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# *Post-mortem Care of the Soul: Mechtild of Hackeborn's the Booke of Gosthye Grace*

Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa

*The Booke of Gosthye Grace* is the Middle English translation of *Liber Specialis Gratiae*, the revelations of Mechtild of Hackeborn, a German mystic and chantress of the convent of Helfta at the end of the thirteenth century. This essay argues that Mechtild's revelations demonstrate a unique interface between medicine and religion. In the late Middle Ages, spiritual care and cure were expected to be administered during one's life time and after death. Focussing on the health of the soul as evidenced in Mechtild's revelations on the last rite, *post-mortem* prayers and commemorations, this essay will demonstrate that the concept of the body and blood of Christ as *caritas* was central to the deliverance of souls from Purgatory and that the act of mercy performed for fellow Christians was steeped in the culture of redemptive reciprocity. At the end, it will reassess the popularity of the Middle English extracts of Mechtild's prayers in fifteenth-century England, also in the context of the care of the soul.

*In this world, which is essentially those regions of Europe under direct influence of the Frankish political and cultural traditions, death was omnipresent, not only in the sense that persons of all ages could and did die with appalling frequency and suddenness but also in the sense that the dead did not cease to be members of the human community. Death marked a transition, a change in status, but not an end. (Geary 2)*

*The Booke of Gosthye Grace* is the Middle English translation of *Liber Specialis Gratiae*, the revelations of Mechtild of Hackeborn, a German mystic and chantress of the Benedictine/Cistercian convent of Helfta at the end of the thirteenth century. The *Booke* consists of five parts: Part I is

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Mechtild's visions arranged around the seasons and holydays of the liturgical year; Part II lists the special graces bestowed on Mechtild; Part III gives guidance for "the helthe of manys sawle"; Part IV offers instruction to religious men and women; and Part V discusses prayers for the dying and the deceased.<sup>1</sup> Although Caroline Walker Bynum has discussed Mechtild's spirituality, and Rosalynn Voaden, and more recently C. Annette Grisé investigated the popularity and circulation of her revelations in fifteenth-century England, the text itself has generally escaped widespread scholarly attention.

This essay explores the idea of the health of the soul that permeates the *Booke*. In a pre-Cartesian society where body and soul were inextricably linked, aspects of devotional literature were predicated upon an interaction between medical and religious discourses, and Mechtild's treatment of this interaction renders her revelations unique. My focus in this essay is on the late medieval concern for the *post-mortem* care of the soul. Although in Christian belief death was thought to be a transition to a better state of spiritual health, as it is nowadays, people in late medieval society were constantly preoccupied by fears of *mors improvisa* (sudden death) and concentrated their minds on the health of the soul. Their preoccupation was interconnected with the teaching of the late medieval Church, whose concern was the promotion of spiritual rather than physical health for the living and the dead. The examination of Mechtild's revelations which follows will illuminate the increasing importance of the last rite, *post-mortem* intercessions and commemorations – the three rituals which guarantee a better state of spiritual health. At the end, I will re-assess the popularity of the Middle English extracts of Mechtild's prayers, also in the context of the care of the soul.

Medieval death rituals were founded in part on the classical idea of the recovery of one's soul. As Paul Binski argues, "the quasi-medical, or 'thaumaturgical,' character of medieval death rituals owed much to the heritage of Greco-Roman medicine" (33). When Christianity inherited the practice of ancient rituals, Christian death rituals became more about healing than dying. In addition, there was the widespread concept of *Christus medicus* in the Christian faith during the Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup> Behind

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<sup>1</sup> Halligan 38. All references to *The Booke of Gostlye Grace* (hereafter *Booke*) are from this edition and will be followed by part, chapter and page number.

