Doing Public Philosophy in the Middle Ages? On the Philosophical Potential of Medieval Devotional Texts

Amber L. Griffioen

Abstract: Medieval and early modern devotional works rarely receive serious treatment from philosophers, even those working in the subfields of philosophy of religion or the history of ideas. In this article, I examine one medieval devotional work in particular—the Middle High German image- and verse-program, *Christus und die minnende Seele* (CMS)—and I argue that it can plausibly be viewed as a form of medieval public philosophy, one that both exhibited and encouraged philosophical innovation. I address a few objections to my proposal—namely, that CMS is neither *public* enough nor that it counts as proper *philosophy*—and I attempt to defend CMS's public philosophical credentials in light of these objections. I conclude with a brief discussion of how devotional texts like CMS can help us do innovative public philosophy today.

[Content Warning: The narrative under discussion in this article contains graphic images of spousal abuse and physical violence.]

1 Introduction: The Canonical Exclusion of Devotional Texts

Medieval Christian devotional works rarely receive serious treatment from professional philosophers, even those working in the subfields of philosophy of religion or the history of philosophy. On the one hand, this should not be surprising. Not only is the genre of devotional literature made up of various literary forms and styles (e.g., prayers, verse, image programs, meditations, fables, allegories), the authors and consumers of this literature are also not always those their contemporaries would have classified as "scholars" (belonging neither to the *schools* nor, in some cases, to the class of *men*). In addition to Scripture, such texts drew on such diverse sources as popular Christian legends, secular courtly love traditions, satirical literature, even bawdy folk tales—and, especially in the late middle ages, they were increasingly composed in the vernacular. Moreover, in contrast to the stricter formats of standard medieval scholarly treatises and commentaries,

devotional texts did not ask their readers (or hearers) to engage in explicit discursive argumentation and abstract reasoning but rather encouraged them to place themselves in a particular imaginative or contemplative space capable of arousing not only true beliefs but also the appropriately corresponding affective and conative attitudes. Indeed, the aims of devotional texts were seldom solely, or perhaps even primarily, cognitive, and they often employed extremely vivid, concrete, and explicit—even erotic—imagery in the service of their theoretical and practical ends.

For all these reasons, devotional literature might seem more at home in contemplative or liturgical contexts than in the more "rigorous" systematic contexts of scholastic academic disputation. It is therefore no wonder that it has generally been considered as having little to offer by way of philosophical value or innovation.[1] Regardless of how medieval readers themselves might have actually received and interacted with this literature, unless a devotional work was penned in Latin for an intellectual audience by a (usually male) author viewed by contemporary scholars as having contributed in some other way to the "Western philosophical canon" (according to some commonly received narrative about what that term means and certain preconceived notions about who belongs to it), it is unlikely to receive much attention from academic philosophers. However, this is to neglect almost an entire body of literature that has significant potential for the way we think about the history of philosophy—especially when considered in light of its more inclusive and public-facing nature. Devotional literature often filtered difficult theological concepts, as well as the philosophical ideas that informed them, through more familiar and popular forms of expression, making them accessible to readers both inside and outside the scholastic ivory tower. Not only were these texts in conversation with the scholarly ideas of their days, their dissemination to female and lay audiences allowed for a much wider participation in such discourses than medieval universities would have allowed. They should thus be considered particularly worthy of philosophical attention, especially (but by no means exclusively) for those interested in expanding the traditional boundaries of our received narratives concerning the history of philosophy or in making the discipline a more inclusive space.

This article will focus much of its attention on one late medieval text and image program that was especially popular in the Lake Constance region of what is today Southern Germany and Northern Switzerland, titled *Christus und die minnende Seele*, or "Christ and the Loving Soul" (hereafter: "CMS"[2]). This allegorical tale of the Christian spiritual journey to union with the divine belongs both to the genre of devotional meditation and to

---

[1] That is, where it is considered *at all* by contemporary scholars. Much of the lack of import attributed to medieval devotional literature can be simply inferred from philosophy's relative *silence* on the matter.

[2] In what follows, I will use 'CMS' to refer to the larger narrative program, which comes to expression in various particular arrangements and media from the fourteenth to sixteenth

the category of so-called "bridal mysticism," in which the human soul is represented as the bride of Christ.[3] There has been relatively little attention paid to CMS in the Anglophone scholarly literature, and its philosophical relevance has received even less discussion.[4] In fact, at first glance CMS might appear to present a tough case for the claim that devotional works of this kind can really be classified as *(medieval) philosophy*, let alone that they can represent examples of philosophical *innovation*. However, much here depends on how we understand these terms in the first place, and I think CMS can serve as good case study for thinking more carefully about the philosophical value of literature that has been relegated to the margins of medieval philosophy and theology. Ultimately, I hope to make a case for understanding CMS and other such devotional texts as a form of what we might (anachronistically) call *public philosophy*—one that actually *encouraged* innovation and creative play with difficult concepts in ways that scholarly treatises might not have been able to accomplish by themselves.

The article is roughly divided into two halves. The first half focuses almost exclusively on CMS itself—exploring its historical context and audience (Section 2), the allegorical narrative as set out in the manuscripts and broadsheet (Section 3), and the ways in which the interactive, public nature of that narrative can be seen to both display and encourage intellectual innovation (Section 4). The second half brings together my reading of CMS with historical and contemporary sources to address a few possible objections to the notion of CMS as medieval public philosophy (Section 5)—namely, that it is neither "public enough" (Section 5.1) nor that it is "really" philosophy (Section 5.2). Finally, I briefly argue that even if the reader ultimately disagrees with my assessment of its public philosophical value and potential for innovation with regard to its *medieval* readers, CMS and similar devotional texts can nevertheless help *us* do innovative public philosophy today, both by emulating their style and engaging with their content (Section 6).

2 *Christ and the Loving Soul*: Manuscripts and Circulation

As with much popular devotional literature, CMS is not best understood as a singular, definitive text. It is better construed as a kind of "narrative formula" that comes to expression in various arrangements and media in the late middle ages. It most commonly takes the form of an image program accompanied by rhyming text in Middle High German, though the

---

centuries. Where a particular manuscript or version is intended, I will use the relevant abbreviation from the scholarly literature (see footnote 6).

[3] For more on late medieval bridal mysticism, see, e.g., Gregory 2016 and Keller 2000.

[4] Notable exceptions in the Anglophone literature (from outside philosophy) include Keller 2000; Gebauer 2010; and Volfing 2017. For a more philosophical treatment (in German) of the themes of divine and human action in CMS, see Griffioen 2017.

elaborateness of the images and the length and style of the accompanying texts varies. In some manuscripts, the images function to illumine a more comprehensive text; in others, short captions in rhyme or verse briefly explain the images. The order of the scenes is not always the same, and some manuscripts include scenes not included in other editions. In all versions, however, the narrative describes the journey of the eponymous "Loving Soul" and her "spiritual ascent" to union with Christ. Along the way, she must endure several physical, intellectual, and spiritual trials (many problematically initiated by the heavenly bridegroom himself), but her reward is a crown in heaven and being united in love and wisdom with her divine beloved.

Although the imagery of the biblical Song of Songs and the idea of the soul as the *sponsa Christi* were nothing new in the fifteenth century, bridal mysticism flourished in the late medieval German-speaking world (and especially in the High Rhine [*Hochrhein*] region around Lake Constance), alongside the tradition commonly called *Minnemystik* or "love mysticism" as exemplified in the work of thirteenth-century beguines like Hadewijch of Brabant and Mechthild of Magdeburg or in the writings of the fourteenth-century Dominican and student of Meister Eckhart, Heinrich Seuse (a.k.a. Henry Suso). These mystagogical traditions commonly employed tropes from a variety of genres (e.g., Neoplatonist contemplative traditions, the Desert Fathers and Mothers, hagiographical literature, secular courtly love literature, even popular pieces of social satire)—and CMS is no exception in this regard. In her extensive historical study of the extant CMS manuscripts, Amy Gebauer (2010) suggests that the earliest versions of CMS probably emerged in southwestern Germany in the mid-fourteenth century in the form of a pictorial broadsheet with accompanying rhyming couplets.[5] However, the only known completely preserved version of a CMS broadsheet—abbreviated *M* in the literature (see Figure 1)—dates to the 1560s and hails from the printing house of Matthäus Franck in Augsburg. Nevertheless, four early broadsheet summaries exist, which briefly describe the images or reproduce the rhymes from the now-lost *Ur*-broadsheet (Gebauer 2010, 145). A significantly expanded version of CMS, entitled *Die minnende Seele* (or *MS*), emerged in the fifteenth century and is included in several manuscripts that circulated in the Lake Constance region in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. *MS* contains over 2000 lines of rhyming verse between Christ and the Soul, usually with free-standing illustrations and scene headings. Finally, an illustrated printed book from

---

[5] I rely heavily on Gebauer's insightful analysis in what follows, as well as on the annotated Middle High German transcription of *MS* by Romuald Banz (1908), which is taken from manuscripts *E* and *D*. I additionally had the pleasure of being able to work with Manuscript *E* in the *Stiftsbibliothek* in Einsiedeln in September 2019. There is, so far as I know, no full English translation of the *MS* text, so all translations from the MHG here are mine.

