Stephanie Béreiziat-Lang and Michael R. Ott

From Tattoo to Stigma: Writing on Body and Skin

1 Premedieval Bodies and Ancient Otherness

Human skin has always been an immediately evident and readily available medium to which marks and signs can be applied. For instance, 61 tattoos have been identified on the body of “the iceman” Ötzi, the more than five thousand year old mummy found in the Alps in 1991 on a glacier at the Austrian-Italian border.¹ Crosses and parallel lines forming patterns on his skin are now distinguishable via new photographic techniques; but their significance is lost to us. With no textual source to help us explain the mysterious meaning of these tattoos, it is hard to decide whether they were made for aesthetic, therapeutic or religious reasons (or some combination thereof, as in the case of magical practices).² And yet these age-old lines and crosses on Ötzi’s skin may help to challenge our common understanding of script and writing as a system of significant signs identified primarily to encode speech and language. As far as bodies and skin are concerned, we have to develop a broader perspective, taking into account various forms of corporeal marking. Ötzi’s tattoos may be considered as a corporeal “proto-script”, marking the body, making it readable and extending its natural expressive potential. Although these signs may not be alphabetical characters, they are an extraordinary form of writing that transforms the human body into a text demanding to be read. After all, living human bodies and their surfaces provide a very special material, worthy of exceptional practices and discourses.

Historically, it is difficult to estimate the cultural significance and scope of tattoos and similar types of corporeal inscriptions. Since archaeological remnants are subject to decay, almost everything we know about marks and writing on skin stems from written records, sources that are also sparse and not always unequivocal. One main difficulty lies in the vocabulary. The word “tattoo” denoting the insertion of pigments into the skin, for example, came into the English language (and to other languages as well) by way of colonialism: James Cook introduced the Polynesian word for “to

¹ See Zink 2016, especially 46–56.

² See Renaut 2004.

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mark” after observing this practice in Tahiti. The Greek term *stigmata* is much older. It refers to corporeal marking in Latin texts and it creates a direct link between the phenomenon in antique cultures and the Christian imaginary, even as the cultural significance of the practices varied over time.³

As a specific body-script, corporeal inscriptions may be used to write, often by force, social relations and hierarchies upon the very flesh of men and women; or they might enable someone to fashion his or her own body, following a script of individual identity or showing affiliation towards a certain group. Earliest written accounts originate from antique Mediterranean civilizations; although these records attribute markings on human bodies regularly either to foreign “barbarians” or deviant persons. Tattooing practices are mentioned for the whole Northern African space—an outstanding example are the Thracians—as well as the Western Balkan Peninsula.⁴ While Germanic tribes presumably did not practice permanent tattooing, they used corporal painting as an analogous bodily marking practice (if Latin historiography and ethnography are to be trusted).⁵ In order to distinguish themselves from such cultures, the Mediterranean “high cultures” reject the practice for themselves, construing the tattoo as a mark of social difference and, especially, subordination. Greeks and Romans used tattooing or branding to permanently stigmatise the bodies of criminals and slaves in the form of punitive marks.⁶ The principle behind this attribution is pretty much clear: while one’s own body remains unsullied, the skin of others may be marked and stained. Old Testament prohibitions against any cuttings and printed marks (except for circumcision) suggest a similar stance in Jewish culture.⁷

It seems as if these antique practices of marking the body were mostly forgotten during the Middle Ages. If there were tattoos in significant numbers, they would have been “circulating most actively on the margins”, as Jane Caplan notes: “The tattoo has been a promiscuously travelling sign in Western culture, moving literally on the homeless bodies of the slaves, criminals, pilgrims, sailors, soldiers [...]”.⁸ Early Christians may have adapted these marks of deviance to signal their affiliation with the new religion, writing “J. N.” (*Jesus Nazarenius*) or the letter *tau* “τ” (because of its resemblance to the cross) on their arms or palms. In doing so, they constituted themselves as an excluded and disdained community, re-semanticising and subverting the corporeal signs of slavery, “appropriating the identity of slave or criminal in such a way as to translate the humiliating mark of political subjugation into an inscription

³ See Jones 1987, 139.

⁴ Renaut mentions several sources, for example: Herodotus, *Histoires*, V, 6; Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses* 14.19–20, see Renaut 2004, 88.

