nonetheless, recent enthusiasm for the analysis of women's embodied spirituality and the performative aspects of devotion has obscured the broader context of Elisabeth's religious practice.

Although half of Philip's text describes Elisabeth's performance, much of it discusses other aspects of her spirituality—such as extreme asceticism and various forms of miraculous knowledge—and Philip spends very little time discussing the stigmata for which Elisabeth has become so famous. She was apparently known for her stigmata during her lifetime, but only one other contemporaneous source mentions them, and its tone is negative. Six years after Philip visited Elisabeth, Gilbert of Tournai complained about her in his *Collectio de Scandalis Ecclesiae*, which he wrote in 1273 for the second council of Lyon. The Franciscan scholar was asking for reform, and he finished his list of concerns with a discussion of the beguines. He closed his discussion with the objection that "among the silly women of this kind is one who is publicly rumored to bear the stigmata of Christ. If this is true, let it not lurk in hiding-places but be known more openly. But if it is not so, let hypocrisy and pretense be put to shame."[36] Gilbert does not mention Elisabeth by name, but given the year and geographical location, she is by far the most likely object of his anxiety and therefore the most probable object of his apparent request for an investigation. As a Franciscan, Gilbert was presumably interested in maintaining the unique status of Saint Francis's stigmata,[37] and his politically oriented stance may have been further

[33]Rebecca Clouse, "The Virgin above the Writing in the First *Vita* of Douce 114," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 11 (1994): 87–102; Ellen M. Ross, *The Grief of God: Images of the Suffering Jesus in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 110–117; Elliott Visconsi, "'She Represents the Person of Our Lord': the Performance of Mysticism in the *Vita* of Elisabeth of Spalbeek and *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *Comitatus* 28 (1997): 76–89; Sandra L. Zimdars-Swartz, "The Stigmata of Elisabeth of Spalbeek: A Case Study in the Construction of a Religious Experience," *Magistra* 10:1 (Summer 2004): 3–35.

[34]Jennifer N. Brown, "Elizabeth of Spalbeek's Body: *Performatio Christi*," *Magistra* 11:2 (Winter 2005): 70–88.

[35]Marie d'Oignies had stigmata-like marks that may have been self-inflicted. See Jacques de Vitry, *The Life of Marie d'Oignies*, trans. Margot H. King (Saskatoon, Canada: Peregrina, 1987), 63, 146.

[36]Gilbert of Tournai, "Collectio de Scandalis Ecclesiae," *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 24 (1931): 33–62. "Inter huiusmodi mulierculas una est et fama surrexit iam quasi publica, quod ipsa est Christi stigmatibus insignita. Quod si verum est, non foveat latebras sed apertius hoc sciatur; si vero non est, hypocrisis et simulatio confundatur" (Gilbert 62). Translation by Barbara Newman.

[37]Saint Francis was not the first to suffer wounds for the sake of Christ, but the concept of stigmata as the sharing of Christ's own wounds—a favor bestowed by Christ himself—

motivated by the knowledge that the reform agenda of the council would extend to the mendicant orders. Without this incentive, it is unlikely he would have singled out Elisabeth from the other beguines for special consideration. His attention demonstrates Elisabeth's continuing fame well after Philip's visit, but even though Elisabeth's performance and stigmata were the most notable—or noticeable—features of her cult, they were not the sole defining feature.

Elisabeth's Life. According to Philip, Elisabeth began her career with "the continued punishment of the divine scourge and the mortification of her own flesh" at the age of five.[38] Within roughly ten years, she probably began performing the Passion and was granted the stigmata, for sometime before Philip arrived,[39] William of Ryckel built her a chapel with an adjoining room that quite literally became the stage for her performances of Christ's Passion.[40] Elisabeth was never enclosed as an anchoress, so it is most likely that the room and chapel were built to house her performances and the growing number of spectators. Her ensuing state of semi-enclosure promoted Elisabeth's status as a holy woman, and people came to see her perform and to ask her advice just as they approached other holy women, such as Marie d'Oignies and Juliana of Mont-Cornillon, for spiritual guidance. Offering prayers, guidance, and mystical knowledge was the primary means by which holy women attracted religious clients and, as with these women, Elisabeth's spirituality revealed itself in her mystical knowledge of forgotten feast days, the spiritual state of others, and the authenticity of relics. Despite her reputation as chiefly a performer and stigmatic, the extant records suggest that the element of her spiritual practice involving miraculous knowledge spanned her whole life, while her Passion performances and stigmata may have comprised only a brief period in her practice. Yet Elisabeth's eventual cessation of her Passion performance was not necessarily due to any alteration in her spirituality. It may simply have been a consequence of the

formalized around Saint Francis, and he remains the only person whose stigmata have been formally confirmed by the Church.

[38]"Illa etiam divini flagelli ab infantiae quinquennalis innocentia usque ad hanc quam nunc attigisse dicitur vicennalem continuata castigatio et sic propriae carnis mortificatio" (Philip 364).

[39]Philip says "not long before we arrived" ("dudum fuit" [Philip 373]). It is highly speculative, but nonetheless worth mentioning, that Pope Urban IV sent two bulls protecting beguines to Liège in 1262 and that this may have been a catalyst for William's actions. In any case, William had already founded the beguinage of Saint Agnes in 1258, and the building of Elisabeth's chapel several years later was both a promotion of her spirituality and a continuation of his spiritual program.

[40]For the history of this chapel, see Simons and Ziegler, "Phenomenal Religion," and Jaspers, *Elisabeth van Spalbeek*. For Philip's description of the chapel, see 373.

incredible physical demands the performance made on her body, as in the "early retirement" of athletes and dancers today.

In contrast to other religious women such as Juliana or Mechthild of Magdeburg, it is unlikely that Elisabeth was ever in a position that made it necessary for her to join a convent. Nonetheless, she may have joined the community at Herkenrode at some point after the French court incident, dying there as late as 1304.[41] Since Elisabeth's major protectors—William of Ryckel, Henry of Guelders, and Philip of Clairvaux—were all dead or deposed by 1273,[42] and no records of her activities exist after 1277, it would seem that she retired from public life shortly after her involvement with the French court and may have ceased her public performances several years earlier.[43] This may have been a prudent response to the absence of her immediate protectors, but Elisabeth's influence, such as it was, seems not to have suffered from their disappearance since she was involved with the French court several years later. It is likely that Elisabeth retired to Herkenrode due both to the community's support—they had drawn Philip's attention to her over ten years before[44]—and to its position as a Cistercian

[41]The date of Elisabeth's death is speculative. See Bussels, "Was Elisabeth," 53; Roisin, *L'hagiographie cistercienne*, 71 n. 5. See note 1 for more on the uncertainty of Elisabeth's dates; see note 23 and the sentence it follows in the text for further speculation on whether or not she entered Herkenrode.

[42]William of Ryckel died in 1272, Henry of Guelders was deposed in 1273 about the time of the second council of Lyon, and Philip of Clairvaux's abbacy ended in 1272/3 owing to his death. The *Gallia Christiana* states that Philip was abbot from 1262–1272, dying at the beginning of 1273 while abroad from Clairvaux. However, he was apparently buried at Clairvaux, and it seems that he died abroad during visitations and not because he left Clairvaux. *Gallia Christiana*, vol. IV (Paris: 1728; reprint, Gregg International, 1970), 807–808. Most scholars follow this dating of Philip's abbacy, but Roisin dates his abbacy as 1261 to 1269 or 1270 (70). She cites a list of abbots of Clairvaux originating at the abbey, but the list is highly ambiguous and seldom gives dates, instead providing the number of years a particular abbacy lasted. The edited list, cited by Roisin, is in Marie-Henri d'Arbois de Jubainville, *Etudes sur l'état intérieur des Abbayes cisterciennes et principalement de Clairvaux, au XIIe et au XIIIe siècle* (New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1976), 353–355. However, Jubainville's own work, to which the list is an appendix, gives the date of Philip's abbacy as 1262–1273, citing *Gallia Christiana*, 807. Jubainville gives no explanation as to the discrepancy between the common dating of Philip's tenure and the list in the appendix. Given the evidence, I use the 1272/3 date as the most likely end of Philip's term as abbot.