<sup>2</sup> For Mechtild's vision of *Christus medicus*, see *Booke*, I, 43 197

this concept is a belief that the chief cause of sickness was Original Sin. Theologians such as St Augustine (c. 340-430) saw the Passion of Christ as the best medicine through which man might recover his spiritual and physical health.<sup>3</sup>

Mechtild's vision of the last rite can be contextualised within these therapeutic traditions. When Mechtild attends the last rite of a sister in sickbed, she prays for her and has a vision of the sister's soul kneeling before Christ, who shows the sister his red wounds as she receives the sacrament. The sister's soul worships the "heylefulle woundes of [her] holy luffere Ihesu Cryste" (V, 2 556), and gives a salutation to the Holy Trinity.<sup>4</sup> Although the last rite itself has sacramental resonances, Mechtild's vision distinctively stresses the therapeutic power of Christ's body and blood and incorporates medical concepts into a late medieval mystical discourse, a discourse which had evolved through intensive devotion to Christ's humanity shown by his sufferings during the Passion.

Christ's wounds were hailed as the essence of his humanity. The eucharistic Christ who bleeds and offers himself for the salvation of humankind stimulated the devotion to Christ's humanity and related devotion to his blood, heart, and wounds, all of which symbolised the Eucharist.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, devotion to the Body of Christ was increasingly emphasised in the wake of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), which not only advocated the centrality of the Mass in Christian life but considered the sacrament to be the protection and remedy for spiritual and bodily ills.<sup>6</sup> Early in the *Booke*, Christ confides to Mechtild that his blood was deemed to be the "medycine of sawles heyle" (I 35 178) while his fresh red wounds were "verrey medycine of heyle to mannys sawle" (I 38 183). Privileged in its sacramental implications, the wound of Christ's side, from which flows the nourishing and cleansing liquid, was worshipped as a fountain of his redemptive love.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in Christ's maternal role in the scheme of salvation, his blood was thought to be the "birthing blood, living and red," which anticipated spiritual rebirth and salvation.<sup>8</sup> The wound of Christ, therefore, is the source of eucharistic medicine as revealed in the sacrament of the Mass and the

<sup>3</sup> St Augustine, Book 10, chapter 27 432.

<sup>4</sup> *Booke*, V 2 556-8.

<sup>5</sup> For eucharistic piety, see Bynum, *Wonderful Blood* 271-72; *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, chapter 4; Rubin 302-19.

<sup>6</sup> The Mass became "in every sense a *medicina sacramentalis*, suffused with occult power": Rawcliffe, *Leprosy* 339; see also Horden 141.

<sup>7</sup> A related devotion to the Sacred Heart was cultivated by the nuns at Helfta: Finnegan 133-43.

<sup>8</sup> Bynum, *Wonderful Blood* 159. For the efficacy of Christ's blood, see Millett 45.

locus of redemptive love through which one receives eternal life and health.

Following the last communion administered to the dying sister, Mechtild sees two angels preparing two basins to wash away her stains of sin with the water of mercy, in keeping with the words of the Scripture: *Misericordia et veritas precedent faciem tuam* [Mercy and truth shall go before thy face] (Ps. 88.15). Notably, instead of the priest, Christ sits before the sister while the Virgin Mary, sitting at her head, prays for her. Christ assures the sister of the “halwynge & heyle of bodye ande sowlle” (V 2 557) by blessing her with the token of the holy cross. After this anointing, Christ commends the sister’s spotless soul to his Mother: “Lo, modere, I commende þis sawlle to þe, whiche þowe schalte presente to my syght withowtene anye spotte of synne” (V 2 558). This vision illuminates not only the role of Christ as physician of the soul but also of the Virgin, who acts as a nurse in the service of her Son.