⁵ “Certains guerriers germaniques (Tacite, *Germanie*, 43, 6) et bretons (César, *Guerre des Gaules*, 5, 14) se badigeonnaient le corps de noir ou de bleu avant de partir au combat. Ces peintures corporelles ont été confondues dès l’Antiquité avec des tatouages indélébiles” (Renaut 2004, 89).

⁶ See Gustafson 2000; Jones 1987, 2000.

⁷ See Lev. 19:28.

⁸ Caplan 2000, xv.

of divine election”.⁹ In a similar way, pilgrims and crusaders may have acquired tattoos and brandings in the Holy Land, thereby expressing the desire for a visible and somatically experienceable distinction.¹⁰

We find this deliberate “marking” of Christian difference in the context of medieval *imitatio Christi*, when believers receive stigmata, experiencing the wounds inflicted on Christ’s body during the crucifixion on their own bodies. Although stigmata are, like Ötzi’s tattoos, strictly speaking neither writing nor alphabetic script, they are nonetheless distinctive, readable, and profoundly socially significant. However, in contrast to Ötzi’s tattoos, which we can view for ourselves, medieval religious stigmata are only documented in textual accounts. Yet, regardless of whether reported stigmata were real or not, they represent an important and widely circulating discourse, crucially influencing the medieval image of corporeal signs and bodily marks.

This chapter shall explore medieval examples of script-bearing bodies in two sections: first we briefly consider instances of magical runes applied to and incorporated into bodies in Old Norse poetry before exploring in more detail Christian negotiations of the body as a medium in (auto-)biographies of saints and in mystical texts. Starting with stigmata, modelled on Jesus Christ, we follow the transition from externally applied marks to self-inflicted—“auto-poietic”—corporeal writing. We will then take a quick glance at secular literature, such as the accounts of *Richard Coer de Lyon*, Dante’s *Divina Commedia* and the early modern *Historia von D. Johann Fausten*. These texts clearly show a connection to religious contexts but often extend their expressive potential by developing a dynamic bodily performance, closely linked to the respective storyline.

2 Runic Magic and Christian Stigmata

Old Norse poetry represents an intriguing and extraordinary culture of corporeal writing. Since magical powers are often ascribed to runic letters, they are able to affect not only things but also human bodies. *Sigrdrífumál* (“Sigrdrifa’s speech”), which is part of the *Poetic Edda* (written down in the thirteenth century), offers a significant example of the corporeal potential of runes. Odin, the Germanic god of wisdom, sorcery, poetry and the runes, puts the Valkyrie Sigrdrifa to sleep, using a rune written on her body as sleeping spell. Sigurd, who finds the sleeping Valkyrie and awakens her, asks her to teach him wisdom. She hands him a drinking-horn with mead, and then explains the force and effectiveness of runes:¹¹

⁹ Burrus 2003, 405.

¹⁰ Fleming 2001, 107, with Early Modern evidence that might indicate a long tradition.

¹¹ In the ninth stanza Sigrdrifa gives some advice on runes for childbirth that are supposed to be scratched into the palms of the hands. In another Old Norse poem from the second half of the thir-

<i>Qlrunar scaltu kunna, ef þú vill, annars</i>	Ale-runes you will want, if another man's wife
<i>qvæn</i>	
<i>vélit þic í trygð, ef þú trúir;</i>	tries to betray your trust;
<i>á horni scal þær rista oc á handar baki</i>	scratch them on your drinking-horn, the back of your hand
<i>oc merkia á nagli Nauð.</i>	and the "need" rune on your nail.
<i>Full scal signa oc við fári síá</i>	With this sign your horn can never harm you;
<i>oc verpa lauki í lög:</i>	dip a leek in your drink;
<i>þá ec þat veit, at þér verðr aldri</i>	then I know you will never find
<i>meinblandinn miðr</i>	death mixed into your mead.
(Edda 1962, 191)	(Poems of the Elder Edda 1990, 8–9)

This advice is for when one is offered a welcoming drink as a guest.¹² "Need" (*Nauð*), the n-rune, which is supposed to be applied to a fingernail and the back of one's hand, seems to have magical qualities. Although the writing of runes is just one of the actions described, it establishes a connection between the marked vessel, the marked person, and the power of runic writing. As we can see, runes and script possess power that goes far beyond the preservation and transmission of messages.