[43]Perhaps she stopped performing about the time Gilbert was writing, sometime between 1273 and 1277, although her decision to cease her performances was apparently unconnected to his complaint. There is no reason for it to have been connected to the French court incident either, since Elisabeth emerged from the affair with her reputation solid enough for rumors to spread that Queen Marie thanked Elisabeth for her help by founding a convent in her honor. In fact, the queen only founded an infirmary at the convent; see the discussion below for more. Nonetheless, the silence of the historical record after 1277 is open to interpretation. The reason for thinking that Elisabeth may have ceased performing is that the French court documents refer to her only as a prophetess.

[44]Philip states that "in provincia Leodiensi prope quoddam famosum et solemne monasterium virginum, filiarum beati Bernardi primi Claraevallensis abbatis, quod vocatur Erkenrode, per sex

house with close ties to the Cistercian network Elisabeth had tried to develop over her life, thus allowing her to retire from the world while retaining her affiliations. This perspective is encouraged by the fact that Herkenrode was likely responsible for promoting Elisabeth's cult after her death.

Elisabeth's *Probatio*. Dyan Elliott and Nancy Caciola make the two most complete attempts to analyze the religious politics that surrounded Elisabeth.[45] While Elliott is primarily concerned with Philip's proof of Elisabeth's veracity as a holy woman, Caciola offers the fullest analysis to date of Elisabeth's life by discussing Philip's text, the complaint of Gilbert of Tournai, and the documents concerning the French court scandal. She comments:

> If our evidence about Elisabeth were limited only to the laudatory work produced by Philip of Clairvaux, in fact we would know very little about her—and what observers thought of her. Philip's narration was intended to propagate her reputation as a living saint inspired by Cistercian spirituality. . . . The other texts, however, tell different stories, for they arise from within different power structures and subordinate Elisabeth to their individual ideological viewpoints. . . . Philip's presentation of Elisabeth was but a single, early testimony concerning a woman whose reputation persisted, for good *and* ill, much longer. . . . Elisabeth's self-representations ultimately were subordinate to the representations of her crafted by others, either through rumor mongering or through the production of a written text.[46]

Given the semi-permanent nature of the written text as opposed to performance, it is true that Elisabeth's self-representations have not lasted as long as "the representations of her crafted by others." Nonetheless, Caciola's account is less than fair. My analysis of the extant texts demonstrates that Elisabeth considered herself a holy woman who was integral to her political milieu and that behind the portrayals of others was a woman who believed herself capable of wide religious and political influence within the strictures surrounding laywomen of her time. She was never fully "subordinate" to the "ideological viewpoints" of others, for she possessed a shrewd ability to negotiate systems of circulation and

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aut septem leucarum distantiam a Leodiensi civitate remotum, est quaedam puella nomine Elizabeth" (Philip 363). He goes on to say that he heard of her when "circa partes illas officium visitationis exercens" (Philip 363). His obvious implication is that he first heard of Elisabeth when visiting Herkenrode. For more, see notes 48 and 51.

[45]Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003), 113–124; Dyan Elliott, *Proving Woman*, 186–189. See also Remco Sleiderink, "Een Straf van God."

[46]Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, 123–124.

exchange, forging lasting connections with a wide variety of people. Moreover, we should not dismiss Philip's text so quickly as mere "early testimony." Although his text is the earliest of the extant documents, taken as a group they span only ten years (1267–1277), ending when Elisabeth was about thirty. The actual time span of the texts may be shorter, since this begins the count with Philip's visit although he may have written the text any time before 1272, the final year of his abbacy and a time when he was apparently abroad from the abbey and in failing health.[47] In addition, Philip's text is exceedingly complex and cannot be reduced to a "narration . . . intended to propagate her reputation as a living saint inspired by Cistercian spirituality." As a *probatio*, the primary goal of Philip's text is, in fact, to *prove* Elisabeth's sanctity by testing her.

Dyan Elliott provides an excellent analysis that strips away the political layers of the *probatio*. Philip states in his report that he went to see Elisabeth solely on account of hearsay, claiming, "When I had heard those wondrous works of the Lord, I, brother Philip of Clairvaux (performing the office of visitation around those parts), did not believe the stories until I myself had gone to see the girl with my own eyes, at which point I proved [*probavi*] that I had not been told the half of it."[48] Philip's use of the verb *probavi* is striking. As Elliott demonstrates in *Proving Woman*, the Latin verb *probare*—to prove or to test—was rarely used carelessly because it was, in many respects, a legal term.[49] The primary procedure involving the *probatio* was the *inquisitio* or inquisition, originally a judicial procedure from Roman law.[50] Richard Kieckhefer has demonstrated that even during the Middle Ages the term "*inquisitio* referred to a specific trial following inquisitorial procedure,"[51] and the two major institutional forms of

[47]*Gallia Christiana*, vol. IV, 807–808.

[48]"Quae quidem mirabilia Domini opera cum audissem, ego frater Philippus de Claravalle, circa partes illas officium visitationis exercens, non credebam narrantibus, donec ipse veni et vidi oculis meis, et probavi quod dimidia pars mihi non fuerat nuntiata" (Philip 363). See Elliott's translation and use of this quote in Elliott, *Proving Woman*, 186.

[49]Elliott, *Proving Woman*, 3, 18.

[50]Ibid., 18.

[51]Richard Kieckhefer, "The Office of Inquisition and Medieval Heresy: The Transition from Personal to Institutional Jurisdiction," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 46:1 (January 1995): 36–61; 47. Kieckhefer has argued convincingly, in this article and elsewhere, that "a centralised, curial inquisitorial authority did not come into existence until 1542" although "the idea was at least put forward as early as the thirteenth century," citing Pope Urban IV in 1262 (57). Nonetheless, Kieckhefer maintains that in practice, inquisitors remained more or less on their own throughout the medieval period, to act or not as they saw fit, often without papal and at times without episcopal oversight. Given this, I by no means intend to imply that Philip was an appointed inquisitor on any level but simply that he took some aspect of this function upon himself in his visit to Elisabeth. In fact, Philip makes clear in the above quote (notes 44 and 48) that he did not hear of Elisabeth until *after* he reached the nearby abbey of Herkenrode while "performing the office of visitation." He did not travel to the area intending

ecclesiastical *inquisitio* were canonization and the inquiry into heresy. Philip's statement that he "proved" that Elisabeth was a wondrous work of the Lord implies that he proceeded, if somewhat unofficially, on the basis of a similar inquiry to produce proof of Elisabeth's spiritual status, deciding among the possibilities of heretic, fraud, and holy woman only after he had tested Elisabeth.

Simone Roisin states that the text is "a report of the inquiry [enquête] made by Abbot Philip of Clairvaux on the stigmatic of Spalbeek, a report written by the inquisitor [enquêteur] himself."[52] This is true to a point. The text is certainly in large part an inquisitorial account, but Philip does not concentrate on her stigmata. Instead, he attempts to prove Elisabeth's holiness by testing the veracity of her entranced performance. Elliott points out that *probare* "is also a verb used for torture—a possibility that is at the center of the martyr's *passio* but that invariably hovers at the edge of the heretical trial."[53] Just as Christ's love or a martyr's faith was "proven" through torture, to "prove" a holy woman's veracity and demonstrate that she was not a heretic or fraud often involved actions that would be considered torture today. In the *probatio* of Douceline of Provence, boiling lead was poured over her bare feet. Her trance was proved legitimate by the fact that at the time she felt nothing, though she was in terrible pain after her trance ended.[54]

Philip's tests of Elisabeth's trances were not nearly so severe, but, in her case as well, the proof of sanctity seemed to lie in the legitimacy of her trances. In the case of the feather test, Philip recalled:

> I saw the lightest feather placed between her mouth and her nose so that if the slightest breath had exhaled from her lips or nose it would immediately have blown off the feather, which despite this remained completely motionless for the whole of her ecstasy unless, by chance, someone removed it before the end.[55]

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to perform an inquiry, and the alteration between the "officium visitationis," his duty as abbot of Clairvaux, and "probavi," a term more in keeping with the "officium inquisitionis"—which Kieckhefer comments "referred to the function or jurisdiction entrusted to inquisitors" (47)—is notable.