Figure 1: The *M* Broadsheet

the printing house of Wolfgang Schenck in Erfurt was produced around 1500 and contains three scenes not found in the other editions.[6]

The CMS narrative itself takes slightly different forms among the surviving manuscripts, which points to the unique potential of the original pictorial broadsheet to be read and interpreted in various ways. For example, as Gebauer has shown, the pictorial broadsheet *M* can be read both sequentially (horizontally, alternating from left-to-right and right-to-left) and thematically (vertically, from bottom to top), representing the Soul's metaphorical "ascent" from the realm of worldly attachment to that of the spiritual senses and eventually to the heavenly realm of the divine which transcends language and thought. The broadsheet could also be cut into individual scenes that could be inserted into manuscripts as desired (Gebauer 2010, 146). Given this flexible and easily adaptable form, CMS cannot be attributed to any particular author, let alone to an author of theological or philosophical "repute" like a Bernard of Clairvaux or a Heinrich Seuse (despite its commonly being paired with various works by Seuse and other "mystical" texts in the surviving manuscripts). And unlike Bernard (who wrote in Latin) and Seuse (whose widely read works appeared in the MHG vernacular and in Latin), so far as we know the longer version *MS* never appeared in full Latin translation. Many scholars have thus

---

[6] The manuscripts mentioned in this article are as follows (for the complete list and details of all the CMS manuscripts, fragments, and prints, see Gebauer 2010, 15–74):

- *Mz*   Mainz, Stadtbibliothek, Hs. I 221 (after 1350); https://www.dilibri.de/stbmz/content/titleinfo/1144253

- *K*   Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, St. Georgen pap. germ. 89 (after 1400)

- *B*   Basel, Universitätsbibliothek, A X 123 (1441)

- *E*   Einsiedeln, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. 710 [322] (ca. 1490); http://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/list/one/sbe/0710

- *D*   Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, Cod. Donaueschingen 106 / Mainz, Martinus-Bibliothek—Wissenschaftliche Diözesanbibliothek, Hs. 46 (ca. 1495); https://digital.blb-karlsruhe.de/id/1178013

- *I*   Wroclaw, Biblioteka Uniwersitecka, Von der ynnigen selen XV Q 329 / Schweinfurt, Museum Otto Schäfer, OS 231 (ca. 1500); https://mdz-nbn-resolving.de/details:bsb00083102

- *Ü*   Überlingen, Leopold-Sophien-Bibliothek, Ms. 22 (1500–1510); http://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/list/one/lsb/Ms0022

- *M*   Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Einblatt III, 52[f] (1559–1568); https://mdz-nbn-resolving.de/details:bsb00099504

Mz represents the earliest of the surviving CMS texts and contains a broadsheet text summary. *B* contains 18 lines of a CMS broadsheet summary inserted as handwritten marginalia into an earlier Basel manuscript, possibly by way of the Council of Constance (Gebauer 2010, 25–27). Manuscripts *K*, *E*, *D*, and *Ü* each contain an edition of *MS*. Of these, *Ü* is the only manuscript without illustrations or illuminations, but there are empty spaces on the pages where the various scenes from the broadsheet presumably would have been inserted. The print book *I* contains 24 illustrated scenes, each accompanied by two rhyming couplets, one spoken by Christ and the other by the Soul.

followed Romuald Banz (1908) in attributing the authorship of *MS* text to a female nun and in likewise assuming that it was intended primarily for a female monastic audience, though as we shall see below, this assumption is problematic in more ways than one. In any case, despite (or perhaps because of) its wide dissemination among women and laypersons, CMS has often been either outright ignored or dismissed as having little by way of intellectual value. It is this dismissive attitude toward CMS and similar literature that I want to challenge in what follows. To do so, however, it will be important to sketch out the general CMS narrative in a bit more detail and to explore how the allegory might be variously interpreted in context.

3 A Tale of Two Husbands: The CMS Narrative

In what follows, I will largely focus on CMS as set out in *MS* (versions of which are contained in manuscripts *K*, *E*, *D*, and *Ü*), since it is here that we find the most extensive version of the narrative. On occasion, however, I will refer to the broadsheet *M* and the broadsheet text summary *Mz*, where relevant scenes (likely belonging to the original broadsheet) are omitted in *MS*. The central event in each scene is indicated in boldface.

    MS opens with a lengthy "prologue," in which the Soul is preparing for bed by saying her **evening prayers**. Christ interrupts her devotions and launches into a lengthy and thoroughly disheartening counterfactual bedtime story concerning the ills of worldly marriage. In this passage, adapted and repurposed from the popular social satire *Des Teufels Netz* ("The Devil's Net"),[7] Christ relates to the Soul how, were she to pursue a conventional marriage, she would be destined to become a penniless wife with "one or two children"[8] whose drunken, callous husband would physically and verbally abuse her,[9] leading to a life of submission, subjugation, and ultimately vice.[10] Christ offers her a much more attractive-sounding marriage—namely, a spiritual betrothal to him. Instead of rising early to a "stinking mass" left by her babies, with a spiritual marriage she need only go to the morning mass (matins), but would be back in bed before it could even get cold.[11] The scene concludes with Christ singing at her bedside

---

[7] For more on the relationship between *MS* and *Des Teufels Netz*, see Keller 1997 and Banz 1908, 124ff.

[8] *MS* 24: *ain kind oder zway*. All quotations from *MS* are taken from Banz 1908 and listed by line number.

[9] Cp. MS 59–63: *Und er spräch: ‚gelt, ich mache dich grennen und grainen! / Müß ich aber an dir zerschlahen die hend?' / Und stieß dir den kopf umb die wend / Und mit dem knú in den ruggen; / Das müstist du als vertruken.*

[10] *MS* 70 uses the terms *liegen und triegen* ("lying and deception").

[11] Cp. *MS* 89–95: *So müstist den wúschen und wäschen gon, / Und würdest ain stinkende metti hon. / Deß bist du von mir alles erlon. / Můst mir ze metti uff ston / Und an din gebett und andacht gon, / So lest du dich nider balde, / E das bettli recht erkalte.* The wordplay with *metti* here is clearly intentional.

in "higher" mystical language, using the quasi-Eckhartian metaphors of birthing ("my Father births me in her night and day"[12]), sparks and fire ("an ember [which] will burn from outside and inside with right and godly love"[13]), and flow ("she well notices my secret flowing-in"[14]) to represent the Soul as simultaneously Christ's mother, his bride-to-be, and his lover.[15]

The mystically charged language of Christ's prologue gives way to a primary group of scenes in which Christ establishes his authority over the Soul as her "spiritual husband." He rudely **awakens** his bride, pulling back the covers and ordering her to arise and meditate on his passion. He then prohibits her from eating and drinking, commanding her to **fast,** before announcing in no uncertain terms that he intends to "beat [her] flesh,"[16] while the Soul laments her suffering. Christ nonetheless **mortifies** her body, arguing that as her spiritual spouse he can do with her as he will.[17] Then, in a striking reversal of the gospel miracles, Christ proceeds to **blind and lame** the Soul in order to "tame" her as she continues to weep.[18] Having thus achieved the relative compliance of the Soul, Christ takes on the role of "school-master" (one who disciplines with the rod) and gives her **formal instruction** in theology. Despite having been blinded in the previous scene, the Soul is shown here with a book on her lap (one of the purported "inconsistencies" pointed out by commentators), reading about basic Christian doctrine and the "virtues big and small."[19] In the next scene, the Soul is prevented from partaking in her favorite pastime of **spinning,** being called instead to be spiritually active. The refusal to allow the Soul to spin new clothes is followed by the removal of her remaining clothes, through which the Soul is taught the virtue of "detachedness"[20] through the humiliation of a literal **disrobing**. Christ tells her she must be "fully naked" if she wants to be able to "enjoy" him thoroughly,[21] while the Soul continues to protest. The hardship of this undressing, however, is only a prelude to the even more violent culmination of this group of scenes,

---

[12] MS 179: *Min vatter gebiert mich in ir nacht und tag.*

[13] MS 214–216: *Und wirt enzúnt als ain glut / Und wirt brinnen / Von ussnen und von innen / Von rechter götlicher minnen.*

[14] *MS 211: Sy merkt minen haimlichen influß wol.* Importantly, the word *haimlich* here can mean both 'secret' and 'familiar'/'intimate'/'at-homeness,' indicating the ways in which Christ "belongs" in the soul, where he is continually birthed via the Father (cf. footnote 12). Likewise, *influß* indicates both what Bernard McGinn (2005) has called Eckhart's "metaphysics of flow" and the idea of effectivity ('in-fluence').

[15] Marian references are present throughout CMS.

[16] Cp. *MS 46: Ich müß dir din flaisch beren.* For this scene, the *M* broadsheet uses a grotesque play on words—*fleisch mit fleyß beren*, or "to beat [her] flesh with fervor."

[17] Cp. *MS 504–507: Ich han mit dir ein gaistlich e, / Du müst liden wol und we; /Es sol nach dinem willen nit gan / Du müst volgen dinem man.*

[18] Cp. *MS 666–667: Darumb müß ich dich blenden und lemen, / Das ich dich mug gezemen.*

[19] *MS 772: tugent klain und größ.*

[20] *MS 858: geschaidenhait.* Manuscript *D* uses the more Eckhartian *abgeschaidenhait* here.

[21] Cp. *MS 860: Du müst gar entblötzet sin, / Wilt du dich genietten min.*

Figure 2: *Hanging* (from Manuscript *D*, f. 19r)

in which Christ **hangs** the bride to the point of near-death (Figure 2).[22] Now literally suspended between heaven and earth,[23] the Soul gives up her attachment to earthly life with Christ's assurance that she will not be lost.[24] Using the same words with which he lulled the bride to sleep in the prologue, he now encourages her to close her eyes to the world and assures her that he will be the one to awaken her.[25]

The next group of scenes in the narrative is heavily influenced by biblical imagery from the Song of Songs. The broadsheet *M* and the broadsheet summary *Mz* both begin this series with the Soul once again fast asleep, though this time she has fallen **asleep at the altar,** showing the spiritual progress she has made in the first series of scenes. In contrast to the opening scene, however, Christ warns against waking "the daughter," as it might frighten her back into the realm of worldly attachment.[26] She responds that she has fallen "outwardly" asleep to the world and has awoken "inwardly"

---

[22] In *M* and *I*, the soul is shown as being crucified. In *E*, *D*, and *K*, however, the soul is depicted as hanging by her neck from the gallows, her hands crossed in a gesture of voluntary submission (cp. Gebauer 2010, 97).

[23] Cp. *MS* 969: *über alles, das uf ertrich ist*

[24] Cp. *MS* 1030–1031: *Und du darin nit werdist verlorn, / Wann du des vatters sun hast geborn.* The birthing metaphor here harkens back to that employed in Christ's mystical speech in the prologue.