Magical practices involving corporeal writing, such as those used in mystical or occult healing, can take the form of writing applied to the body's surface, as well as the literal incorporation of text. Script-bearing amulets were not only attached to the body; biblical verses, dissolved in water, could also be ingested.¹³ The magical treatise MS. e Mus. 219 (late thirteenth century) from Oxford's Bodleian Library, for example, indicate a cure for men seized by a demon:

you should take a piece of parchment and write on it the sign of the cross and the opening of the gospel according to John. Then you should scrape the words off the parchment into a bowl, and give these scrapings to the afflicted person to drink, along with holy water.¹⁴

While in *Sigrdrífumál* the reiteration of the rune guarantees the fusion of body and text, in the case of the magical treatise the fusion is achieved via the digestion of Holy Scripture. In both cases, however, there are additional effects produced by this amalgamation of text and body: protection against danger and poison in one case; exorcism of a demon in the other. These combinations of a corporeal sign with the ingestion of a script-containing magic beverage in a vessel also show some similarities with the Christian Eucharist.¹⁵

teenth century, *Sólarljóð* ("The Song of the Sun"), often compared to Dante's *Divina Commedia*, sinners are portrayed with bloody runes on their chests (*Sólarljóð* 2007, 287–357, stanza 61).

¹² See von See et al. 2006, 559.

¹³ See Healy 2016, 1237.

¹⁴ Quoted in: Kieckhefer 1989, 74. We would like to thank Sylvia Huot for drawing our attention to this passage.

¹⁵ For textual ingestion and eucharistic references in general see also Rubin 1991.

Unlike these accounts of concrete practices that apply script to the human body, other texts offer more imaginative scenes of corporeal writing that lend themselves to metafictional readings. In those narrations, the boundaries are often blurred between corporeal script as a physical phenomenon and its metaphorical use as a “to-pos”. These narrative texts can benefit from the two complementary modes of transformation which Michel de Certeau has identified with regard to the corporeality of writing: *intextuation* (transforming body into text) and *encarnation* (transforming text into body).¹⁶ Mystical narratives thus feature a constant interplay, transforming bodies into texts and texts into bodies. Hence we see medieval texts reconfiguring the foundational Bible verses from the Revelation of St John and the *Cantus cantorum* deploying a range of possibilities to articulate the contact with God in terms of an inscription on the body.¹⁷ *Pone me ut signaculum super cor tuum, ut signaculum super brachium tuum*—Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm—indicates *Cantus cantorum* 8:6, referring to both an external, visible marking on the skin and an interior, more intimate heart-inscription. The testimonial character of visible skin-writings (as stigmata) and the mystery of the hidden marks of sanctity within the heart are the two vectors of medieval hagiographic interest. Both are readable as a form of *imitatio Christi*.

The “scar-writing” (*Narbenschrift*)¹⁸ of stigmata makes the saint’s body a medium of divine communication and makes readable a (lost) divine autograph.¹⁹ The marks of the crucifixion born by Saint Francis, the first recorded stigmatic in the early thirteenth century, allow him to imitate Christ—and many more will follow Francis’s example in the centuries to come. In hagiographic accounts, the saints re-perform and remember the passion with the help of corporeal writing. The textual enactment of those stigmata is clearly expressed, for example, in Caesarius of Heisterbach’s *Dialogus Miraculorum* (c. 1220). In this reflection about the suffering skin as a parchment and Christ’s body as an open book that enables a direct, non-mediated reading of the Scripture, Caesarius equates the scars with written signs:²⁰

In pelle siquidem corporis eius scriptae erant litterae minores et nigrae, per lividas plagas flagellorum; litterae rubeae et capitales, per infixiones clavorum; puncta etiam et virgulae, per punctiones spinarum. Bene pellis eadem prius fuerat multiplici percussione pumicata, colaphis et sputis cretata, arundine liniata.

¹⁶ Certeau 1990, 206: “[S]ans cesse, la loi s’écrit sur les corps. [...] Elle en fait son livre. Ces écritures effectuent deux opérations complémentaires: par elles, les êtres vivants sont ‘mis en texte’, mués en signifiants des règles (c’est une intextuation) et, d’autre part, la raison ou le Logos d’une société ‘se fait chair’ (c’est une incarnation)”.

¹⁷ “Hurt not the earth nor the sea nor the trees, till we sign the servants of our God in their foreheads” (Revelation 7:3).

¹⁸ See Küsters 1999.

¹⁹ See Kiening 2016, 227.

²⁰ See Küsters 1999, 82ff.; Kiening 2016, 226–227, the following text passage (Caesarius von Heisterbach 2009, 109) is cited in Kiening 2016, 388.