[52]"Enfin, la *Vita Elisabeth* est la rapport de l'enquête faite par l'abbé Philippe de Clairvaux sur la stigmatisée de Spalbeek, rapport consigné par l'enquêteur lui-même" (Roisin, *L'hagiographie cistercienne*, 72).

[53]Elliott, *Proving Woman*, 3.

[54]Philippine Porcellet, *The Life of Saint Douceline, a Beguine of Provence*, ed. and trans. Kathleen E. Garay and Madeleine Jeay (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 51–52.

[55]"In hoc etiam raptu et in aliis inter os et nares vel levissimus flatus exiret, statim plumam ejiceret: quae tamen ita stabat immota per totum illius extasis intervallum, nisi forte eam aliquis antea removeret" (Philip 366).

The fact that Elisabeth has apparently stopped breathing proves that her trance is authentic. The inquisitional process included the search for such proof, and Philip's text is not only the record of that search; it forms the foundation of his proof. As Elliott notes, "heretical trials or failed canonizations . . . demonstrate the *inquisitio*'s potential for reversal and other unintended consequences."[56] The process of inquiry could turn a saint into a heretic; the fine line between them often depended upon the needs of the inquisitors. Luckily for Elisabeth, the mutually productive relationship between Elisabeth and Philip arose at a time when the model of the *mulieres religiosae* was well-established and thriving. Philip essentially placed Elisabeth on trial, proving her veracity to anyone who—like Gilbert of Tournai shortly thereafter—might be unwilling to believe in the holy woman's divine inspiration. It was as politically advantageous for the Cistercian Philip to claim Elisabeth's divine authority for his order as it was for the Franciscan Gilbert to revile it on behalf of his own order. Philip's text is a subtle blend of *probatio* and *vita*, providing enough of each to use Elisabeth's actions as a valuable exemplar for Cistercian spirituality while ostensibly demonstrating his own impartiality.

Since Elliott's primary interest is in the development of the *inquisitio*, she, like Roisin, understands Philip's text to be an inquiry into Elisabeth's stigmata. Yet Philip is by no means solely an inquisitor. Although Elliott and Caciola are correct in their understanding that Philip is using Elisabeth as an exemplar, Philip's text is nonetheless evidence of a *symbiotic* relationship between himself and Elisabeth. It is neither simply the record of his inquiry nor a one-sided formulation of Elisabeth's sanctity. As Anneke Mulder-Bakker has observed, hagiography "is not a genre, that of the *vita*, but a discourse."[57] Philip's hagiographic *probatio* is a mixed-genre text combining features of an *inquisitio*, a *vita*, and an eyewitness description of a performance, thus creating a unique Latin document that stretches the discursive boundaries of hagiography. The multi-generic nature of Philip's *probatio* provides ample room for analysis, but very little has been written thus far on the non-performance section of his text. Though it may appear to be little more than a collection of well-worn tales, it proves to be much more when contextualized by the other remaining documents concerning Elisabeth. While Philip's text is certainly laudatory, as Caciola states, it also provides a great deal of information not only about Elisabeth but about those who came to observe her.

[56]Elliott, *Proving Woman*, 5.

[57]Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, "The Invention of Saintliness: Texts and Contexts" and "Saints without a Past: Sacred Places and Intercessory Power in Saints' Lives from the Low Countries," in *The Invention of Saintliness*, ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker (London: Routledge, 2002), 3–23, 38–57; 13.

III. The Politics of Mysticism

In 1265, just prior to visiting Elisabeth, Philip had gained the upper hand in a power struggle with Abbot James of Cîteaux, the Cistercian motherhouse (1262–1266). Philip won with the aid of Popes Urban IV and Clement IV, and a 1265 bull from Pope Clement IV ended the contest in a manner that in practice allowed Clairvaux to retain and strengthen its position as one of the most powerful houses in the Order. It is possible that Elisabeth's political connections through William of Ryckel ensured Philip's support even as her unique religiosity engaged his interest, for Philip's own political network was extensive, and he fiercely defended his position. During the power struggle with Abbot James, Philip had been elected bishop of Saint-Malo in an attempt to force him to leave Clairvaux, but he declined the election and traveled to Rome despite a threat of excommunication from James. Pope Urban IV granted Philip's request[58] to remain at Clairvaux and allowed him to stay away from the 1264 General Chapter owing to the possibility of "his imprisonment at Cîteaux."[59] The visit of Philip and his colleagues not only must have expanded Elisabeth's network of patrons, but it also demonstrated the degree to which she herself had already become an object of pilgrimage. During his visit of several months,[60] Philip himself witnessed a number of people, including a nobleman, come to ask her advice.

In fact, Philip frequently depicts Elisabeth as actively engaged in the politics of patronage in episodes which he ostensibly provides as proof that Elisabeth is, as Barbara Newman says of Ida of Nivelles, "gifted with a kind of spiritual telepathy."[61] In one instance,

> Our servants, the foot soldiers who guard our horses, were once standing nearby in order to ask for her prayers. . . . When she had looked at those

[58]Urban IV's ties to Philip are not extensive, but they are nonetheless potentially suggestive. Shortly after becoming pope in 1262, Urban IV sent two bulls to Liège in order to protect unaffiliated women such as beguines, recluses, and anchoresses (McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards*, 65). Prior to becoming Pope Urban IV, Jacques Pantaléon had been the archdeacon of Liège, and as Pope Urban IV he seems to have retained an attachment to the religious women of the area. Perhaps the most famous example of this connection is his support of Juliana of Mont-Cornillon and his institution, on her behalf, of the feast of Corpus Christi. It is impossible to know if the pope had heard of Elisabeth, in part because Jacques Pantaléon was no longer archdeacon by the time of the elections of William of Ryckel and Henry of Guelders, and any connection between the men is purely speculative.

[59]Louis Julius Lekai, *The Cistercians: Ideals and Reality* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1977), 70–71.

[60]Philip certainly stayed for a few months, but the precise length of his stay is impossible to determine from his text.

[61]Barbara Newman, "Preface: Goswin of Villers and the Visionary Network," in Goswin of Villers, *Send Me God: The Lives of Ida the Compassionate of Nivelles, Nun of La Ramée, Arnulf, Lay Brother of Villers, and Abundus, Monk of Villers*, ed. and trans. M. Cawley (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), xxix–xlvii; xlvi.

> men more carefully, she had one of them in particular—young and honest, both good-looking and of good character—called to her, and she told him through an interpreter that he should become a lay brother at Clairvaux as soon as possible, or at another house of our Order. . . . The young man freely promised her that he would follow her counsel. Indeed he did, because not much later, at the entreaties of the girl, we sent the boy to our house and accepted him as one of our lay brothers.[62]

According to Philip the boy became an excellent brother, and Elisabeth claimed that she singled him out because "she had perceived him to be among those who would be saved, and, if he had died at that time, the entrance to the heavenly country would quickly have been opened to him. Because of this, she had desired that the boy's state might be strengthened by the remedy of religious life and the company of monks."[63] While this may certainly be true, the scene also seems to portray Elisabeth as a young woman who might have some influence at Clairvaux.

While the patronage of a lay brother is not, in itself, remarkable, the episode emphasizes Elisabeth's access to the "spiritual telepathy" that distinguished many of the holy women who preceded her, particularly those whose lives figure in Martinus Cawley's aptly titled collection *Send Me God*. In addition, the fact that Philip records the event in his carefully structured text gives it an importance it might not otherwise have. Philip distinguishes Elisabeth's portrayal as a *mulier religiosa* through the use of this particular topos by demonstrating her employment of "spiritual telepathy" not only to craft herself as a patron of the young man, with obvious echoes of Marie d'Oignies and Jacques de Vitry,[64] but also to involve herself in the political workings of Clairvaux and thus the Cistercian Order. Though William's connections contributed to the spread of Elisabeth's fame, she herself seems to have had the ability both to strengthen these ties and to expand them. On the surface, this event may place Elisabeth in a poor light compared with her potential model, Marie d'Oignies, since the patronage of a lay brother is of little significance alongside Marie's relationship with Jacques de Vitry.