The eucharistic and medical overtone of Mechtild’s vision can be compared with Henry, Duke of Lancaster’s penitential meditation in *Le Livre de seyntz Medicines*. Employing wounds as a dominant metaphor, Henry envisions himself as mortally wounded by sin and pleads for urgent medical help. In the process of treatment, Henry asks the Lord to give him medical ointments made from his precious blood.<sup>9</sup> Each spiritual wound in Henry’s body must be treated with ointment made with blood from the corresponding part of Christ’s suffering body, for the wounds of Christ act as antidotes to sin. As Henry meditates upon Christ’s suffering body, he seems to see his bleeding wound as the place from whence the therapeutic and spiritual blood flows. Ultimately it comes to signify the source of divine love for sinful humanity.<sup>10</sup>

Late medieval preoccupation with Christ’s wounds is reflected in the practice of saying the *Pater Noster* in veneration of the wounds. This prayer, the staple of late medieval devotion, emerges as a therapeutic and efficacious prayer carrying a freight of medical imagery in Mechtild’s vision (IV 32 538 etc). For example, when she offers up five thousand and four hundred *Pater Nosters* said by her congregation in memory of Christ’s wounds (IV 32 537), Christ appears to her, spreading out his hands with open wounds, and says to her that his wounds would soothe the wrath of God the Father: “Whan I hange on the crosse alle my woundes schewede þame openlye ande þay alle syngulerly criede to God the fadere ande prayede for mannys hele, ande so 3itt into this daye with a manere crye, þay slake þe wrath of þe fadere fro a synfulle man” (IV

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<sup>9</sup> *Le Livre* 170-88.

<sup>10</sup> See further Yoshikawa 407-8.

32 538). Moreover, as Christ gladly receives the prayers in worship of his wounds, he identifies himself with a poor almsman who rejoices in taking daily bread, and assures Mechtild of the merit of worshipping the wounds with the *Pater Noster*:

Ande this I telle the þat þare myȝt neuere pore almessemene be made more gladde when he toke almesse whiche he hadde with his importunite cryenge ande askynge als I with gladnesse and ioyfull[nes] receyues a prayere whiche es ȝyffene to me in worscheppe of my woundys. Also I telle the þat þat prayere may nevere be sayde deuoutelye & intentelye for any mane botte þat itt schalle gette hym the state of helth. (IV 32 538)<sup>11</sup>

The repetition of the *Pater Noster* according to the number of Christ's wounds was also perceived to be related to the ways in which the prayer would become therapeutic. When Mechtild says five *Pater Nosters* to Christ's wounds for a friend who recently passed away, she asks him what remedy a dead soul will obtain from that prayer.<sup>12</sup> He tells her that the soul will have five benefits – protection, consolation, hope, trust and joy of heaven, all of which are ministered by the angels (V 11 581).

Mechtild's vision of the last rite, however, not only illuminates the healing power of Christ's wounds but provides a testimony to the widespread belief in the efficacy of intercession by the Virgin and saints. When the Virgin is named by a priest in the litany of the saints, she commends that the sister be embraced by Christ as his bride:<sup>13</sup> "Lo, sone, I gyffe þe þis spowse to þe evere to be in thy presence ande in thy holye beclypynges" (V 2 557). As Carole Rawcliffe argues, "[the Virgin's] role as a mediatrix between sinful humanity and God ensured a special place for Marian devotions in the liturgy for the dead" (*Medicine for the Soul* 104).

At the same time, the increasing demand for intercessory prayer is germane to what Jacques Le Goff called "the birth of Purgatory." After the idea of Purgatory had become well established in the twelfth century, the demand for intercession and remembrance to bring about swift delivery from the pains of Purgatory increased. As Eamon Duffy argues, "the souls in Purgatory were part of the church of the redeemed, and

<sup>11</sup> A passage about "pore almessemene" appears in an extract (Cambridge, University Library, MS Dd. xiv. 26[3]), attributed to Mechtild, although the translator of this extract took some liberties: see Voaden 64-65 and my argument below.

<sup>12</sup> It was a custom of her convent to say the prayer as soon as they were informed that anybody was dead: see *Booke*, V 11 581.