[25] *MS* 1034–1036: *Schläf fast und laß dir wol sin: / Ich lon dich nit vergessen min, / Wann ich will selber din weker sin.*

[26] Cp. *Song of Songs* 2:7.

to Christ.[27] The dreamlike sequence that follows begins with Christ offering the Soul a **love potion**, which the Soul takes willingly, noting that it makes her both drunk and lovesick.[28] The potion serves to release the Soul from the passive obedience displayed in the first series of scenes, and she begins to actively **pursue** Christ, who now **flees** from her in turn.[29] In a game of hide-and-seek at the same time both playful and serious, Christ intentionally **conceals himself** from the Soul for three days,[30] which only serves to inflame her desire more. She calls on God the Father and the discursive theological knowledge acquired in earlier scenes as she begins to seek out and actively pursue her bridegroom.[31] Then, in a drastic role reversal from the first group of scenes, the Soul takes up her bow, draws her *minne străl* (or "arrow of love"), and goes on the hunt. She shoots and **wounds** Christ in the side (Figure 3), capturing him as her prize in order to "enjoy him" forever.[32] Christ now takes on a more passive (and passionate) role, allowing himself to be **bound** by his huntress, who can no longer be **tempted** (with gold) to release him. Love compels Christ to **kiss** his bride,[33] and he gently whispers his (ineffable) **secret word** to her.[34]

In the third and final series of scenes, the spiritual marriage between Christ and the Loving Soul is consummated.[35] His *mysterium* having been revealed to her, Christ and the Soul now stand on more or less equal footing. In yet another Marian reference, he rewards her with the **crown of heaven** and performs on the **fiddle** and the **drum** for his bride and "queen-mother." The narrative climaxes in a heavenly **embrace** between Christ and the Soul in which the lovers are united.[36] The print book *I* even provides an additional scene depicting the lovers together in their marriage bed, with the now-crowned Soul in the dominant position (Figure 4).

---

[27] Cp. the inscription in *M*: *Ich schlaff zů dir in eysserkeit / Vnd wach zů dir in jnnigkeit.* Cp. also *Song* 5:2.

[28] Cp. *Song* 2:4–5.

[29] Cp. *Song* 1:4. Although *Mz* and *M* both show the soul chasing after Christ, *MS* depicts things the other way around: the soul is pursued by Christ, who worries that she is falling back into the ways of the worldly life (*MS* 1204–1205).

[30] Cp. *MS* 1225: *Ich bierge mich, du vindest mich nicht.* From this point onward, the illustrations in *E* depict the soul garbed in the habit of a Cistercian nun. However, this need not indicate the text was intended for a female monastic audience. Rather, the nun's habit serves a representative function, indicating that the Soul has detached herself from the world in the way requisite for living a godly life (as ideally exemplified in the monastic lifestyle). On this point, cp. Gebauer 2010, 156ff., as well as Section 5.1 below.

[31] Cp. *Song* 3:1.

[32] Cp. *MS* 1317–1318: *ich wil in schießen, / Ob ich sin iena mug genießen.*

[33] Cp. *MS* 1684–1685: *Din minne hăt bezwungen mich, / Das ich mich lon kússen dich.*

[34] Cp. *MS* 1756: *Ich runen dir ain toges wort, / Das úbertriffet allen hord.*

[35] The order of these unitive scenes varies among the manuscripts.

[36] Cp. *MS* 2045–2046: *Lieb, ich und du sind all ain, / Alsus wirt ains us uns zwain.*

Figure 3: *Wounding* (from Manuscript *E*, f. 13v)

4 The Mystagogical Itinerary of CMS: Imitative or Innovative?

The general "narrative formula" of CMS as presented in Section 3 is often viewed in the scholarship as rather derivative. And it is true that the CMS corpus commonly makes use of allusions to tropes from late medieval Rhineland *Brautmystik* and *Minnemystik*, biblical Wisdom literature and Song of Songs, Neoplatonist cosmology and Dionysian apophaticism, and hagiographic literature and spiritual *vitae*. It borrows more than a little of its imagery from other (purportedly more "sophisticated") mystical sources and, in the case of *MS*, even adopts passages from popular satirical literature more or less word for word. All this might lead one to dismiss CMS as something like a quirky-but-unoriginal "mashup" of low-brow medieval "pulp fiction" and "higher" spiritual and philosophical literature— or alternatively as a kind of violent and erotic "Jesus fan fic" for the ignorant masses.

Yet if we refrain from assuming from the outset that the CMS narrative is "derivative," simply because it appeals to familiar themes in accessible
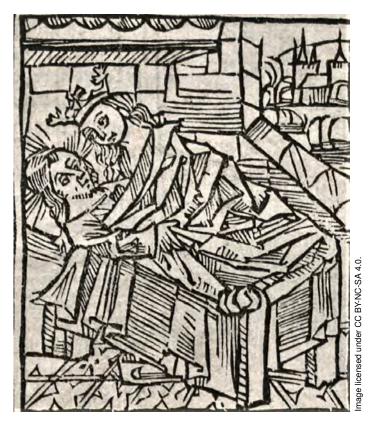
Figure 4: *Embrace* (from Manuscript *I*, f. 15v)

language, we might actually start to see the promise of this "simple" litera-ture for innovative philosophical and theological reflection. Not only could scenes be ordered differently depending on context, the overarching narra-tive itself was complex enough that the social situatedness of CMS's various authors, scribes, and audiences likely led to different interpretations by different groups. In this sense, perhaps CMS's eclectic echoing of its diverse sources is a feature, not a bug. In fact, if we allow ourselves to imagine that CMS represents a carefully constructed narrative formula adaptable for and accessible to both non-scholastic and scholastic audiences, we can begin to understand how it is capable of not only reflecting back familiar theological ideas but also providing readers with the tools to queer and subvert them.

To take just one example, a scholarly audience might have read the spiritual itinerary of CMS in light of the traditional "Triple Way" of the *via purgativa*, *via illuminativa*, and *via unitiva*. And certainly we do find scenes of purification, enlightenment, and union in CMS. The entire first set of scenes, from waking to hanging, for example, appear aimed at "cleansing"

the Soul of her attachment to the world in the sense of the traditional *via purgativa*. However, the scenes that follow do not correspond as neatly to the latter two stages if one merely reads the broadsheet horizontally or follows the sequential narrative of *MS*. Illumination in an epistemic sense really takes place explicitly in only two scenes—formal instruction and secret word—the former of which is located in the series of purgative scenes, while the latter either is placed in the context of more unitive scenes. Indeed, in contrast to many mystagogical texts of philosophical repute, in CMS illumination seems less a cognitive condition(ing) for union with the divine bridegroom and more either a helpful tool (the Soul calling on her theological instruction to compel Christ to re-appear) or merely a happy byproduct (Christ granting the Soul his "secret word" prior to union). However, if one reads the broadsheet *M* vertically as well as horizontally (Figure 1), as Gebauer suggests, one sees that, in addition to the horizontally sequential *via purgativa* at the bottom of the broadsheet, the images ascending up the right-hand side themselves represent a distinct *via illuminativa*—one which involves both obedience (mortification) and effort (formal instruction), divine hiding (concealment) and knowledge by acquaintance (secret word)—and which culminates in the reward of a heavenly crown. On the left-hand side, in contrast, we see a different *via unitiva* than that represented in the horizontal sequence at the top. Here, the Soul moves from relative passivity (waking, hanging, asleep at the altar) to genuine activity (wounding) and ultimately mutual intercourse (embrace). The right-hand side thus presents the Soul's epistemic progress with respect to religious understanding, whereas the left-hand side displays her volitional progress with respect to right willing and properly directed desire.

However, another way of reading CMS focuses less attention on the stages of the Soul's individual progress and more on the *relationship* between the Soul and Christ. Thus, in place of the somewhat individualistic *triplici via*, Hildegard Elisabeth Keller (2000) prefers to speak of "a twofold series of relationships" in which the purgative stage (representing marriage) stands on its own, while the *via illuminativa* and the *via unitiva* are "drawn together under the theme of love" (193n27). From the standpoint of a medieval woman, this may have been a more natural reading, as CMS not only provided instructions for making spiritual progress, it also contained a social critique that women would have been especially positioned to recognize. While a male monastic reader might have been amused by Christ's satirical representation of secular marriage in *MS*'s prologue, a medieval woman might have seen her own experience (or perhaps that of her mother or sisters) reflected in it, such that the choice presented the Soul between secular and spiritual marriage in the prologue was not merely soteriological: it was *existential*.

At the same time, the fact that Christ's abusive action toward the bride in the purgative scenes mirrors that of the earthly husband he critiques in the

prologue might also be read as a subtle critique of the Church and the cloistered life—one that can only be overcome by turning away from the world completely, perhaps even transcending the strictures of the earthly Church to pursue Christ, not in marriage but in *love*.[37] This reading makes sense of the fact that the scenes between waking and hanging in CMS mix the literal and allegorical senses in ways the later scenes do not (Keller 2000, 202ff.; Volfing 2017, 173ff.): Brides of Christ (nuns) were required to rise early for matins, encouraged to engage in certain ascetic practices like fasting or self-mortification, and forced to give up various activities they enjoyed. And one might read these scenes as merely encouraging the acquisition of personal and spiritual discipline through suffering, which is certainly a theme in many mystagogical texts of the period. However, as Keller notes, "the spiritual marriage bears an amazingly close similarity to the martyrdom of secular marriage," with Christ "tak[ing] over the undisputed legal position of the husband and overlord" as well as redeemer—"privatizing" the Soul precisely by "de-priving" her (Keller 2000, 203–204). Yet as the Soul progressively leaves the world behind and turns toward love, she is "graced" with the ability to take up her own weapon and to passionately yet violently pursue, wound, and capture her beloved, ultimately landing on more or less equal footing with him. As opposed to the scenes involving marriage, she is now able to "possess" Christ and "penetrate" the depths of his Wisdom.

Although as Annette Volfing (2017) notes, "there is something unsettling" about the way *MS* "oscillate[s] uncomfortably between contrast and parallelism," if we read the *via purgativa* sequence as suggested above, the fact that it "does not operate with a consistent distinction between the literal and allegorical levels" does not necessarily render it "hermeneutically confused" (173). Rather, it presents different kinds of opportunity for imaginative identification among its diverse readership and opens up a hermeneutical space that simultaneously allows both a theological orthodox reading and a subversive social (perhaps even ecclesial) critique. For those used to applying the hermeneutics of the "fourfold senses of Scripture" (literal, mystical, moral, and anagogical), the oscillation can serve as a reminder that the reader should think about more than just the literal story as presented. However, for those not accustomed to reading (or hearing) in this manner, CMS still presents opportunities for identification and interpretation, either in a more literal sense or in the sense of a fictional social parody. This narrative structure therefore encourages reflective immersion and creativity on the part of the reader—not despite

---

[37] Compare to this the claims of thirteenth-century women thinkers like Mechthild of Magdeburg or Marguerite Porete, who maintained that the soul who has made a certain degree of moral and spiritual progress will leave behind virtue, prayer, and even the mandates of the Church for union with Christ (Mechthild) or annihilation in the Godhead (Marguerite). It is, in part, for this purported antinomian and anti-clerical philosophy that Marguerite would be burned at the stake in 1310.

its dependence on other texts, tropes, and traditions but precisely *because* of it.[38] Indeed, in contrast to its classification by some commentators as a form of "lower" and "derivative" bridal mysticism, CMS might actually represent mystagogical literature at its richest and most complex, even while it presents us with transgressive images that would have stimulated, disrupted, and triggered the theological imaginations of different medieval readers in different ways.