[62]"Servientes nostri, videlicet pedites qui custodiunt equos nostros, semel assistebant, orationum suarum suffragia petituri. . . . Cum vero diligentius intueretur eosdem, unum ex eis, juniorem, simplicem et satis elegantam et bonae indolis adolescentem, fecit ad se specialiter accersiri, et ipsi per interpretem, dici fecit ut quam citius posset conversus fieret Claraevallis, vel alterius domus Ordinis nostri, in qua suae conversationis locum invenire valeret. Et hoc ipsi modis omnibus consulebat. Cujus consilio idem adolescens libenter acquiescere se promisit. Quod et factum est: quia non multo post, ad preces ipsius puellae, eumdem puerum misimus ad domum nostram et eum fecimus conversorum nostrorum collegio sociari" (Philip 375).

[63]"Respondit quoniam ipsum in statu salvandorum esse cognoverat, et, si tunc discederet, cito sibi pateret patriae coelestis ingressus. Et propter hoc desiderabat ejusdem pueri statum religionis remedio et religiosorum consortio roborari" (Philip 375).

[64]Jacques de Vitry, *Marie d'Oignies*, 113, 121–122; see also 92, 111.

However, the fact that Abbot Philip is the author of this episode raises the possibility of interpreting the scene as one in which Elisabeth not only proves her spiritual capabilities but also gains Philip's tacit approval to engage, at some level, with the business of his house. At the very least, Elisabeth's actions are those of a young woman aware of both the political possibilities of building networks and the means through which a woman such as herself might begin to build them.

While the above episode seems to demonstrate Elisabeth's interest in the networks of the religious orders, Philip confirms the extent of Elisabeth's reputation among the laity in his description of a different encounter:

> On another day a certain noble and powerful Dutch man, wholly unknown to the girl and all the members of her household, entered the virgin's house with his attendants. At his entrance, the virgin was disturbed and said to that knight and his crowd of attendants: "*Lords, before God, if anyone among you has been excommunicated, let him depart and not speak with us, lest he perchance cause us to share in his peril.*" However, while she was saying these things, she was directing her eyes at the nobleman himself. After he heard these things, the noble departed in shame without making a reply or saying anything whatever. They learned through his attendants that the nobleman stood at that very moment in a state of excommunication. . . . The abbot faithfully related to us that he himself had not previously known the nobleman.[65]

While Philip again concentrates on Elisabeth's spiritual telepathy—that is, her miraculous knowledge of the nobleman's excommunication—equally interesting is the very fact of his arrival. It seems unlikely that his name would have been unknown to Elisabeth and her family, especially William, even if the nobleman himself was unknown by sight. Yet if true, he must have traveled some distance to visit Elisabeth. His identity today remains a mystery, but his very presence indicates the possible scope of Elisabeth's reputation as a holy woman even as her denunciation of the nobleman proved that her reputation was deserved.

These episodes demonstrate that Elisabeth was accustomed to receiving laypeople as visitors, but her interaction with the group of visitors Philip brought with him, or eventually summoned from elsewhere, shows her

[65]"Altera autem die quidam nobilis et potens vir theutonicus, eidem puellae et omnibus de domo prorsus ignotus, cum sua familia virginis domum intravit. Ad cujus ingressum virgo turbata eidem militi et assistenti sibi turbae sic ait: 'Domini, pro Deo, si est aliquis inter vos excommunicatus, recedat et non loquatur nobiscum ne forte sui periculi nos participes efficiat.' Dum autem haec diceret, ad eum nobilem oculos dirigebat. Quibus auditis, idem nobilis, confuses et absque responsionis aut cujuscumque sermonis prolatione, recessit. De cujus excommunicatione per familliam ejusdem nobilis constitit in instanti. . . . Hoc autem fideliter nobis retulit idem abbas, quod nec ipse noverat nobilem praenominatum": Philip, 376–377.

ability to engage in religious dialogue with monks as well. Philip's group includes not only the servants discussed above, but also "my colleagues and I, all abbots and monks."[66] These abbots and monks, unfortunately, remain anonymous, and it is impossible to know how many people were in Philip's group, how many abbeys they represented, and whether anyone present besides William was from Sint-Truiden. There are two other tantalizing references to Philip's group. Near the end of his work, Philip mentions "our interpreter, a Dutch monk of Clairvaux, who was known to her."[67] Elisabeth apparently knew the monk even before he visited with Philip, and if this is so, we have evidence of one more pre-existent connection between Philip and Elisabeth. Moreover, this comment also clarifies the form of communication between Elisabeth and Philip.

The presence of the interpreter, together with a reference to Abbot William as "our instructor and our faithful and certain interpreter of her girlish speeches,"[68] tells us that Elisabeth spoke only Dutch while Philip and his colleagues from Clairvaux spoke French. Consequently, any dialogue between Elisabeth and Philip or the other abbots was indirect, and it is easily possible that the "interpreters" did more than simply translate Elisabeth's words. Philip rarely quotes Elisabeth except when she is explaining her actions by detailing what her divine inspiration has made known to her, and the inability to communicate directly may account for Philip's emphasis on Elisabeth's actions, which he could see and prove. Despite the relationships Elisabeth was obviously forming with Philip and his fellow visitors, there is very little description of any actual *dialogue* between them and Elisabeth.

Philip's second specific reference to his colleagues occurs in another scene of interaction, during one of Elisabeth's meals in which "a companion of ours (our fellow abbot from Vauclair) touched a spoonful of milk to her mouth."[69] Philip dwells on the fact that Elisabeth barely touched the milk—finishing only the one spoonful in three painful sips—and hints that this failure to require nourishment helps to prove her legitimacy. However, the fact that he names the abbot of Vauclair as part of the company of "abbots and monks" visiting Elisabeth demonstrates that there were abbots present other than Philip and William, and that the abbot of Vauclair was named solely because he participated in this particular portion of Elisabeth's *probatio*. Philip's group seems to have included a large number of highly placed Cistercians—a tribute either to his connections or to the breadth of the inquiry into Elisabeth. Either way, Philip's companions supply evidence of Elisabeth's

[66]"Ego et socii mei, abbates et monachi": Philip, 371.
[67]"Ab interprete nostro, Claraevallensi monacho theutonico sibi noto": Philip, 377.
[68]"Noster extitit paedagogus, et puellarium sermonum fidelis et certus interpres": Philip, 373.
[69]"Quidam socius et coabbas noster de Valle Clara coclear lacte plenum applicuit ori ejus": Philip, 378.

ability to draw people to her even as each individual provided Elisabeth with an array of potential external connections. Elisabeth's communication with the abbot of Vauclair was limited, in this case at least, to their actions, but William's list of relics confirms continued contact between the abbot and Elisabeth.

Visitors were not Elisabeth's only connection to other spiritual companions, however, for Philip discovered that she had a spiritual companion whom she herself could visit. As we have seen, Elisabeth was *physically* unable to visit other *mulieres religiosae*, but Philip's text furnishes evidence for one of the most fascinating relationships between two holy women: that of Elisabeth of Spalbeek and Marie of Lille. According to Philip, their friendship was based on their visionary knowledge of each other. Although she and Marie of Lille had never met in person, Elisabeth told Philip that "they saw one another often since their trances frequently occurred at the same time."[70] This vision is a *mutual* vision that enables a virtual pilgrimage; Elisabeth and Marie see each other in real time when their trances coincide. As Philip recalls, Elisabeth told him, through William of Ryckel, that

> "I suffer little compared to a virgin named Marie, who lives in a town in Flanders called Lille. Truly, she is scourged far more sharply and violently than I." And then she began to describe the sufferings of this Marie as if she had seen her often in torment—although she had never seen her, nor had she heard anything whatever about Marie from any mortal, it is believed. Even the abbot did not know anything about her. Nor had any rumor reached those parts, because the homes of these virgins are very far apart. Concerning this Marie, *our girl added that they saw one another often since their trances frequently occurred at the same time*, and that she knew Marie well. . . . And our girl revealed much about Marie's suffering and wisdom which I knew to be true. For I have frequently visited her, when passing through Lille on account of my visitations. The Lord King of France[71] also visited her several times and had a lovely chapel built for her.[72]

[70]Philip, 376, see below.