The small and black letters were written by the bruising blows of the scourge on the parchment of his body; the red letters and capitals by the piercing of the nails; and the full stops and commas by the pricking of the thorns. Well had that parchment already been polished with a multitude of beatings, whitened by blows and spit, and erased with the reed.²¹

Like a manuscript, the body becomes a textual document, proving the veracity of its message of redemption. And through the meditative lecture, the divine body becomes a “script” to imitate.

The Middle English *Charters of Christ* (c. 1350) also belong to this Franciscan tradition. These narrative poems are concerned with Christ’s crucifixion, transforming the material components into a legal transaction: “Christ’s skin is the parchment, the wounds, its letters, the blood, the sealing wax, and the Eucharist, that section of the charter left for safekeeping in the hands of those striking the legal transaction”.²² By commingling practices linked to chancelleries and charters with the human body as medium of the written word, these texts can also remind us that medieval readers and writers were used to seeing and touching inscribed skin that very much resembled their own, marked “with pores, veins, cuffs, or scars”.²³

In the *Charters of Christ*, the “incarnation” of the biblical passion goes hand in hand with a poetic *intextuation* of the body. Jesus Christ, as first person narrator, presents his tormented body as a written document:

And so y suffred all þe nyzt
 Tyll on morn hit was day-lyzt
 Streyned well harde to a tre
 As parchemyn oweth for to be
 Herkeneth now & ȝe shall wyten
 How þe chartur was wryten
 Ouer all my face fyll þe ynke
 With þornus þat in my hedde gonne synke
 The pennus þat þose letterus wryten
 Wer skourges þat y was with smyten
 How many letterus þat þer-on bene
 Rede & þou may wyte & sene
 ffyue þowsande fyue hundered þen
 Wonþus of my body rede & wanne
 ffor to shew þe of my loue-dede
 My-self wyll here þe chartur rede
 “O vos omnes qui transitis per viam attendite
 uidete si est dolor sitis sicut dolor meus”
 ȝe men þat gon her by þe way
 Beholde & se both nyzt & day
 And redeth vpon þis parchmyn

And so I suffered all the night
 Until in the morning it was daylight
 Stretched firmly on a tree
 As a parchment ought to be.
 Listen now and ye shall learn
 How the charter was written
 Over all my face fell the ink
 The result of thorns that in my head were sunk
 The pens that wrote those letters
 Were scourges with which I was struck
 How many letters that thereon be
 Read and you may know and see
 Five thousand five hundred ten
 Wounds on my body red and discoloured
 So as bestow on thee my love-deed
 Myself will here the charter read
 “O all you who walk by on the road, pay attention
 and see if there be any sorrow like my sorrow.”
 Ye men that go here by the way
 Behold and see both night and day
 And read upon this parchment

²¹ Translation by Newman 2003, 182.

²² Rubin 1991, 307.

²³ Kay 2017, 3.

3yf any sorow be so gret as myn
 Stonþeth & herkeneth þis chartur redde
 Why y am wounded & all forbledde
 (155–175)²⁴

If any sorrow be so great as mine
 Stand and listen to this charter being read
 Why I am wounded and covered in blood.

As in Caesarius's text, the corporeal writing of the wounds is carved as *letterus* on a *parchemyn* by scourges figuring as a *pennus*.²⁵ The document of the *chartur* becomes readable for the faithful (*redeth vpon þis parchmyn*), guiding them to knowledge (*wyten*) that slips in a sort of auto-documented *credo*. The very voice of the saviour (*my-self*) confirms this poetic *credo* as an embodied auto-poiesis, and gives an undeniable authority to the anonymous poem. As Annette Kehnel has pointed out, this distinctive perception of corporeality goes along with a cultural transformation "in which justice was increasingly centred on the written record and [...] royal bureaucracy".²⁶

We find a similar tendency in vernacular chronicles where the *imitatio Christi* model can be adapted to legitimise royal authority. In the Portuguese *Crónica de Portugal* (1419), the recently crowned King Afonso Henriques, confronted with a papal legate doubting his legitimacy, challenges the papal written document by showing his wounds and opening up his naked body like an open book:²⁷

[A]ntes que o cardeal partise, desvestyo el-rey sua capa pele e amostrou-lhe muytos synais de feridas que tinha no corpo e dise: "Cardeal, em como eu sam irege bem se mostra nestes synais destas feridas, as quaes eu ouve com os mouros em tal lide e estas em tal e estas no combate de tal vila que lhe filhey e estas outras em tal, e todo isto em serviço de Deos". (31)

Before the Cardinal left, he took off his leather coat and showed him many signs of wounds he had on his body, and said: "Cardinal, what kind of heretic I am, is clearly shown by these wounds, which I got in this battle against the Moors, and those in that other, and these here in the battle in this town and those others in this one, and all this in the service of God."