However, even if I am right and CMS represents a prime example of medieval *mystagogical* innovation, why should we think that it represents a piece of *public philosophy* as I have claimed—and thus, by extension, an example of *philosophical* innovation? There are, broadly speaking, two types of objections that could be raised to calling devotional works like CMS public philosophy. The first challenges the respect in which CMS is really "public." The second calls into question the idea that it is really "philosophy." In Section 5, I want to explore these possible objections more thoroughly, before concluding with a brief discussion of how CMS can both inspire and inform public philosophy today.

5 Objections to CMS as Public Philosophy

5.1 "It's Not Really *Public*!"

One concern we might raise regarding the idea of CMS as a form of medieval public philosophy is that its audience was limited in ways that undermine the plausibility of its really being understood as *public*. For example, both the Soul's identification in CMS as the (female) bride and lover of a (male) bridegroom, as well as the Marian imagery attributed to her throughout, might lead contemporary readers to conclude that male readers would be largely excluded from the readership of *MS* (and perhaps of CMS in general), since they would be largely unwilling or unable to identify with a "loving Soul" portrayed in such a way. This assumption has led some commentators to follow Romuald Banz in assuming that *MS* was authored by a literate nun solely for a literate and female monastic audience. If they are right, and *MS* was meant for the convents, then we also cannot ignore the further fact that convent life for women was, simply put, *cloistered*. This is not to say that medieval nuns had nothing to do with what went on outside their walls, and certainly the level of engagement with society at large differed from order to order and convent to convent. But it nevertheless remained a *sequestered* lifestyle—one cut off from the outside world in many important respects. Thus, even if its audience was not technically an academic or scholarly one insofar as it addressed women,

---

[38] Elsewhere (Griffioen 2017), I have argued that CMS additionally lends itself well to a reading according to the notion of mutual "turning" (*keren* in the MHG)—which can be traced back to Plato's allegory of the cave and becomes especially prominent in Neoplatonist and Augustinian meditative traditions (cp. the Greek *metanoia* and the Latin *conversio*).

CMS might hardly seem to be public in the sense that we might think relevant for public philosophy today.

A few general remarks are in order before we more closely examine the historical thesis that that the authors, circulators, and audiences of CMS were predominantly women religious. First, I can think of no good reason why a piece of public philosophy's addressing a particular limited audience should disqualify it from being considered relevantly "public." Whether addressing stay-at-home dads or working moms, Britney Spears stans or diehard sports fans, complacent adults or inquisitive children—what makes philosophy public is not necessarily its universal applicability but rather a certain kind of *accessible particularity*. To be sure, the wider the audience, the more of the "general public" a piece might reach. But philosophy does not cease to be public merely because it fails to address everyone. In fact, the kind of "view from nowhere" that attempts to disinterestedly abstract away from particular situated perspectives is precisely what public philosophy is likely to want to move away from. Something similar applies to the idea that a sequestered audience is not a public audience. The philosophers and inmates currently engaged, for example, in philosophy in prison programs certainly find themselves in a sequestered environment, but this does not make the philosophy done here cease to be relevantly public.[39] If anything, this is philosophy at its most publicly relevant, and (as with the aim of much devotional literature) the results can be *transformational*.

So what *does* it mean for philosophy to be public? One possibility suggested by Mog Stapleton and Dave Ward (2021) is that public philosophy refers to "any philosophical activity led by professional philosophers outside the context of a university" (214). However, to assume that public philosophy must be led by *professional* philosophers excludes both philosophically trained scholars who have left the profession or pursued alternative careers and philosophically minded individuals who stand outside the profession (e.g., scholars in a neighboring field or "amateur" philosophers). Likewise, it is unclear what "outside the context of a university" means, since professional philosophy conferences, which are unlikely venues for public philosophy, often occur outside a university context while universities themselves often sponsor and host public-facing events. A more expansive approach is put forward by Alessandra Tanesini (2020), who suggests that philosophy can "go public" in at least four ways: (1) it is carried out *in public* (rather than exclusively in academia); (2) it *addresses* the public (rather than only professional philosophers); (3) it concerns matters of *public interest* (e.g., of social or political—and, we might add, spiritual or

---

[39] For two examples of prison programs in philosophy, see the UC Santa Cruz San Quentin Prison Ethics Bowl and "Prison Inside" program (https://publicphilosophy.ucsc.edu/philosophy-inside/), as well as the initiative "Just Ideas" directed by Christia Mercer and the Center for New Narratives at Columbia University (https://newnarratives.philosophy.columbia.edu/just-ideas).

existential—relevance, or bearing on considerations of morality and justice); and (4) its methods sometimes involve *public reasons* (those reasons that persons of different backgrounds can share). Tanesini's approach to public philosophy is thus less about strictly demarcating the public philosophical sphere from the "private" or "professional" sphere and more about who it additionally *includes*: public philosophy is that which is not carried out *exclusively* in the domain of academia and *exclusively* by and for professional philosophers. It involves concerns that are not *only* of interest to academic philosophers, and it invokes reasons that go beyond the *merely* theoretical. This characterization thus allows both that those doing public philosophy need not themselves be professional philosophers and that public philosophy may likewise include professional philosophers as part of its audience. (Indeed, philosophers may benefit greatly from both producing and consuming public philosophy.)

What does this mean in regard to CMS? I have thus far left unquestioned Banz's assumption that *MS* was authored by a female nun for a female monastic audience. Importantly, even if this assumption is correct, I think *MS* meets all four of Tanesini's ways of being public. According to Banz's account, *MS* was authored outside the medieval university context by a person who was not among the "schoolmen." It was addressed to similarly situated non-scholars, and it concerns matters of moral, existential, and soteriological significance that are, in fact, shared by *all* ensouled human beings. Nevertheless, there is also good reason to think that *MS* was more public than the restriction of the authorship and readership to monastic women allows. Somewhat ironically, Banz's proposal that *MS* was written by a woman seems to rest in large part on a misguided perception of the text as lacking in logical coherence and rigor, stylistic sophistication, and philosophical depth—the very kinds of features that contemporary academic philosophers who deride the quality of public philosophy often attribute to such work. In the case of *MS*, Banz simply infers from his assessment of the *banality* of the text that the author is unerudite, naive, or simple—and he concludes from this that they must therefore be female. For example, although acknowledging the large number of knowledgeable references to mystical terminology and concepts in *MS*, he writes that "the authoress . . . often loses the thread" (Banz 1908, 37) and "doesn't know what to do with the terminology of higher mysticism" that she (unskillfully) wields (182). She must, therefore, be a "nun who is unusually well-read, but without depth, without contemplative talent" who merely "puts the fruits of her ambitious collection [of mystical tropes] to rhyme" (180). Although he patronizingly concedes that her writing is "not without charm" and that "the drastic idioms and expressions picked up from the commoners" lend her work "a rare and pleasant peculiarity," he also claims that she clearly "fails to care about forging her own imagery" or developing any "elevated" style of writing. The language of *MS* is derided as "mediocre and monotonous"—and, even worse, it would seem: *repetitive*. Moreover,

"even her epithets are colorless: *pure, holy, big, good*, etc." What she is speaking, Banz remarks with an air of disdain, is "everyday language [*Alltagssprache*]—sermones humi repentes" (181–182).[40]

Here again we see the implicit assumption that accessibility implies a lack of originality and that imitation and repetition speak against innovativeness, this time combined with the gendered inference that these features speak for *MS*'s having been authored by a simple monastic woman for simple monastic women. While it is true that the graphic critique of worldly marriage in the prologue, the heavy emphasis on the body throughout, and the eventual empowerment and elevation of the Soul to near-equality with Christ *might* point to a female author for *MS* or at least a close familiarity with female-authored mystagogical texts of the period,[41] the implied assumption of many commentators that a male reader could neither identify with the female figure of the Soul nor write in a feminine voice takes a ludicrously narrow view of the medieval religious imagination. As Rabia Gregory (2016) points out, late medieval Christians thought of Jesus as "espoused to every person, male and female, Christian and Muslim, and Latinate" (33). Moreover, there was a long historical tradition of identifying the soul with the bride of Christ in male-authored monastic literature (Keller 2000, 188–89; Gebauer 2010, 156–57).

Indeed, we need only turn to Heinrich Seuse to see the absurdity of the claim that medieval male authors could not or would not write narratively in both male and female first-personal voices. In the *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*, Seuse often refers to himself as Lady Wisdom's "poor washer-woman," [*sin ǻrmú wǒscherin*], while Wisdom addresses him as "my daughter" [*min tohter*].[42] However, in the Latin *Horologium Sapientiae*, Seuse sometimes casts himself in a male role, switching back and forth between the female Soul yearning for her divine Bridegroom (as in CMS) and the male Servant who longingly desires the love of his *Minnerin*, Eternal Wisdom. In fact, as Barbara Newman (2002) points out, before the *Horologium* "it was highly unusual for a man to play the male role in a scenario of celestial love" (2). Seuse himself notes in the prologue to the *Horologium* that "the style changes from time to time, to suit what is then the subject. Sometimes the Son of God is presented as the spouse of

---

[40] Banz's analysis clearly exercised influence on later scholars, who often implicitly continued to perpetuate the trope of the "confused" or "unsophisticated" (female) author. For example, Williams-Krapp expresses surprise that the "illogical" order of the scenes in *MS* did not bother the author*ess*, which he explains by surmising that "she was apparently so fixated on only using the individual scenes as a basis for her detailed didactic remarks that a coherent structure was of little importance to her" (Williams-Krapp 1989, 364).

[41] On women's concern with physicality and elevation in the late middle ages, see Bynum 1994, 165–175.