[71]Presumably Saint Louis (Louis IX), who ruled 1226–1270.

[72]My emphasis. "Quadam vero die, petente eodem abbate ab ipsa quomodo seu qua virtute tot et tam gravissimas poenas poterat sustinere, respondit: 'Parum patior respecta cujusdam virginis cujus nomen Maria, quae manet in quadam villa Flandriae quae dicitur Insula. Ipsa enim longe acrius et vehementius flagellatur quam ego.' Et tunc incepit dictae Mariae describere passiones, ac si ipsam vidisset pluries in angustia tormentorum: quam tamen nunquam viderat, nec de ipsa quidquam audierat ab aliquo mortali, ut creditur. Nec etiam abbas aliquid de dicta Maria sciebat, nec ad illas partes super hoc aliquis rumor ascenderat, quia loca dictarum virginum ab invicem multum distant. Adjecit etiam de illa Maria quod frequenter concurrentibus earum raptibus mutuo se videbant, et quod optime cognoscebat eamdem, dicens quod illa erat sapientissima puella et quod ipsa habebat spiritum sapientiae et consilii. Et multum de ipsius patientia et sapientia revelavit: quae cognovimus esse vera. Nam et ipsam frequenter visitavimus, per eam villam

Many women had visions of others—for instance, Marie d'Oignies had a vision of her hagiographer, Jacques de Vitry, as he was being ordained in Paris[73]—and *Send Me God* takes its title from the ability of some holy figures to "gift" others spiritually—that is, to provide other holy people of their choosing with heightened spiritual episodes such as trance and divine possession. In one case, a priest who had been "sent God" by Ida of Nivelles went into trance, in which state he saw and was blessed by Ida. Later inquiry confirmed that Ida was in trance at the time, but Ida's view of the incident is unknown.[74] Moreover, she and the priest in question—like Marie d'Oignies and Jacques de Vitry—already knew each other in the physical world. Hadewijch of Brabant's "List of the Perfect" is a record of her visions of many holy people whom she had seen or known in her life, but she did not interact with any of these people in her visions.[75]

Elisabeth's vision was distinct from these, for it involved a simultaneous meeting and exchange between two spiritual equals who had never met in the physical realm. Neither woman "gifted" the other, nor, apparently, were they aware of each other by reputation before beginning their spiritual encounters. They met in trance and continued to visit in this manner as two holy women who had no need for any external interference or physical messenger. This is all the more interesting given the potential language barrier between them, since Marie probably spoke French. Their communication was thus in all ways miraculous, and even though Elisabeth could not physically leave her room without aid except during her trance-performance, the mutual vision solidified her reputation as a mystic while extending and reinforcing her network. Philip states that he himself knew Marie of Lille well and that one of her patrons was King Louis IX of France, making her an excellent connection for Elisabeth. Yet the ultimate importance of the vision lies in the fact that it allowed Elisabeth to overcome her disability virtually and to form a virtual, mystic relationship akin to that of Juliana of Mont-Cornillon and Eve of Saint Martin. Elisabeth adapted the visionary tradition to create a new method of exchange that expanded and strengthened her religious and political networks.

Despite Philip's insistence that neither Elisabeth nor William knew anything directly about Marie, the episode may serve to suggest the extent of the religious network to which Elisabeth belonged. The parallels between the

Insulam causa visitationum nostrarum transitum faciendo. Dominus autem rex Franciae ipsam aliquotiens visitavit, et ipsi valde honestam fabricari fecit capellam" (Philip 376).

[73]Jacques de Vitry, *Marie d'Oignies*, 129.

[74]Goswin of Villers, *Send Me God*, 75.

[75]Hadewijch, "Women of the Middle Ages: The List of the Perfect," trans. Helen Rolfson, OSF., *Vox Benedictina* 5:4 (Winter 1988): 277–287.

two women are inescapable, particularly given the fact that Abbot William, like the king of France, had a chapel built especially for his holy woman. Although Elisabeth and Marie had never met, other people—like Abbot Philip and his visitation party—had obviously moved between them. The relic documents attest this, since a Marie of Lille in Flanders appears on the list of those to whom Elisabeth and William sent relics.[76]

The Relics of Sint-Truiden. From 1270–1272, William collected an extensive array of relics,[77] and his inventory records the numerous relics sent to him and Elisabeth. He also records the relics they sent to others, such as Marie of Lille and numerous Cistercian monks and nuns. Some of these, like the abbot of Vauclair, may have visited Elisabeth in the company of Philip of Clairvaux. It is possible, for example, that the unnamed interpreter from Clairvaux and the anonymous lay brother both appear on the list of recipients at Clairvaux. In addition, although there is no hint as to whether Vauclair had a link to Elisabeth before Philip's visit (as Clairvaux may have had through the interpreter), this connection certainly remained important, for quite a few of the relics were sent to the abbot and monks of Vauclair. Besides the many recipients, the main supplier listed is "Sister Hedwig of Susato, a nun at Saint Maccabees in Cologne," who sent the relics through a woman named Ermentrude,[78] although others—including a prior of Val Dieu—also sent Elisabeth relics.[79] This circulation of relics inevitably strengthened and expanded Elisabeth's network,[80] but, like her visions of Marie of Lille, it also offered Elisabeth the possibility of forming close spiritual bonds with those whom she could not visit.

In *The Invention of Saintliness*, Anneke Mulder-Bakker describes "the conviction that saints and the holy forge a link between God and humanity. This often takes place through the medium of persons, but in many cases also through objects. . . .We could call this the type of the 'power stations,' places where the divine could be tapped."[81] Relics, holy sites, and living saints served very similar purposes, and just as networks grew between

[76]Coens, "Les saints," 409; Berlière, "Guillaume de Ryckel," 275.

[77]In particular, William collected the relics of Saint Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins.

[78]"Soror Hawidis de Susato, sanctimonialis apud Sanctos Machabeos in Colonia" (Coens 409 and Berlière 272, my translation). For Ermentrude, who is named but not described, see George, "A Saint-Trond," 221–223 and Coens "Les saints," 410. Cologne is the city where the relics of Saint Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins were uncovered.

[79]George, "A Saint-Trond," 222 and Berlière, "Guillaume de Ryckel," 277.

[80]The recipients included Cistercians from Val Dieu, Vauclair, Signy, Epinlieu, Valroy, Cherlieu, Igny, and even the Jewish convert Catherine, the abbess of Parc-les-Dames. Relics were also sent to the abbess of Prémy, to Alem-sur-Meuse, to Aalburg sur la Meuse, to Borloo, and to Ter Beek (George, "A Saint-Trond," 222–223). Also see Berlière, "Guillaume de Ryckel." It is interesting to note that no relics were sent to Philip of Clairvaux by name.

[81]Mulder-Bakker, "The Invention of Saintliness," 9.

living saints, they also formed between holy people and specific relics or holy sites. Elisabeth's chapel became a holy site for Philip and those whom he describes, and it remained so after her death, serving as the site upon which her spiritual power could be "tapped." In addition to being a pilgrimage site, Elisabeth employed the traditional exercises of *mulieres religiosae* in order to partake in the circulation of people and objects that created religious networks. She was not a passive object of pilgrimage and its resulting circulation. Instead, she actively participated in the gift exchange that produced and maintained religious and political associations.