<sup>13</sup> Although the names of the intercessors were said in litany during the canonical Hours throughout the Middle Ages, intercession by the Virgin became increasingly efficacious as the cult of the Virgin grew in the later Middle Ages.

prayer for the dead was one of the principal expressions of the ties that bound the community together" (348-49). Moreover, since intercession was thought to be a spiritual regimen to counteract the lethal consequences of the seven deadly sins, the accumulation of intercessory prayer as a treasury of merit was believed to result in a speedier journey through Purgatory and ultimately a means to allow the deceased soul to obtain Paradise.

Indeed, mass-singing, intercessory prayer and alms-giving were the predominant features of *post-mortem* care of the soul in a society where judgement loomed frighteningly large.<sup>14</sup> In this context, the remembrance of the dead became a key element of the *post-mortem* ritual in the medieval Church. As the Christian era was celebrated in a single liturgical year, the prayers for the death of Christ, saints or worthy individuals were structured into the year as a seamless progression of prayers. I argue that this temporal and spatial seamlessness united the prayers on earth with eternal salvation. The remembrance and anniversaries of the dead became integrated into Christian history, "forming a framework not only for the year, but also for God's plan for earth, which incorporated all of history and the future" (Daniel 13). Mass as *post-mortem* ritual, therefore, was believed to be especially "inclusive of and interactive between all generations: the living and the dead and God" (Hill 153), and such a spiritual aid was considered to be one of the works of mercy done by the living to help the dead. Moreover, since it was believed that prayers for specific souls were the most effective way of ensuring spiritual health, it became important for the wealthy to have daily Masses said by chantry priests, which was often done by leaving testamentary bequests for commemoration in religious houses where votive masses might be regularly celebrated on their behalf by a chaplain. For others, it was important that they be remembered yearly on the anniversary of their death or burial.

One of Mechtild's visions bears witness to the efficacy of her intercessory prayers. When Mechtild is praying for the earl, the founder of the convent,<sup>15</sup> on the day following his death, she sees his soul weeping before Christ's feet, sorrowing over his unworthiness while he had been living in the world. Out of compassion, Mechtild prays that Christ's tears would remedy the earl's soul (V 4 560). In the third month after his death, the earl appears to her again. This time Mechtild asks him what was most helpful and profitable for his soul after death. He tells

<sup>14</sup> In medieval hospitals, alms-giving was directly linked to the benefactor's salvation: see Gilchrist 8-9.

<sup>15</sup> This appears to be a mistake. The earl is likely the descendant of the founder, Burhard, count of Mansfeld: see Halligan 105, note 560/9.

her that “[m]assis syngynge, gyffynge offe allmus, ande clene prayere þat commeth fro a clene herte ande clene fro dedelye synne” (V 5 565) are of help. Noticeably, as the soul of the earl reveals, the morals of those who said prayers come under close scrutiny, since intercession by those who had made full atonement for their own sins was thought to be more effective. This is particularly obvious in the medieval hospital, where inmates were carefully chosen from the rank of the respectable poor, “on the assumption that prayers said by individuals of unimpeachable moral character would find greater favour with God” (Rawcliffe, *Medicine for the Soul* 106).

Moreover, like the *Pater Noster*, the Mass was considered a unit of merit and so the efficacy of the Mass increased as the number of masses said for the soul increased.<sup>16</sup> The votive Mass of the Five Wounds of Jesus, one of the most popular votive Masses of the late Middle Ages, was thought to be efficacious for delivering from Purgatory the soul for whom the masses were celebrated.<sup>17</sup> In this context, the trental, which consists of a set of thirty requiem Masses celebrated on thirty consecutive days, is an important occasion for remembrance of the dead and communication between the living and the dead. During the trental observed for the earl, Mechtild has a vision in which Christ stands before the priest and says to the congregation that the oblation a priest receives from faithful men is profitable for the health of the soul (V 4 562). At the end of this vision, she sees the soul of the earl going about the altar and singing these words: “Lorde, I knawe itt wele þat bowe haffes betakene my bodye to deyde for helth, ioye, ande comforth of my sowle” (V 4 562). Thus, the soul of the earl has secured spiritual health by virtue of the trental masses he bequeathed.