[42] Cp. *DW* 212 and 223. In what follows, references to Seuse's MHG works are taken from the 1907 edition of Seuse's German works edited by Karl Bihlmeyer (abbreviated here as *DW*), and the translations are mine. I will use Edmund Colledge's 1994 English translation of the *Horologium*, "Wisdom's Watch Upon the Hours" (abbreviated henceforth as *Watch*).

the devout soul; then later the same Son is introduced as Eternal Wisdom, wedded to the just man" (*Watch*, 55).[43]

Importantly, whether or not *MS* can be plausibly attributed to a female author, if we take as our starting point the possibility that the text is aimed at being accessible to a diverse set of medieval readers, as opposed to merely assuming the author lacks education, sophistication, or skill, then the "commonness" or "coarseness" of its vernacular verse (which is actually extremely clever, employing comical puns, familiar idioms, and witty wordplay) might be transformed from a vice to a virtue—less *sermones humi repentes* and more *sapientia in nuce*. As C. Thi Nguyen puts it, "Recognize a piece of public philosophy for what it is. Recognize that the author has probably not slipped up in some idiotic way, but is probably under enormous demands to clarify, simplify, and compress" (2019).[44] Omissions and oversimplifications may be intentional; a more familiar and colloquial tone is to be expected; the practical and applied aspects may overshadow some of the more technical theoretical aspects; and so on. If we apply this principle of charity to the author of *MS*, we may come to very different conclusions about their abilities than commentators like Banz or those who follow him in implying a lack of care and sophistication on the part of the author. We thus should perhaps not think of the author of *MS* as someone naive, unlearned, or too caught up in their own mystagogical zeal to notice the inconsistencies in their narrative, but rather as someone who was wholly at home with the both the popular literature and philosophical theology of their day, and who was able to condense it into a form consumable and comprehensible for a wider audience.[45]

That audience, too, was composed of more than just nuns. In fact, although many of the manuscripts containing *MS* ultimately landed in female convents around Lake Constance, they seem to have often reached the nunneries via the laity. For example, manuscripts *E* and *D*, which ultimately both ended up in convents, were originally commissioned by wealthy laywomen in Konstanz for their own personal use and served as status symbols of the original owners' social standing and spiritual erudition (Gebauer 2010, 38). Yet even within the walls of the convent, the wide

---

[43] For a more detailed analysis of Seuse's intentional adoption of various gender roles, see Hamburger 1998.

[44] Nguyen notes that public philosophy today is often made both a "soft-target on which to drop some easy philosophy bombs" and a "barrier to entry" for those not already recognized or securely employed in academia. We might say something similar for the way CMS and similar vernacular devotional texts have been disparaged as intellectually "unserious" and excluded from the history of Christian philosophy.

[45] For example, the fact that the Soul is shown reading a book after being blinded and running after Christ on foot after being crippled is (*pace* Banz and Williams-Krapp) not a careless inconsistency, but rather indicates the idea that one must become detached from the sensible world (here: blinded and lamed) before achieving theological illumination ("spiritual vision") and genuine autonomous pursuit of the divine ("spiritual mobility"). On this point, cp. Gebauer 2010, 203ff.

dissemination of the broadsheet or individual images from it—which were very possibly also exchanged between male confessors and female nuns in the context of the *cura monialium* (Gebauer 2010, 248)—indicates that one did not need to be lettered to engage with the narrative. In addition, one of the fourteenth-century broadsheet summary versions, found in manuscript *Mz*, was owned by a Carthusian monk in Mainz (Williams-Krapp 1989, 351). This text adds easy Latin descriptions introducing the various themes from the broadsheet, most prefaced by *hic tangit* (e.g., *hic tangit abstinenciam, hic tangit disciplinam, hic tangit qualiter anima debeat addiscer*), to the rhymed couplets in German. A mid-fifteenth-century manuscript from Basel (*B*), on the other hand, contains 18 lines of broadsheet-summary text in the vernacular, handwritten into the margins of a Latin text on sermon-writing. It thus appears that the readership of CMS also included Latin-educated monks, and Gebauer goes so far as to suggest that *Mz* and *B* were produced "by and for a male readership" (247). In this sense, as she puts it, CMS "is a work at the intersection of various opposing groups and interests in the late middle ages: lay and monastic audiences, male and female readerships, the vernacular and Latin languages, image- and text-based spirituality, reform and mysticism" (157).

Finally, in addition to the fact that CMS narratives circulated widely for almost 200 years and reached a remarkably diverse audience, we cannot forget that were also fundamentally *interactive*. Broadsheets like *M* and books containing texts like *MS* circulated inside and between communities. They were not seldomly carried long distances and were passed from hand to hand, reader to reader. In some communal contexts, the CMS narrative may have been read aloud to an audience, perhaps even acted out. Moreover, unlike many scholarly treatises, these books and images were not only meant to be read and contemplated. They were visually and haptically stimulating, and they were in turn stroked, kissed, modified, augmented, sometimes even defaced by their medieval readers (Borland 2013; Rudy 2010, 2016).[46] As we have seen, the broadsheet could be read horizontally, vertically, or both, and it could be physically cut into individual images and pasted in various constellations and contexts. Devotional texts and images of these kinds thereby demanded bodily engagement from their readers. In

---

[46] Borland (2013) relates how a medieval reader defaced images of evildoers in a twelfth-century manuscript containing the *Life* of St. Margaret, noting that although the reader "was likely aware of the preciousness associated with the manuscript, that knowledge did not deter them from making their marks on this book" and demonstrating the power of the book to present an "opportunity . . . for the physical and immediate eradication of evil" by the rubbing or scratching out of images depicting evil (97–98). In my own work with manuscript *E*, I noticed significant wear on the bottom-right-corner image of Death in a pictorial representation of the mystical journey as described in Seuse's *Life of the Servant*. Whether due to intentional defacement or simply wear and tear from readers turning the page with dirty fingers, this reminds us that the material and embodied engagement with such texts is important to our understanding of how their content reached and was consumed by medieval readers.

all these ways, CMS opened the door for various kinds of somatic, spiritual, and (as we shall see) philosophical interaction with the narrative. Thus, if we follow Hildegard Elisabeth Keller (1998) and turn the intellectual derision of CMS on its head by centering those very public and "banal" elements that have been traditionally used to disqualify it from scholarly appreciation, we might be surprised at what (public philosophical) treasures we find there.

5.2 "It's Not Really *Philosophy*!"

Still, even if we agree that CMS is public in all the senses discussed above, the question remains whether it can be understood as public *philosophy*. In this section, I want to examine more closely a few objections that might be raised against reading CMS (or any particular version of CMS, particularly *M* and *MS*) as properly "philosophical." Importantly, I will not argue here that CMS can *only* be understood as public philosophy (as opposed to, say, public theology or even religious pop art), nor will I even claim that it is *best* understood as public philosophy. I only hope to demonstrate that it can *also* fall under the umbrella of what we might plausibly consider public philosophy, or minimally that it is a public piece of both general philosophical relevance and relevance to the history of philosophy.

Oftentimes when philosophers object, "But that's not philosophy!" with respect to historical figures, texts, and genres, they are not particularly clear about the respect in which they take the object of their derision to be "non-philosophical." It is thus worth setting out a few ways one might go about formulating the objection that CMS is not philosophy:

1. CMS is not philosophy because it is not authored by a philosopher.
2. CMS is not philosophy as medieval scholars understood it.
3. CMS is not philosophy as we understand it today.

I will discuss each of these objections in turn and will attempt to show how each of them is unsuccessful, before concluding with a discussion of how CMS may be used to help us do innovative public philosophy today.

5.2.1 *CMS Is Not Philosophy Because It Is Not Authored by a Philosopher.*

One might maintain that some text or activity cannot count as philosophy unless it is written or performed by someone we take to be a philosopher— that is, philosophy *is* as *a philosopher* does. But then *who* counts as a "philosopher"? It will not help to simply state that a philosopher is anyone who "does philosophy," for then we would seem to be right back where we started. I take it the appeal on views like this is to a kind of *expertise*. That is, it is assumed that for something to count as philosophy *proper*, it needs to be composed or performed by a philosophical *expert*—someone with the requisite education in the discipline, academic credentials, and maybe

even a certain level of recognition among other experts in the same field. This doesn't necessarily help us understand what philosophy *is*, such that one can become an expert in it. But it does assure us that if someone has the requisite amount of formal training, then whatever it is they are doing by way of scholarly output is likely to be philosophy.

With respect to historical figures and texts, however, things are a bit more complicated. On the one hand, most of the items we now classify as "medieval philosophy" were penned by persons who would not have identified as philosophers. Most of them were, properly speaking, experts in *theology* and viewed philosophy merely as a "handmaid" to theological investigation. We will take up the late medieval distinction between theology and philosophy in more detail in Section 5.2.2, but for our purposes here it suffices to note that if philosophy needs to be done by *philosophers*, we must likely also throw out Augustine, Anselm, Abelard, Aquinas, Scotus, Ockham, and the majority of the figures who populate our textbooks on the history of medieval philosophy, and so in this respect CMS might at least be in good non-philosophical company. However, what is usually meant when referring to "the" medieval philosophers in Western European Christendom is a particular set of (almost exclusively male) scholars who had received a "classical" education, generally in a medieval center of learning or university. They are considered "philosophical" experts, insofar as they are viewed as having written influential texts that helped shape the history of Western ideas on topics that we today count as belonging properly to philosophy (e.g., metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, ethics, political philosophy).[47] On this approach, texts like *MS* are excluded simply by virtue of not having been penned by one of these canonical "philosophers," and the misguided assumption that the author was unerudite and probably female does not help the matter. *MS* and the other iterations of CMS do not neatly fit into the narratives we are used to telling about the history of philosophy. They are not widely read today, nor do we see major philosophical figures that we know and love referencing or engaging with them.[48]

A few notes are in order here. First, as we saw above, we cannot simply assume that the author was female, that they were uneducated, or that they had no interaction with the scholars of their day. Given that it was becoming more common in the late middle ages to write in the vernacular— especially if the aim was didactic or pastoral—the author of *MS* may just as

---

[47] We should also remember here that the idea of a singular narrative of the Western history of ideas is largely a (re-)construction of the nineteenth century. I am also uncomfortable with the term "Western," but it will have to suffice for the purposes of this article. Usually, what meant by it is something like "Anglo-American-European," where the "Anglo" includes some Eastern-hemisphere English-speaking regions in the former British Empire (e.g., Australia and New Zealand) but not others (e.g., India or Nigeria), the "American" really only designates Canada and the United States, and the "European" excludes much of Eastern Europe.

[48] However, even this assumption might be somewhat hasty. For example, see Griffioen and Phillips (Forthcoming) on the influence of German Rhineland mysticism and devotional texts on Descartes's *Meditations*.

well have been an educated, even well-connected, male monk familiar with the courtly literature and *Minnemystik* of his day. Second, even if *MS* was written by a woman, it displays a competence with complex theological and philosophical ideas, such that she might have as much right to be designated a "philosophical expert" as many of her male counterparts who have received more attention in scholarship on the history of philosophy. Third, even if the author of *MS* did not enjoy the skill or "expertise" of a scholar at, say, the University of Paris, if it is indeed plausibly interpreted as a form of *public* philosophy, why should we assume that this form of philosophy requires the kind of expertise we look for in academic contexts?