A relic guaranteed to be authentic was a gift of great value, offering a portable link through which "the divine could be tapped." While the relationship between women religious and their religious clients took many forms, such as Elisabeth's patronage of the lay brother or her agreement to pray for a member of Philip's retinue,[82] the connection created by relics was not an isolated event. The value of an authentic relic remained constant since its power could be invoked at any time, and the action of presenting or receiving such a gift created a relationship that was presumably intended to last. Such a gift from a holy woman was worth a good deal of support—economic or otherwise—from the recipient. However, the guarantee of a relic's authenticity was no small matter, for it required supernatural knowledge that was beyond ordinary clerics. I believe that Maurice Coens is correct in thinking that Elisabeth identified and authenticated the relics of Sint-Truiden. Coens rightly sees echoes of the relationship between Elisabeth of Schönau and her brother Ekbert,[83] for in the mid-twelfth century, Elisabeth of Schönau had authenticated and identified a number of Ursuline relics through a series of visions that her brother recorded.[84] Elisabeth of Spalbeek likely provided a similar service for the Ursuline relics of Abbot William of Ryckel, who was not only her relative but who also considered her his "spiritual daughter."[85] While relic identification was not uncommon

[82]Philip, 375.

[83]Coens, "Les saints," 411, especially note 3. See also George, "A Saint-Trond," 221.

[84]Elisabeth of Schönau, *The Complete Works*, trans. A. L. Clark (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 213–233.

[85]Coens, "Les saints," 409. Saint Ursula and her eleven thousand virgins, together with several men who were supposedly among their retinue, make up a large portion of the relics sent to William from Cologne. This is not surprising, since the bones of—reportedly—Ursula and her virgins were discovered at Cologne in the twelfth century. William's connections with Cologne had begun during his days serving William II of Holland, since Conrad, the archbishop of Cologne, supported William as Holy Roman Emperor and helped crown William at Aix-la-Chapelle in 1248 with the blessing of Pope Innocent IV. In addition, the cartulary of Sint-Truiden contains five documents that Conrad wrote generally demonstrating strong support for the new abbot and his monastery (Piot 243–248). William of Ryckel had other connections in Cologne as well, for Coens and George speculate that, upon a visit to Cologne, William brought back some relics which he gave "around 1265" to the beguinage of Saint Agnes that he had founded in 1258

among holy women, Elisabeth not only authenticated and identified the relics but became a full participant in their exchange.[86] Her guarantee of the relics' authenticity enabled their circulation among her associates, as well as among William's, and several of the recipients seem to have been acquainted primarily with her.

Coens believes that Elisabeth was able to send the relics she received to friends of her own choosing, and the evidence of the document confirms this. As William states, "I sent the heads of [Saint] Andrew and [Saint] Elisabeth to Peter, abbot of Igny, and in addition Elisabeth, our daughter, also sent the small head of the blessed Uda."[87] Another relic that may have been sent on Elisabeth's initiative was dispatched on August 20, 1271: the bodies of several saints were conveyed to Marie of Turri who lived at Lille in Flanders.[88] This was undoubtedly the same Marie of Lille with whom Elisabeth shared the visions that Philip described. Since these relics were sent to Marie roughly four years after Philip's visit, it is clear that even if Elisabeth, William, and Marie had not been in contact at the time—as Philip so carefully stressed—they obviously made and maintained contact after the visit.

This entry also demonstrates that Elisabeth's participation in the relic exchange is not always self-evident. The entry does not directly state that Elisabeth sent the relics, nor that they were sent upon her request. Nonetheless, the connection is undeniably of her forging, suggesting that others on the list may easily have been connected to Elisabeth as well as to William. The inventory thus hints at the breadth of their religious connections and at their efforts to maintain and strengthen them, implying

(George 221). It is possible that William brought back relics from Cologne as early as 1258, when he technically founded the beguinage through a gift of the land. See Simons, *Cities*, 31, 105, 296 n. 94, and George, "A Saint-Trond," 221.

[86]Marie d'Oignies also authenticated relics, but, like Elisabeth of Schönau, she did not participate directly in their exchange. She did, however, use her connection with relics to great advantage; for more on her manipulation of relics, see Brenda Bolton, "Mary of Oignies: the undervalued 'pearl,'" in *Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation*, ed. Anneke Mulder-Bakker (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 1–25.

[87]"S. Andreas [. . .] S. Elyzabeth [. . .] Huius Andree et huius Elyzabeth capita dedi domino Petro abbati Igniacensi, et etiam Eliyzabeth, filia nostra, dedit et caput parvum beate Ude" (Coens 411 and Berlière 275). Elisabeth received the head of Saint Andrew from a prior of Val Dieu in May, 1272, though from William's records it is difficult to tell if the Saint Andrew he sends to the abbot is Elisabeth's—but sent as a joint gift—or if it is another Andrew. Philip records Elisabeth's reception of the relic of Uda as follows: "9 July 1272, head of Saint Ude (*sic*) to Elisabeth of Spalbeek" (George 223). Since William apparently did not record a sender, it is possible that he sent her this relic himself.

[88]"S. Litbertus[. . .], S. Gertridis[. . .], S. Martha[. . .], S. Conrardus[. . .], S. Merswendis[. . .] quam habet Maria de Turri apud Insulas in Flandria[. . .] Istam misi Marie de Turri LXXIo in die beati Bernardi" (Berlière 275).

a wide circle of patronage involving the exchange of political support through the giving and receiving of relics. In one particularly significant case, a relic was sent on August 24, 1271, to the Dominicans in Dijon by way of a duchess of Brabant. The duchess is not otherwise named, but there are only two possibilities. Marguerite, the daughter of King Louis IX of France and wife of Duke John I of Brabant, died in 1271 and is unlikely to be the duchess mentioned. Far more likely is Adelaide, the former duchess of Brabant and widow of Duke Henry III of Brabant, who was a strong supporter of the Dominicans and founded the Dominican house of Val-Duchesse.

William wrote under the entry that "I sent Saint John via the duchess of Brabant to all the Dominican friars at Dijon."[89] The extent to which the duchess herself was involved in the gift is unclear, but this is one of the few non-Cistercian connections mentioned in William's inventory. Given Adelaide's strong personal support for the Dominicans, her direct participation seems probable. The exchange is particularly important because it demonstrates a possible connection between Elisabeth and the women of the Brabant ducal house. Elisabeth's relationship to one of these women—Marie of Brabant[90]—is the central issue of the last set of documents concerning her life. Marie of Brabant was the daughter of Henry III and sister of John I of Brabant.[91] As a glance at the genealogical chart shows, she had briefly been the sister-in-law of King Philip III of France, when Marguerite was married to John I. The connection between the French royal family and the ducal house of Brabant was very close, and it is within the realm of possibility that Elisabeth was known to the French court even before Marie married Philip III. Elisabeth was also associated with Marie of Lille, whose patron was King Louis IX, providing another potential avenue through which the court may have heard of her. At any rate, the connection between Elisabeth, Marie, and the French court would unexpectedly involve Elisabeth in court politics three years after Marie's marriage.

French Court Politics. In 1276, Prince Louis died. Louis was the oldest son of King Philip III and his first wife, Isabella of Aragon. Court politics immediately swung into action over the cause of death, and the resulting chaos is not easy to untangle. The struggle involved Pierre de Benais, who was the bishop of

[89]"S. Egidius[. . .], S. Iohannes[. . .] Istum Iohannem misi per dominam ducissam Brabantie fratri[. . .] et toti conventui fratrum Predicatorum apud Diion" (Berlière 276). See also George, "A Saint-Trond," 223.

[90]Marie of Brabant married King Philip III of France in 1274, after the 1271 death of Philip's first wife, Isabella of Aragon.

[91]As we have seen, Henry III of Brabant was one of the three first cousins to whom William of Ryckel was so closely joined—the other two being William II of Holland and Henry of Guelders.

Bayeux,[92] and Pierre de la Broce,[93] who was the chamberlain of Philip III. These two were related by marriage and joined in alliance against the new queen, Marie of Brabant. The struggle commenced when Pierre de Benais, perhaps at the behest of Pierre de la Broce, began to spread a rumor that Marie had poisoned the prince.[94] A competing story attributed to two beguines, one of whom was Elisabeth, warned that Prince Louis had died by divine retribution because King Philip was sinning against nature.[95] While the two rumors seem to respond to one another, which came first and precisely why it started are unclear. The rival versions of the ensuing intrigue in its totality are equally difficult to resolve, but the most important documents are reports by two men who were personally involved in the events they recorded. One was the papal legate Simon de Brion (the future Pope Martin IV); the other was the bishop of Liège, Jean d'Enghien. The other primary source describing this incident is the *Life of Philip III* by Guillaume de Nangis, which survives in both the original Latin and a contemporaneous French translation. However, Nangis's retelling is far less detailed, was written after the affair ended, and refers only to an unnamed "beguine of Nivelles." Since those directly involved likely provided the most reliable depictions of the affair, I follow the accounts of Simon de Brion and Jean d'Enghien.