However, the hope for early deliverance from Purgatory is not limited to the wealthy who could afford to bequeath expensive spiritual services. Christ guarantees the efficacy of the *Pater Noster* said for the dead souls, and gives Mechtild a detailed exposition on each petition of this prayer (V 10 575-80). Christ teaches her how a man should pray in his heart recalling the loving redemption of Christ and ask the Father that the souls in pain would receive the love of his son’s heart (V 10 576-77). When Mechtild says the *Pater Noster* with a devout intention as inspired by Christ, she sees a great multitude of souls being delivered from Purgatory (V 10 580).

<sup>16</sup> Tanner 105.

<sup>17</sup> Medieval hospitals also offered masses of the Five Wounds of Christ, “which were usually requested in multiples of five for the commemoration of the dead”: Rawcliffe, *Medicine for the Soul* 128.

Significantly, as Christ continues to instruct Mechtild about the efficacy of intercessory prayer, his emphasis moves from the benefit of the suffering souls to that of the person who performs intercessions for the dead. He tells her that when a person prays for any dead soul out of compassion or charity,<sup>18</sup> s/he will be “partynere of alle goodeneses þat be done in holy cherche, specially for þat same þat es deyde” (V 11 581) and that s/he will be granted the remedy and health of the soul when passing out of this world.<sup>19</sup>

Behind this vision is a system of reciprocity firmly established in late medieval society. It is widely known that the recipients of a corporal work of mercy, such as the sick poor in medieval hospital, were expected to reciprocate for the benefit of benefactor with their own prayer, which was also understood as one of seven spiritual works of mercy.<sup>20</sup> Although Mechtild’s vision emphasises the reward of one who prays for the dead soul rather than the reciprocal work expected from the recipient of the work of mercy (in this case, Mechtild as the recipient of the charity provided by the founder of the convent), nevertheless, it elucidates that “reciprocity was quintessential both to their practical execution and to the perception of their spiritual merit” (Hill 121). As Liz Herbert McAvoy argues, with Purgatory taking on an eschatological role, “an organised intercession for souls passing through this liminal realm” was understood to “benefit not only those suffering souls but also those performing intercession on their behalf in the world,” and so the system of reciprocity enforced “communication between the three realms of the afterlife and the world” (draft 5 143).

Furthermore, Mechtild had an illuminating vision of this reciprocal activity, a vision of the Mass sung on the anniversary of the death of the founder of the monastery, whose act of charity was remembered through mass singing. The soul of the lord enjoys bliss in heaven because of his commendable work of founding the monastery where, governed by an abbess, a congregation of nuns offers worship to God:

In his corowne he hadde als many flowres of golde als he hadde ande schulde wynne sowlys to God in þat monasterye. Also two abbesses whiche gouernede that monasterye stode be hym, one on the right syde ande anothere on the lefte syde of hym. . . To þase abbesses owre lorde gaffe þankynge with fulle pleysyng ande softe wordes, forasmuche as neuere sawle perryschede of þame þat were commyttede to þare kepyng. (V 3 558-59)

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion on “feeling compassion,” see McNamer 1-57.

<sup>19</sup> See the extract in Cambridge, University Library, MS Did, xiv. 26(3), in Voaden 65 and my discussion on this extract and fn 28 below.

<sup>20</sup> The spiritual works of mercy were to counsel, correct, console, relieve, forbear, pray and instruct: *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* 1302.