Even among those philosophers who endorse and regularly engage in public philosophy, there is often an implicit assumption that those who write or perform public philosophy will, in fact, be philosophical experts, while its recipients and consumers will be non-experts. This implicit appeal to expertise might explain why (in addition to being themselves authored by professional academic philosophers) a number of papers on public philosophy define it in terms of *outreach*, as Stapleton and Ward do. Public philosophy thus becomes, as Jack Russell Weinstein (2014) puts it, "the act of *professional philosophers* engaging with non-professionals, in a non-academic setting, with the specific goals of exploring issues philosophically" (38, my emphasis).[49] However, as I intimated earlier, I see no reason to limit who can be said to *do* public philosophy—or even to *write* public philosophy—to professional philosophers or those with the proper formal training and academic credentials. First, there are professionals in adjacent fields who can (and often do) engage in public-facing work that engages the public philosophically, either in terms of the way it proceeds or the topics it covers, or both. Second, as Weinstein points out, we can distinguish between *professional* and *amateur* philosophers in the public sphere without denying that both can be engaged in philosophy—even *good* philosophy: "[The amateur's] output may not meet the standard of the academy, but there is no evidence that this ought to be the measure of philosophical success in the first place" (36). For this reason, I think a slightly tweaked version of Brian J. Collins's (2020) disjunctive (inclusive) definition gives us a better way to think about public philosophy—namely, as *(i) philosophical work done openly by philosophical experts outside the "walls" or domain of the academy, or (ii) philosophical work done by philosophical experts or non-experts for/with an audience of non-experts*.[50]

---

[49] Of course, the non-expert public does not call what "we" as professional philosophers do in terms of outreach "public philosophy," and in some cases its being characterized as philosophy in the first place might turn off those members of the public the philosophy is intended to reach. Cf. Weinberg 2016.

[50] Cp. Collins 2020, 73. I have substituted the terms "philosophical experts" and "philosophical non-experts" for Collins's "professional philosophers" and "non-professional philosophers" for the reasons provided above. I have also added the qualifier "openly" to the first disjunct, as I assume that Collins would not count philosophical work written, say, in a

Note that this view allows both that non-experts in philosophy can be legitimately said to do public philosophy and that philosophical experts can be the recipients of it. Additionally, this definition gestures at the fact that public philosophy is not unidirectional; it is essentially *interactive*. Its aim is to get people (whether experts or non-experts) to *engage* philosophically in the non-academic sphere, hopefully on issues of interest or relevance beyond the academy, as Tanesini suggests. Public philosophy is, at least in its intention, a two-way (or perhaps multi-way) street. Not only do professional or amateur philosophers do public philosophy when they engage with the public by, for example, writing, teaching, conversing, or performing on topics of philosophical interest, but those on the receiving end of these endeavors do public philosophy when they engage. In this sense, children, teenagers, inmates, college undergraduates—and, we might add, those medieval readers, listeners, and viewers who engaged with the verse or interpreted the broadsheet of CMS—can *all* be considered participants in public philosophy, experts or no. Unless, that is, CMS does not count as philosophical for some other reason. Let us now turn to a couple of additional ways one might reject the idea of CMS as "genuine" philosophy.

5.2.2 CMS Is Not Philosophy as Medieval Scholars Understood It.

"Here is a recipe for producing medieval philosophy: Combine classical pagan philosophy, mainly Greek but also in its Roman versions, with the new Christian religion. Season with a variety of flavorings from the Jewish and Islamic intellectual heritages. Stir and simmer for 1300 years or more, until done." So writes Paul Vincent Spade (2004) in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. As Spade humorously points out in this (admittedly somewhat reductive) "recipe," what we today refer to as medieval philosophy contains heterogeneous "ingredients" from various traditions and influences.[51] It is also, as Spade puts it, "a potent and volatile brew"—one that I want to maintain underlay and gave shape to CMS as it "fermented" over the course of the 200 years in which it enjoyed its most widespread popularity. Yet there is still the question of how scholars living in the late middle ages would themselves have understood philosophy and demarcated it from other subjects. Can CMS really be considered as philosophy on *their* terms?

---

professional philosopher's diary, or perhaps merely for her own personal entertainment, as "public philosophy," even if done outside the academic context.

[51] I would probably prefer to refer to medieval philosophy as something more akin to an "assorted trail mix" rather than an ale, mead, or potion, in which the ingredients, once mixed, are no longer distinguishable from one another. However, if one wishes to stick with the "volatile brew" image, it would behoove us to remember that, although beer is often associated today with male monastic life, women brewers ("alewives") played a major role in the development of beer culture in medieval Europe. So, too, I would maintain, with medieval philosophy.

In general, 'natural philosophy' in the late middle ages designated the study of terrestrial things, whereas the domain of theology (or at least of medieval *theologians*) focused on the super-terrestrial, including God, angels, human souls, and other purportedly non-physical realities and realms. Thus, as noted in Section 5.2.1, the majority of figures we count today as medieval philosophers would have identified as theologians, where what philosophy they did do was in the service of properly theological ends. On this view of *philosophia ancilla theologiae*, the cognitive (and moral) aims of CMS would, if anything, have fallen under the category of theology, not philosophy. This would not rule out that CMS made use of philosophy in service of its theological ends and thus could derivatively count as philosophy, or at least as philosoph*ical*. However, the CMS narrative also does not make extensive use of concepts that usually would have been classified under the heading "natural philosophy." Moreover, with the "momentous" shift (most notably in Thomas Aquinas) toward viewing theology as itself as an independent scientific discipline—one which used "rigorous reasoning from fundamental scientific principles" (Grant 2007, 248)—one might wonder whether late medieval scholars would have viewed something like CMS as even falling under the heading of theology, given its lack of discursive argumentation. It may have had *spiritual* cognitive ends—namely, knowledge of God through Christ—but, for the schoolmen, this might not have been sufficient to be counted as theology "proper." It certainly would not have been viewed as *theologia naturalis*, let alone *philosophia naturalis*.

But natural philosophy was not the only understanding of philosophy in play. Even during Aquinas's time there were several definitions of *philosophia* to choose from, and it was not always clear which one was being referred to when philosophy and theology were contrasted, or one was made subservient to the other. For example, around 1250 (about a century before manuscript *Mz* was composed), Arnulfus Provincialis, a *magister artium* at the University of Paris, compiled a list of the definitions of philosophy of which he was aware. Among others definitions, these included "love of right reason," "the study of virtue," "the study of mental correction," "the certain knowledge of both things seen and things unseen," "the certain knowledge of divine and human matters, conjoined with the study of right living," "the art of arts and the science of sciences," "order benefitting the soul," "self-knowledge," "the care, study and anxiety which relate to death," and "the inquiry into nature and the knowledge of divine and human matters insofar as that is possible for [human beings]" (Evans 1993, 8). Several of his contemporaries came up with similarly heterogeneous lists. In this sense, as G.R. Evans notes, "the thirteenth-century masters got no further than their predecessors"—and, we might add, their successors down to the present day—"in defining the exact scope of the discipline in a manner with which everyone could agree" (9).

Yet, as Peter Ulrich (1995) points out, the tradition also recognizes a *sapiential* concept of philosophy—one "that is not solely realized in the speculative discussion of its 'object' but rather which sees itself as a striving for a unity of living and theorizing [*Leben und Lehre*]" (38). Indeed, one alternative understanding of philosophy popular around the time that *MS* was in circulation was that of the *philosophia spiritualis*, as recovered and developed by none other than Heinrich Seuse, whose vernacular works were often also included in the manuscripts containing *MS*. Seuse's "spiritual philosophy" attempts to recover the ancient sense of *philo-sophia*, or the *love of wisdom*. It is also an attempt to construe philosophy itself, not as a mere intellectual activity in which one engages, but rather as a way of life. From a theoretical standpoint, the epistemic goal of *philosophia spiritualis* is not merely the attainment of speculative knowledge (though it is also that). Ultimately it is a knowledge-by-acquaintance of the highest good—of Wisdom itself—and the transformation of the whole person as a result. Seuse's understanding of philosophy is simultaneously affective, epistemic, and volitional—at once a *Weisheitslehre* and an *ars vivendi* (Ulrich 1995, 33ff.). Those who engage in it "exert themselves with all the love in their hearts and with all their might . . . , taking care and pains that their love may be as full of divine Wisdom as their intellect is full of knowledge, and so they advance in perception of the truth and also in love of the highest good. They 'taste and see how sweet the Lord is' [Ps 33:9]" (*Watch*, 241).

Seuse's spiritual philosophy is not neatly set apart from theology (though it does represent a kind of spiritual "foil" to purely speculative theology). Rather, it is a wholly *Christological* philosophy, in which the personification of Wisdom (the *Sophia* that the philosopher loves) is identified with the second person of the Christian Trinity—the *Logos* or Christ. Here, Seuse follows in the footsteps of his teacher, Meister Eckhart, whose vernacular sermons made the idea of the "birth of the Word in the soul" a central concept. However, whereas Eckhart might be better characterized as a "philosopher of Christianity" (Flasch 2015), Seuse is better regarded as a *Christian philosopher* in the truest sense of the word. For him, it is the affective and imaginative identification with the suffering of the crucified Christ that opens up the possibility of genuine epistemic and personal transformation: "This will be my higher philosophy, 'to know Jesus, and him crucified' [1 Cor 2:2]" (*Watch*, 201).

In Book II, Chapter 1 of the *Horologium Sapientiae* Seuse facetiously (but also critically) pokes fun at the scholars of his day. The philosophers "play about with their astrolabes" and busy themselves with measurement or musical harmonies; they chat about medicine or mechanics, and labor "with most burning zeal" as they drink from a goblet that only serves to make them thirstier. The theologians, for their part, sit inside the "school" of their proverbial mistress, Eternal Wisdom, but either are only interested in speculation and adversarial argument (while being "utterly cold to true love") or try to teach what they do not know (by mere "assertion") because they have not practiced it as a way of life. The true philosophy, Seuse seems

to imply, is *lived* philosophy—it is cultivated, practiced, and shared. It is deeply personal, but it is also *public*—and not just limited to the academy.