It seems that after Prince Louis's death, the chamberlain, Pierre de la Broce, and his relative Pierre de Benais seized an opportunity to discredit the queen by attempting to spread rumors that she had poisoned the king's son. These rumors failed to take hold, but not long afterward a canon of Laon sent word to the king that two holy women from Liège—one of them Elisabeth[96]—had told him that

[92]For more on Pierre de Benais, see Richard Kay, "Martin IV and the Fugitive Bishop of Bayeux," *Speculum* 40:3 (July 1965): 460–483.

[93]For more on Pierre de la Broce, see William Chester Jordan, "The Struggle for Influence at the Court of Philip III: Pierre de la Broce and the French Aristocracy," *French Historical Studies* 24:3 (Summer 2001): 439–468.

[94]De Gaulle, "Documents historiques," 88. This episode bears a striking resemblance to the folkloric motif of the "calumniated wife," discussed in Barbara Newman, "The Heretic Saint: Guglielma of Bohemia, Milan, and Brunate," *Church History* 74:1 (March 2005): 1–38; 24–26. A variation of tales like Chaucer's Patient Griselda, the motif often includes the wrongful conviction of a mother-substitute—such as a nursemaid or governess—for the death of a child in her care.

[95]De Gaulle, "Documents historiques," 89.

[96]De Gaulle, "Documents historiques," 89. Simon records the two women as: 1) Alice, a leper, and 2) "Ysabel of Sparbeke." Surprisingly, no one has suggested a connection between the leprous Alice of Schaerbeek and the "Alice the Leper" in the French court intrigue. This is probably because the current dating of Alice of Schaerbeek's life places her death about 1250, but it is possible that some memory of her reputation remained with Simon, causing him to confuse the actual location of Elisabeth—Spalbeek—and possibly even the precise identity of the other woman, who is not mentioned again anywhere in the text. Nameche and others have realized that "Sparbeke" could be "Schaerbeek," but almost all have decided against this emendation, taking "Sparbeke" as an alternate form of "Spalbeek" with a confusion of the liquids "l" and "r." This seems the best

the king's son had died because Philip was sinning against nature and that unless he changed his ways his line would die out. Philip ordered an investigation, and Pierre de Benais was made responsible for questioning the holy women, together with the bishop of Liège. Both women denied having said anything whatsoever about the death of Louis and stated that the king was virtuous.[97] However, Benais later departed from the account confirmed by d'Enghien's letters, telling Simon de Brion that Elisabeth had told him (Benais) in secret that the prince *had* in fact been poisoned by the queen. A second investigation ensued, and Elisabeth and the canon of Laon confronted each other. Nonetheless, Elisabeth maintained her previous testimony—that she had not said anything to anyone about the death of Louis—and she refused to corroborate Benais's story.

A third investigation involving the bishop of Liège took place some time later.[98] Elisabeth now explained that *Benais* had given *her* the story about the queen poisoning the young prince and that *she* had responded by saying "she knew nothing about it, nor did she believe it to be true, because it was so horrible to have such a suspicion of the queen."[99] Yet even this was not the end. A report by the bishop of Liège describes in detail a fourth interview with Elisabeth. This document begins by saying that Benais's *translator* testified that Elisabeth "said that the prince was poisoned by someone in the queen's suite."[100] When Elisabeth was asked about the man's testimony, "she once again denied under oath having said any such thing and persisted even when confronted with [him]."[101] Finally, a third person testified that one of Benais's men *had* asked Elisabeth to change her story, but she had refused.[102] To summarize, Benais and the chamberlain's party had used false rumors and testimony in several instances in a desperate attempt to force Elisabeth to implicate the queen, but every effort failed to shake Elisabeth. She denied the words placed in her mouth and finally

explanation, for Simon was not native to the area, and his mistaken recollection might have been due in part to some local fame belonging to Alice of Schaerbeek. Since Jean d'Enghien—bishop and resident of the diocese—terms Elisabeth "Lizebeth de Spalbeke," this designation must stand as the most reliable (de Gaulle, "Documents historiques," 96). See A. J. Namèche, "Marie de Brabant et la béguine de Nivelles," *Revue Catholique* 12 (1855): 598–608.

[97]De Gaulle, "Documents historiques," 91 (French "*honnestes*").

[98]Arnoul de Wisemale, a knight templar, was also part of this stage of the investigation.

[99]de Gaulle, "Documents historiques," 93.

[100]Kay, "Martin IV and the Fugitive Bishop of Bayeux," 474. See also de Gaulle, "Documents historiques," 96.

[101]Kay, "Martin IV," 474; de Gaulle, "Documents historiques," 96–97.

[102]de Gaulle, "Documents historiques," 97: "She began to laugh and said, 'What are you saying? That I will deny what I said?'"

accused Benais of attempting to force her to repeat his story. Benais's translator made one final effort to unnerve Elisabeth, but she held her ground.

The upshot of this affair was the execution of the chamberlain,[103] the imprisonment of the canon of Laon, and the escape of Pierre de Benais, the bishop of Bayeux, to Rome. The last report by the bishop of Liège seems to have been the final word on the matter, but there are many ways to understand the contradictory nature of these accounts. Nancy Caciola concludes that Elisabeth was "a weak, vain, and manipulable woman. . . . Elisabeth emerges as an opportunist: different agents attributed various positions to her, and she did nothing to disavow these positions until they became inconvenient. Her only interest was to extend her reputation as an inspired prophetess."[104] This is patently unfair. The court intrigue boils down to a failed attempt by the chamberlain's party to overthrow the queen, though there was apparently widespread speculation that the queen's party had begun the whole affair to overthrow the chamberlain.[105] Either might be true, since the chamberlain's party and the Brabantine party at the French court were certainly at odds. Yet either way, a careful reading of the documents shows that Elisabeth was far from "weak, vain, and manipulable." Rather, she was calculating and confident, just as she had been when she threw the excommunicated nobleman out of her home or asked Clairvaux to accept a new lay brother from among their servants.

Given Elisabeth's connections to the Brabantine house, it does not seem likely that she would ever have accused the queen, and the only people who claimed she did were members of the chamberlain's party. It is more likely that she spoke against the king on behalf of Marie of Brabant, but if Elisabeth *had* ever claimed that King Philip was to blame for his son's death, she seems to have remained firm about her denial once confronted. It

[103]In all fairness, Pierre de la Broce's downfall may have been overdue, and other factors contributed as well. See Jordan, "The Struggle for Influence."

[104]Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, 121–122.

[105]While modern scholars have recently tended to look more favorably upon Marie, Langlois was suspicious of her; see Charles Victor Langlois, *Le règne de Philippe III le Hardi* (Paris: 1887), 13–32; and "Le temps de Philippe III de 1270 à 1285," in *Histoire de France depuis les origines jusqu'à la révolution*, ed. E. Lavisse (New York: AMS, 1969), 103–106. For the apparently widespread contemporaneous speculation, see Dante, *La Divina Commedia: Purgatorio*, ed. L. Magugliani (Milan: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 1995), VI:19–24. Also Dante, *Pugatorio*, trans. J. Ciardi (New York: Penguin, 1957), VI:19–24. Dante writes:

Vidi conte Orso; e l'anima divisa
dal corpo suo per astio e per inveggia,
com'e' dicea, non per colpa commisa:
Pier dalla Broccia, dico; e qui provveggia,
Mentr'è di qua, la donna di Brabante,
sì che però non sia di peggior greggia.