Christ explains that since the lord was a man of benevolence, “[God’s] sapience ande wysdome fonde hym þis waye of helthe” (V 3 559). Moreover, he tells her that since the lord loved the congregation as a means to worshipping God and ensuring the health of his soul, he has claimed the merit of the nuns and enjoys all their good deeds as his own: “[the lord] haffes chalanchede [claimed] to hym the merittes of eche of þame be a specyalle propyrte ande ioyeth nowe in blysse of alle here goode dedys ande goodnessys as of his owne” (V 3 559). Central to this vision are the images upon the lord’s clothing, where Mechtild saw “alle þe ymages of þat congregacion, boyth of þame þat were in hevene blysse, ande of þam þat were on lyve atte þat tyme” (V 3 558). This extraordinary vision conveys that the sisters of the monastery (both the living and the dead) are tightly woven into the fabric which clothes the soul of the lord and that the health of his soul is dependent on the good works of the sisters. The vision illuminates the way Mechtild understands the nature of the spiritual reciprocity between the founder and the congregation of sisters, living and dead.

The culture of reciprocity is further illuminated by an account of a spiritual work of mercy which was granted to Mechtild by her benefactors. When Mechtild considered herself unworthy to receive spiritual gifts from God since she thought of herself as not worshipping God sufficiently, two persons, who had learned about her desire to praise God fully, ordered that an anthem, *Ex quo Omnia*, the antiphon for the feast of the Holy Trinity, be said to God for her as long as she lived on earth (V 17 592). After this arrangement, when Mechtild offers up worship to God in the union of divine love, she sees a great river of water flowing from Christ’s heart, which washes the filth away from the souls of her friends because of their charity (V 17 592). As Christ tells her that “[a]lle werkes of charyte purfyfe a man fro alle venyalle synne[,] [b]otte deydelye [synne] muste be waschede ande done awaye by lowlye confessioun ande grete ande moche contricion” (V 17 592), Mechtild understands that the river of clear water flows in response to the charitable acts of her friends. It is a reward for their work of mercy. Moreover, she hears Christ saying to her:

Also I reserue specyallye to me alle werkes of charite in my herte als [a] dere beluffede tresour into þe tyme þat he come to me whiche haffes fulylede þoo dedys ande werkes of charite, ande þan I wille 3elde þame to hym into encrees of his meritte and of his blysse. (V 17 592-93)

This confirms that those who perform works of mercy will be rewarded by God, who reserves the works of charity as “tresour” in his heart.

Furthermore, I would like to argue that the river of water flowing from the wound of Christ's heart is emblematic of redemptive, reciprocal love, not only between the actor and the recipient, but also between the human soul and Christ. "In a society where works of mercy were interpreted as "services to both the human and the divine body at the same time" (Hill 123), it meant that whether corporal or spiritual, a work of mercy was understood as the accomplishment of a redemptive ideal. Just as a prayer in memory of Christ's wounds is grounded in the concept of the body and blood of Christ as *caritas*, a work of mercy performed for one's fellow Christian is rewarded by Christ's self-giving, redemptive act of charity. Steeped in the culture of redemptive reciprocity centred on the body of Christ, Mechtild's vision assumes a sacramental resonance and illuminates the Eucharist as "'the origin and bond of charity,' uniting the dead as well as the living in the body of Christ" (Rawcliffe, *Medicine for the Soul* 107).<sup>21</sup>

To conclude, it is useful to reassess the popularity of the Middle English excerpts of Mechtild's prayers, which testifies powerfully to the anxiety about salvation in late medieval English society. Apart from two complete versions of *The Booke*,<sup>22</sup> there are a number of excerpts by, or attributed to Mechtild in devotional works and compilations produced for a lay audience.<sup>23</sup> As C. Annette Grisé argues, "many of the extracts and prayers from continental women visionaries that circulated independently in late-medieval English devotional manuscripts and texts emphasize the holy woman's role as a specialist in prayer and devotional practices" (165). Voaden states that one translator of Mechtild's revelations made a patchwork of extracts "to form a relatively homogenous homily to suit [his] own didactic purpose" (65). Adding to these views, I would argue that the extracts of Mechtild's prayers can be contextualised in the late medieval devotional milieu in which the *Pater Noster* and Christ's wounds played a pivotal role in ensuring the health of the soul.