For example, much of the *Life of the Servant*, Seuse's "autobiography" written in the MHG vernacular, is dedicated to the Servant's instruction of his "spiritual daughter," Elsbeth Stagel.[52] Here, Seuse spells out his "spiritual philosophy." He speaks of being instructed to "learn to suffer in the manner of Christ" [*lern liden cristfórmklich*] (*DW*, 145). One who has learned suffering in this way learns how to affectively "let go" and become "detached" from the external world—a necessary step of becoming both cognitively and affectively *un-formed* [*entbildet*], in order to become *(re-)formed* [*gebildet*] through Wisdom (a.k.a. Christ), and finally to move even beyond that which is expressible in words, thought, or image, where one can become *transformed* [*úberbildet*] in the Godhead. In this sense, while Seuse's use of imagery does represent "a necessary concession to the novice," it also provided "signposts for all travelers on the mystical way, no matter how far they had advanced toward spiritual perfection" (Hamburger 1989, 45). *Philosophia spiritualis* exercised in this manner was not just for beginners; rather, for Seuse and his ilk it represented "that true and highest philosophy," which "'bring[s] into captivity [one's] understanding,' as if it were blinded, 'into the obedience of Christ' [2 Cor 10:5]" (*Watch*, 241, 270).[53]

We will take up the role of images and the imagination in more detail in Section 5.2.3, but for our purposes here it is sufficient to note that CMS clearly practiced what Seuse preached, and when we center its essentially public nature, we can see how it used both literal and allegorical imagery to help move its readers into a position where they, too, could become "un-formed," "re-formed," and "trans-formed" by, through, and with Christ—a *philosophia spiritualis* in the fullest sense of the word. It eschewed the styles of those scholars "swollen with wind, so that at once they became puffed up with pride, and strutted around like kings, soliciting for all kinds of headships and degrees and asking for promotions" (*Watch*, 235), and instead aimed to be more accessible to a diverse readership. However, it nevertheless demanded much of any spiritual wayfarer who would undertake its mystagogical itinerary: it is rigorous and robust, even if not especially "scholastic." The idea that CMS could not represent any form of philosophy in the medieval sense of the word is, therefore, simply false.

5.2.3 CMS Is Not Philosophy as We Understand It Today.

However, perhaps it matters less what philosophy meant to medieval readers and more what philosophy means to us today when it comes to thinking

---

[52] It is unclear how much was penned by Seuse himself and how much by Stagel. Interestingly, Stagel served as the abbess of the Dominican convent at Töss and purportedly authored the "sister-book" of *Nonnenvitae* found in manuscript *Ü*, which also contains Seuse's *Exemplar* and a copy of *MS*.

[53] The parallels to the imagery of CMS are striking here.

about CMS as public philosophy. For if we cannot locate much that we can identify as philosophically interesting or relevant for contemporary philosophers, we might wonder why it's worth evening thinking about CMS and similar texts as public philosophy in the first place. Indeed, when we look at the kinds of figures and texts that get classified as "medieval philosophy" or otherwise make it into the historical philosophical canon, we find that we are usually looking either for discussions that reflect what we take to be philosophically relevant today or for ideas that we take to be important for the historical development of those approaches that we now call "philosophy." Thus, for example, we tend to look for things that resemble, say, *discursive arguments* or *conceptual analysis*, or which can be characterized as contributing to at least one of the areas of, for example, *metaphysics*, *epistemology*, *ethics*, or *social and political philosophy*. Here, it might be hard to see exactly how CMS might fit into this mold. Maybe it really is just a piece of *Laienfrömmigkeit*—one that was able to help medieval persons make spiritual progress of the kind indicated by Seuse, but nothing more. I think such a claim would be too hasty, and in this section I want to defend the idea that CMS can also count as recognizable public philosophy by our own standards against a few objections to the contrary.

To begin, one might think that its central focus on the Soul's relationship with Christ might make CMS a case of medieval public *theology*, but nothing more. Yet to assume, as some contemporary scholars seem to do, that once robust theological concepts enter the picture, serious philosophy must necessarily fall by the wayside (or at least take a backseat), fails to recognize entire areas of respectable and rigorous contemporary philosophical thought that explore the limits, coherence, and content of religious and theological concepts. This includes much of philosophy of religion and philosophical theology, as well as the more specific areas of, for example, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, or Hindu philosophy. And while the lines between the theological and the philosophical may be fuzzy (as it is between Christian philosophy and the more recent "analytic theology" movement), the mere fact that these subdisciplines exist and are academically recognized means that we cannot simply dismiss CMS for containing theological concepts.

Unfortunately, even Christian philosophy has failed to properly pay attention to devotional literature like CMS, and it would sadly not be surprising to see some more "traditional"[54] Christian philosophers dismiss CMS as not "rigorous" enough to be called Christian *philosophy*. However, there are sophisticated philosophical theories that both lay the groundwork for and come to expression in devotional works, and the failure to understand the ways certain theories were implicitly communicated and transmitted through these texts prevents us from sufficiently recognizing their overall value for our understanding of the history of philosophy.

---

[54] The irony of this term is not lost on me.

To take just one example, Michelle Karnes (2011) has provided a detailed investigation of the theoretical basis for medieval meditations on the life and passion of Christ, contending that not only did innovative philosophies of imagination inform various late medieval devotional works, they did so in ways that linked the faculty of imagination to the discovery of *truth*, as opposed to merely with invention. She notes that while "the prominence of imagination in late-medieval piety has sometimes been seen to demean it," the surprising yet consistent association of imagination with truth in these texts "requires us to rethink the relatively humble aims that we assign both to it and to imaginative meditations in the period" (Karnes 2011, 4). Such meditations were not simply vehicles for evoking strong affective responses, but also powerful cognitive tools employing a faculty aimed at the real and the true: without the imagination, "the intellect could not otherwise know, and knowing is what the intellect is designed to do" (10).

CMS, too, gives expression to a strong theory of imagination. We noted the parallels above between CMS and Seuse's *philosophia spiritualis*, in which the Soul becomes "unformed" (*entbildet*), "reformed" (*gebildet*), and "transformed" (*überbildet*) as it passes through the various stages of the spiritual journey. Interestingly, the MHG noun that lies at the root of each of these formational verbs—namely, *bild*—is not only the word for "form" but also for "image." Thus, the individual who is "un-formed" from the world in the purgative scenes of CMS is literally "de-imaged" from that which is ultimately *illusory* and *idolatrous*. Her "re-formation" through Christ's love potion—and her subsequent pursuit of Christ—allows her to discover the very "image" of Christ (the *imago dei*) in the depths of her own soul. Finally, her "trans-formation" in union with the divine (including Christ's revelation of his "secret word") takes her *beyond* all images into the realm of that which can only be *shown* or gestured at (e.g., through the various images of CMS) but cannot literally be *said*. This progression closely corresponds to medieval theories of cognition according to which the imagination represented the threshold between the sensory and the intellective—that which makes the image "intelligible." The meditator who ascends with the Soul on the broadsheet thereby also moves cognitively farther away from false or superficial images, advancing ever closer to that which is most real and true—namely, God.

Of course, the various images in picture and verse that imaginatively guided the reader through the CMS narrative could only take her so far. Ultimately, they, too, had to be left behind. So the work of engaging the ideas in CMS through images was intended to assist in properly training the imagination to recognize not only its potential but also its limits. The imagistic engagement in CMS taught the medieval reader how, as Seuse put it in Chapter 53 of the *Life of the Servant*, to "exorcise imagery by way of images" (*bild mit bilden us tribe*).[55] In this sense, CMS's use of

---

[55] *DW* 191: *Er sprach: wie kan man bildlos gebilden unde wiselos bewisen, daz über alle sinne und über menschlich vernunft ist? Wan waz man glichnust dem git, so ist es noh tusentvalt ungelicher, denn es glich sie. Aber doch, daz man bild mit bilden us tribe, so wil ich dir hie*

both figurative and literal imagery is not a "philosophy for dummies" or a "picture-book for the illiterate." It cleverly relies on a sophisticated *applied philosophy of imagination* that employs images precisely in order to move beyond them. CMS permits its readers to climb up a ladder of images in order to get themselves in the position to throw that very ladder away. For some medieval readers committed to this philosophy of imagination, then, meditation on CMS's imagery might have opened the door for more abstract contemplation and engaged theological study. For others, however, the ladder of images may itself have served as a vehicle for particular forms of religious experience aimed at increasing wisdom, enflaming love, and motivating action (Hamburger 1989, 45).

CMS's sophisticated applied theory of imagination is not the only respect in which it is philosophically relevant. Its various scenes display a complex relationship between passivity and activity, grace and autonomy, and compulsion and freedom that deserves more attention than it has heretofore received (Griffioen 2017). Likewise, there is much more we could say with respect to themes like transformative experience and revelation, testimony and epistemic authority, divine hiddenness and activity, virtue theory and antinomianism, and even philosophy of disability or feminist epistemology. Therefore, if, as Collins suggests, public philosophy functions to not only "provide guiding theory" but also to establish a "bridge to the application and practice that makes the theory 'useful'" (Collins 2020, 78), CMS appears a plausible candidate for a historical text that provided just such a bridge between theory and practice. However, is the mere fact that a devotional work operates with a particular philosophical theory really sufficient to allow us to call it *philosophy*, even of a public kind?

I don't see why not. In fact, I see no reason to limit public philosophy to those endeavors that self-identify as such. As (a fictional) Eric Schwitzgebel exclaims in the (fictional) introduction to *Philosophy through Science Fiction Stories*: "Every public act is a kind of advertisement for a way of being. We are all always philosophers. Why does philosophy need to be some rarified, privileged activity?" (De Cruz et al. 2021, 3). Fictional Schwitzgebel's rhetorical question is a good one: If some public activity, figure, or work can contribute to philosophical understanding, then why should we resist calling it philosophy, and why should engaging with it in its philosophical aspects not count as philosophizing? Why can't public philosophy take the form of science fiction stories or blockbuster films, Brontë or Banksy, Lady Gaga at the Super Bowl, or Diogenes in the marketplace? And with respect to the history of philosophy, why should we be afraid of allowing CMS and other devotional works into our stories about the transmission of philosophical ideas? Indeed, if we can expand our notions of philosophy and its history in ways that focus

---

biltlich zôgen mit glichnusgebender rede, als verr es denn múglich ist, von den selben bildlosen sinnen, wie es in der warheit ze nemen ist, und lang red mit kurzen worten beschliessen. Seuse may even have himself devised or overseen the illustrations that would later be found alongside his metaphorical and allegorical language in various MHG manuscripts containing the *Exemplar* (Hamburger 1989, 23ff.).

less on policing modern disciplinary borders and more on cultivating a better understanding of the complexity of the past and present world we occupy, we might find ourselves with a more relevant and engaged discipline that can better contribute to world flourishing and knowledge of the "last things."