I saw Count Orso; and the shade of one
torn from its flesh, it said, by hate and envy,
and not for any evil it had done—
Pierre de la Brosse, I mean: and of this word
may the Lady of Brabant take heed while here,
Lest, there, she find herself in a worse herd.

is interesting to note that whether the rumors about the king were started before or after the rumors about the queen, they formed an effective response, and the battle between the chamberlain and the queen ended in a Brabantine victory. It is not inconceivable that Elisabeth—at the request of the Brabantine party or, less likely, on her own initiative—prophesied against the king. However, even if she had previously spoken against him, her subsequent denials were nonetheless calculated and effective. Doubt about the king's virtue, belief in his partial responsibility for his son's death, and distrust of the chamberlain had already been raised, and Elisabeth's apparent support of the king kept her fervent support of the queen from being suspect.

The major difficulty with the textual evidence surrounding this event is that Elisabeth's words are always reported secondhand. The entire affair is one of "he said, she said," and our interpretation of the evidence depends a great deal on whom we choose to believe. Remco Sleiderink presents Elisabeth as a prophetess, already known for identifying William of Ryckel's relics and for envisioning the spiritual states of others,[106] who was necessary to the machinations of both of the warring parties at the French court and sided alternately with them both, eventually backing down from her claims against the queen out of fear of being unmasked as a fraud or on account of pressure from the Brabantine party.[107] However, I distrust the nature of reported speech in such a highly charged affair, especially when those reporting Elisabeth's words often had a very high political stake in what she may have said. The numerous interviews with Elisabeth seem to me to arise from two sources: the need for the chamberlain's party to use her words to their advantage, and the need for Simon de Brion to unravel Elisabeth's testimony as confusingly reported by the chamberlain's party. That Elisabeth's words were altered and that words may have been put in her mouth altogether does not seem unreasonable for such a situation, in which a group of powerful men were attempting to manipulate a prophetess's abilities for their own political ends.

The open question is, of course, how fickle was Elisabeth? As I have observed, when her words are reported directly by Jean d'Enghien, it finally becomes clear that no one reliable ever heard her say anything against the king *or* the queen. Yet her continued participation in the crisis implies that she was not involved entirely against her will. If her political networking in previous situations was ultimately of slight consequence despite apparent validation of her spiritual authority by the abbot of Clairvaux, the French court scandal involved unquestionable political intrigue. The potentially dangerous affair provided a forum for Elisabeth to exchange her divine

[106]Sleiderink, "Een Straf van God," 44.
[107]Ibid., 49.

authority for advantageous political support she may not have enjoyed otherwise. Despite this, there is no evidence that she was, in Caciola's words, "an opportunist" whose "only interest was to extend her reputation as an inspired prophetess."[108] The problem for the parties of the French court scandal appears to be that Elisabeth, despite her interest in furthering her reputation, was not easy to manipulate. Moreover, Elisabeth was not—in this instance—necessarily engaged in expanding her reputation. While other holy women did use their prophetic abilities to aid political figures, the direct ties between Elisabeth and Marie of Brabant suggest the possibility of a more personal relationship between the holy woman and the queen.

In my interpretation, Elisabeth repaid the support of the Brabantine dynasty—if not their support of Elisabeth personally, then their support of William of Ryckel—by throwing her weight behind the queen. The fact that the chamberlain's party was so desirous to have Elisabeth on their side suggests that this weight was not inconsiderable. While Elisabeth may in fact have altered the practice of prophecy for political ends, her goal was to safeguard a patroness. That Elisabeth was known to the warring parties at the French court seems to me to be a testament to her success in building and maintaining affiliations, and what I perceive to be her unwavering defense of the queen demonstrates her confidence in a delicate situation. This remains true even if Elisabeth first came to the attention of the court through the potentially false report of the canon of Laon, for both parties clearly considered her to be a valuable resource and likely would have offered support in return for the application of her prophetic gifts on their behalf. Whatever the case, I believe that Elisabeth's connection, tenuous or otherwise, to the Brabantine party made her choice far from opportunistic. The downfall of Pierre de la Broce, though greatly desired by both the Brabantine party and, according to William Chester Jordan's "The Struggle for Influence at the Court of Philip III,"[109] by much of the nobility in France, was in no way certain, and Elisabeth's role in the affair's conclusion may not have been inconsequential. Despite the possible risk, this episode shows her not only obtaining political support through her networks but providing it as well. Marie of Brabant later funded the completion of the infirmary at the convent of La Reine or La Royauté,[110] whose chapel was dedicated to Saint Elisabeth.[111] It is no doubt for this reason that "well-

[108]Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, 122.

[109]Cited above, see note 93.

[110]Jean d'Enghien, bishop of Liége, first authorized the work in 1281. Marie's involvement is not documented until 1284, but "ducal letters . . . attribute foundation of the hospital to the queen" (McDonnell 67 n. 56). See McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards*, 66–68; and Simons, *Cities*, 293 n. 81.

[111]Simons, *Cities*, 293 n. 81.

established tradition" claimed Marie had founded the convent in honor of Elisabeth of Spalbeek.[112] While the convent was already standing, perhaps its patron saint *was* part of the reason Marie founded the infirmary there; it would be a lovely testimony to the continuing spiritual and political connection between these two women.

While I certainly move into the realm of extensive speculation in my understanding of this episode, I feel that the previously recounted evidence regarding Elisabeth's life serves to re-contextualize her involvement in the political realm of the French court. Philip's text portrays a woman of strength and spiritual devotion who enacts Christ's Passion daily and has done so for a number of years. She has been granted the stigmata, and a visiting group of Cistercian abbots and monks believe in her veracity and admire her gift of "spiritual telepathy." If Elisabeth could pass Philip's *probatio*, it is not inconceivable that she was self-assured and constant during the interviews pertaining to the French court intrigue. While her impact on the religious community was not earth-shattering, the events that Philip describes demonstrate Elisabeth's interest in participating in the widespread religious networks whose paths carried both spiritual and secular power between its members. Philip's representation of Elisabeth is not of a woman easily manipulated but of one engaged in a number of spiritual exercises that, in one way or another, connect her to people of influence. This aspect of Elisabeth is further strengthened by the evidence of the relic exchange in which she seems not only to have aided her relative but to have participated as fully as possible herself.

IV. Conclusion

The context within which Elisabeth thrived was a highly complex network of associations, not all of which co-existed peacefully. Except for William of Ryckel, Elisabeth had no constant spiritual director, and William never undertook to write her *vita*, leaving her textual destiny in the hands of Philip of Clairvaux. Philip did not know Elisabeth as well as many biographers knew their subjects (again, one thinks of Jacques de Vitry and Marie d'Oignies). He wrote a remarkable text, but one that is simultaneously an awed eyewitness description and a record of his proceedings during Elisabeth's *probatio*. He provides an account of her actions in great detail, but he supplies very few of her "girlish speeches."[113] By chance, Elisabeth's spoken voice remained—if at some distance—in the documents concerning

[112]McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards*, 66.
[113]Philip, 373.

the French court scandal. Through the multiple interviews we hear the voice of a confident, persuasive, and uncompromising woman whose great political talent included a refusal to participate in political intrigue—at least that aspect of the intrigue being forced on her by others. The surviving relic list together with Philip's text hint at the potential of the network supporting Elisabeth and the consequent justification she had in being so assertive. Yet part of the reason for the scanty source material—Elisabeth's lack of a dedicated spiritual adviser—may also explain the freedom and assurance with which she practiced her spirituality. She was well-protected, but not, it seems, closely guarded. Her religious autonomy is undoubtedly responsible for the heterogeneity of the source material, which provides a unique glimpse into the multiple layers of religious politics with which Elisabeth engaged. The *mulieres religiosae* who preceded her supplied her with the topoi of spiritual practice, and her religiosity owes a great deal to that paradigm, yet her political ingenuity was as unusual as were her performance and stigmata. Though many elements of Elisabeth's life remain obscure, the extant sources demonstrate the surprising array of religious and political affiliations surrounding Elisabeth and the skill with which she managed them in her own politics of mysticism. "Many things must still be written that remain beyond the matter poured forth above, but the necessity of business and my personal weakness of body unavoidably force me to put up my pen."[114]

[114]"Adhuc super praelibata materia multa scribenda supersunt; sed necessitas occupationum et propria corporis imbecillitas necessario claudit stilum" (Philip, 378).