A reference to Mechtild and the *Pater Noster* is found, for example, in a section of Carthusian devotional material in London, British Library, MS Lansdowne 379. The passage from Mechtild comes at the end of a passage concerning the efficacy of the *Revelations of Hundred Pater Nosters*, a series of seven daily meditations on the shedding of Christ's blood. In this extract, a Carthusian monk of London wrote about the devotions to

<sup>21</sup> See also Aquinas, III, Supplement, question 71, article 9.

<sup>22</sup> London, British Library, MS Egerton 2006 and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 220.

<sup>23</sup> *The Myroure of Oure Ladye* contains two excerpts from *The Booke*, although the translator took some liberty. The attribution to "Seynt Maude" lent authority to some common prayers and her name became "a kind of free-floating talisman" (Voaden 60).

a brother at Mountgrace, who not only felt joy and consolation, but, following every hundred *Pater Nosters*, said a little Latin prayer allegedly used by Mechtild in mind of Christ's wounds, hoping that the addition of Mechtild's prayer would enhance the efficacy of the devotions:<sup>24</sup>

*Domine Jhesu, filii dei viui, suscipe hanc orationem in amore illo super excellentissimo in quo oram vulneram tui sanctissimi corporis sustinuisti et michi miserere et omnibus peccatoribus cunctis que fidelibus tam viuis quam defunctis amen.* That ys to say my lorde Jhesucrist þe sone of almyghty god receyve this prayer in that most excellent love in the which thou souffred all the woundes of thy most holy body and have mercy of me and all synners and on all crysten people qwyk & ded Amen.<sup>25</sup>

In this extract, the Latin prayer accompanies an English translation which was probably inserted for the convenience of its lay audience. The writer of this passage continues to recount that the monk sent copies of the *Revelation of the Hundred Pater Nosters* and of Mechtild's prayer to his friends,<sup>26</sup> thereby providing a testimony to the popularity of the prayer in memory of Christ's wounds.

Furthermore, the extracts in Cambridge, University Library, MS Dd.xiv. 26(3) include the passage noted above stating that Christ would receive the prayers in worship of his wounds as if he were a "pore almesman."<sup>27</sup> In addition, Christ tells Mechtild that if a man prays for a dead soul compassionately and charitably, he shall participate in Christ's goodness and receive remedy and health of his soul when he passes out of this world.<sup>28</sup> The extracts emphasise the reward of a person who, out of compassion and charity, performs intercession for the dead souls. The message here is both didactic and practical, in that the reader learns that a spiritual work of mercy will be duly rewarded when s/he passes out of the world.

The popularity of Mechtild's revelations and prayers in the form of manuscripts and excerpts shows that the idea of charity and reward was deeply embedded in late medieval cultural consciousness. Furthermore, Mechtild's revelations bear witness to the way that the Passion was understood as therapeutic and medicinal and that the living continued to offer intercessory prayer for the dead in mind of Christ's wounds. This brings us back to the epigraph of this essay: the *post-mortem* care of the

<sup>24</sup> See Grisé 170-71.

<sup>25</sup> London, British Library, MS Lansdowne 379, ff. 52r-53r, quoted from Voaden 63-64. Cf. *Booke*, IV 538, lines 20-539, line 9.

<sup>26</sup> Voaden 63-64.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *Booke*, IV 32 538 and fn 11 above.

<sup>28</sup> Voaden 65. Cf. *Booke*, V 11 581 and fn 19 above.

soul was expected to be administered during one's life time and after death, in its role in the cure of souls for eternal salvation, for "the dead did not cease to be members of the human community" (Geary 2), but remained within a system of loving reciprocity in late medieval society.

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