6 An Alternative Proposal: CMS *for* Innovative Public Philosophy

For those who remain resistant to the idea that CMS and other devotional works (whether in the form of text, image, music, or some other modality) can count as a form of something like medieval public philosophy, there is nevertheless a way in which they can be of value for our own public philosophical endeavors in the twenty-first century. First, they can *inspire* us to philosophical innovation: Whether or not CMS itself is philosophy, it puts on display the ways in which images and rhyme, satire and eroticism, allegory and critique can be used to cultivate understanding and re-orient individuals toward different ways of thinking and engaging with the world. Its transgressive nature within the boundaries of religious orthodoxy can show us how to begin "transgressing rather than policing" our own disciplinary boundaries today (Tanesini 2020), and it can remind us of the value of exploring means of communication that do not necessarily settle the matter for our audience, but rather encourage creative and innovative engagement with the ideas found therein. Whether tweeting aphoristically or composing a modern "broadsheet" on TikTok, penning a science fiction story or practicing embodied body-mapping, CMS can inspire us to seek out new ways of expressing old ideas—or to reach back to old genres to discuss new problems.

Second, CMS can *inform* our public-facing scholarship by itself providing content for engaged philosophical discussion. For example, the violent and abusive images in CMS are anything but unproblematic, especially from our standpoint today. Yet engaging critically with CMS can serve as a springboard for conversations concerning, for example, misogyny and the Church, spiritual trauma, or the ways that social imaginings concerning gender and embodiment inform religious and theological imaginings. The open format of the broadsheet can also be used to get participants to try and put themselves in a "medieval mindset" as someone who would have engaged with such imagery and to see what the philosophical world might look like from that vantage point. It can give us ways of thinking about suffering and its relation to meaning-making (even in a secular context), or it can make us think about what it is exactly that we want philosophy to *do* for us as spiritual beings.

7 Conclusion: Moving Forward by Looking Back

I have attempted to show here just a few of the ways in which one late medieval devotional narrative—namely, that of *Christ and the Loving*

Soul—can plausibly be read as a work of public philosophy. If I am right, then there might be good reason for historians of philosophy to revisit devotional texts and images and reclaim them for the philosophical canon. In fact, given that this literature reached a much wider audience than did scholastic texts, it is not unreasonable to think that they may have had a larger impact on the history of ideas than has heretofore been recognized. Rather than keeping the philosophical canon locked up in the scholastic ivory tower, then, we would do well to permit her to let down her tresses and to see what emerges when we as philosophers and theologians work together with scholars specializing in fields like art history, paleography, manuscript studies, iconography, semiotics, medieval literature, and so on to explore exactly how philosophical ideas made their way to the masses via genres, modalities, and media that appealed to the popular imagination—and how those ideas themselves may have been innovatively reshaped by such engagement.

Moreover, I think that recovering devotional literature and images for philosophy can help us as scholars responsible to the public to "come out of the shade," as Myisha Cherry (2017) counsels, and inspire us to make *our* philosophical work more "accessible in form and in medium" (22). It can remind us that, as the "silver ball [of wisdom] bounces round among us," philosophy is not about "knocking it out of each other's hands, and stealing it away and advertising that someone else does not have it," as Seuse's philosophers and theologians were wont to do in his *Horologium* (and we are still wont to do in our time).[56] If anything, this adversarial model of philosophy has led us to an impoverished understanding of philosophical innovation. It is time to correct this shortcoming by widening our attention and recovering the imaginative ladder that others have discarded after climbing. We may thus perhaps be able to begin saying what was previously only shown and to recover the practice of philosophy as a way of life—a modern *philosophia spiritualis* in community with others.

Amber L. Griffioen
University of Notre Dame
E-mail: amber.griffs@gmail.com

---

[56] Cp. *Watch*, 236ff.

References:

Banz, Romuald, ed. 1908. *Christus und die minnende Seele: Zwei spätmittelhochdeutsche mystische Gedichte*. Vol. 29 of *Germanistische Abhandlungen*. Breslau: M. & H. Marcus.

Borland, Jennifer. 2013. "Unruly Reading: The Consuming Role of Touch in the Experience of a Medieval Manuscript." In *Scraped, Stroked, and Bound: Materially Engaged Readings of Medieval Manuscripts*, edited by Jonathan Wilcox, 97–114. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols.

Bynum, Caroline Walker. 1994. *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*. New York: Zone Books.

Cherry, Myisha. 2017. "Coming Out of the Shade." In *Philosophy's Future: The Problem of Philosophical Progress*, edited by Russell Blackford and Damien Broderick, 21–30. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Collins, Brian J. 2020. "The Broad Nature and Importance of Public Philosophy." *Precollege Philosophy and Public Practice* 2: 72–87. https://doi.org/10.5840/p420204114.

De Cruz, Helen, Johan De Smedt, and Eric Schwitzgebel, eds. 2021. *Philosophy Through Science Fiction Stories: Exploring the Boundaries of the Possible*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Evans, G. R. 1993. *Philosophy and Theology in the Middle Ages*. London: Routledge.

Flasch, Kurt. 2015. *Meister Eckhart: Philosopher of Christianity*. Translated by Anne Schindel and Aaron Vanides. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Gebauer, Amy. 2010. *'Christus und die Minnende Seele': An Analysis of Circulation, Text, and Iconography*. Wiesbaden: Reichert.

Grant, Edward. 2007. *A History of Natural Philosophy: From the Ancient World to the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gregory, Rabia. 2016. *Marrying Jesus in Medieval and Early Modern Northern Europe: Popular Culture and Religious Reform*. London: Routledge.

Griffioen, Amber L. 2017. "Ich wird dich also an griffen / Das du mir nit mugist entwichen: Göttliche Aktivität, seelisches Leiden und die Rolle der Autonomie in Christus und die minnende Seele." In *Handelt Gott in der Welt? Neue Ansätze aus Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*, edited by Benedikt Göcke and Ruben Schneider. Regensburg: Pustet.

Griffioen, Amber L. and Kristopher G. Phillips. Forthcoming. "Via Transformativa: Reading Descartes' Meditations as a Mystagogical Text." In *Transformation and the History of Philosophy*, edited by G. A. Bruno and Justin Vlasits. New York: Routledge.

Hamburger, Jeffrey F. 1989. "The Use of Images in the Pastoral Care of Nuns: The Case of Heinrich Suso and the Dominicans." *The Art Bulletin* 71 (1): 20–46. https://doi.org/10.1080/00043079.1989.10788476.

Hamburger, Jeffrey F. 1998. "Medieval Self-Fashioning: Authorship, Authority, and Autobiography in Seuse's Exemplar." In *Christ Among the Medieval Dominicans: Representations of Christ in the Texts and Images of the Order of Preachers*, edited by Jr. Kent Emery, 430–461. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Karnes, Michelle. 2011. *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Keller, Hildegard Elisabeth. 1997. "Die minnende Seele in des Teufels Netz: Geschlechterpolemik kontrafaziert." In *Text im Kontext: Anleitung zur Lektüre deutscher Texte der frühen Neuzeit*, edited by Alexander Schwarz and Laure Abplanalp, Tausch 9, 109–126. Berlin: Peter Lang.

Keller, Hildegard Elisabeth. 1998. "Von ehelicher Privation zu erotischer Privatheit? Zur Allegorese der Geschlechterbeziehung in 'Christus und die minnende Seele'." In *Das Öffentliche und Private in der Vormoderne*, edited by Gert Melville and Peter von Moos, 461–498. Köln: Böhlau Verlag.

Keller, Hildegard Elisabeth. 2000. *My Secret Is Mine: Studies on Religion and Eros in the German Middle Ages*. Leuven: Peeters.

McGinn, Bernard. 2005. *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany (1300-1500)*. The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism 4. New York: Crossroad

Publications.

Newman, Barbara. 2002. "Henry Suso and the Medieval Devotion to Christ the Goddess." *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 2 (1): 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1353/scs.2002.0014.

Nguyen, C. Thi. 2019. "Manifesto for Public Philosophy." *Daily Nous*. July 1, 2019. https://dailynous.com/2019/07/01/manifesto-public-philosophy-guest-post-c-thi-nguyen/.

Rudy, Kathryn M. 2010. "Dirty Books: Quantifying Patterns of Use in Medieval Manuscripts Using a Densitometer." *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 2 (1/2): 1–44.

Rudy, Kathryn M. 2016. *Piety in Pieces: How Medieval Readers Customized Their Manuscripts*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers.

Spade, Paul Vincent. 2004. "Medieval Philosophy." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* Fall 2014 Edition, edited by Edward N. Zalta. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2004/entries/medieval-philosophy/.

Stapleton, Mog and Dave Ward. 2021. "Transaction or Transformation: Why Do Philosophy in Prisons?" *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry* 7 (2): 214–226.

Tanesini, Alessandra. 2020. "The Stinging and Transgressive Power of Public Philosophy." *oxford public philosophy* 2. https://www.oxfordpublicphilosophy.com/two/stinging-transgressive-power-of-public-philosophy.

Ulrich, Peter. 1995. *Imitatio et configuratio: Die philosophia spiritualis Heinrich Seuses als Theologie der Nachfolge des Christus passus*. Regensburg: Pustet Verlag.

Volfing, Annette. 2017. *The Daughter Zion Allegory in Medieval German Religious Writing*. New York: Routledge.

Weinberg, Justin. 2016. "What Does the Public Call What We Call 'Public Philosophy?'" *Daily Nous*. September 2, 2016. https://dailynous.com/2016/09/02/public-call-call-public-philosophy/.

Weinstein, Jack Russell. 2014. "What Does Public Philosophy Do? (Hint: It Does Not Make Better Citizens)." *Essays in Philosophy* 15 (1): 33–57. https://doi.org/10.7710/1526-0569.1488.

Williams-Krapp, Werner. 1989. "Bilderbogen-Mystik: Zu 'Christus und die minnende Seele'. Mit Edition der Mainzer Überlieferung." In *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Editionen und Studien zur deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters: Kurt Ruh zum 75. Geburtstag*, edited by Konrad Kunze, Johannes Gottfried Mayer, Bernhard Schnell, and Johannes G. Mayer, Texte und Textgeschichte 31, 350–364. Berlin: De Gruyter.