When it comes to the textual play between *intextuation* and *encarnation*, feminine hagiography in particular articulates this double coded "alternative" writing as an opportunity to perform female legitimacy.²⁸ Within the patriarchal medieval society, the female body can be considered as a white page etched with social hegemonies. A male textual production "writes" the saints' bodies and overwrites their own voices.²⁹ In hagiographic accounts like Gregory of Nyssa's *Vita sanctae Macrinae* the textual construction of the female saint by the male biographer is in constant competition with a second, more direct form of corporeal writing: the divine stigmatic inscription

²⁴ Brit. Mus. ms. Cott. Calig. A II., c. 1450.

²⁵ The martyrdom of St Cassian of Imola, stabbed to death by his pupils with their iron styli, is another example of this trope.

²⁶ Kehnel 2015, 257.

²⁷ See Barros Dias 2005, Lang 2017, 84.

²⁸ See Walker Bynum 1991.

²⁹ See Nyffenegger 2013, 272. For medieval female authorship, see Summit 2003.

on the very flesh of the saint. The narrator both refers to and competes with the corporeal inscription.

Not coincidentally, the female voice in the text, if present, defends her invisible or inner corporeal marks as an immediate proof of her elected condition, against the marks of social stigmatisation left on her virginal body by human oppressors. In the anonymous *Liflad ant te passiu of Seinte Margarete* (thirteenth century) from the Middle English *Katherine Group* Margaret's voice insists on the legitimacy of her invisible "seals" and "marks", while her male oppressor Olibrius "fantasizes about overwriting Christ's marks with his own bloody, visible marks and thereby claiming possession of her".³⁰ The text presents a dramatic negotiation between two corporeal incisions, one invisible and redeeming, the other one blood-red. Margaret speaks:

"Ich wulle bitechen mi bodi to eaver- euich bitternesse thet tu const on bithenchen, ne bite hit ne se sare with thon thet Ich mote meidene mede hebben in Heovene. Drihtin deide for us, the deorwurthe Lauerd, ant ne drede Ich na deth forto drehen for Him. He haveth His merke on me iseiled with His in-seil; ne mei unc lif ne deth nother twemen otwa." "Na?" quoth he, "Is hit swa? Neometh hire swithe," quoth he to his cwelleres. "Strupeth hire steort-naket [...] ant beteth hire bere bodi with bittere besmen." Tha awariede werlahen leiden se lutherliche on hire leofli che lich thet hit brec overal ant litherede o blode.

"I will commit my body to every cruelty that you can contrive, and may it bite never so sorely provided that I may as a maiden have my reward in Heaven. The Ruler died for us, the dear Lord, and I am not afraid to endure death for Him. He has sealed His mark upon me with His seal, and neither life nor death can divide us in two." "No?" said he. "Is it so? Seize her at once!" said he to his executioners. "Strip her stark-naked [...]" and beat her bare body with cruel rods." Then the accursed scoundrels laid so miserably on her lovely body that it burst forth overall and was lathered in blood.

These two modes of marking—the inner/stigmatic and the exterior/societal—suggest, as Virginia Burrus observes, that "hagiography itself [...] emerges as a kind of tattooing".³¹

This tendency is reinforced in texts written by female actors themselves. The late medieval nun Teresa de Cartagena, first female mystic in Castilian Spain,³² insists in her first-person narration on the same topical claim of bearing an invisible divine inscription as a seal on her body. In her autobiography she describes her body as performing an *imitatio Christi* and bearing His autograph as a scarring mark:

Me hirió con su poderosa mano, e [...] seguí al Salvador [...] corriendo el olor de los enguentos suyos que son sus preciosas llagas, de las cuales Él, por su grant caridad, quiso ser vngido e quiere vngir a los que pa[ra] sy escoje. (137)

³⁰ See *The Katherine Group* 2016, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/liflade-ant-passiu-of-seinte-margarete> (last accessed: 07.02.2018). Nyffenegger 2013, 274.

³¹ Burrus 2003, 409.

³² Cortés Timoner 2004.

He hurt me with his powerful hand and [...] I followed the Saviour [...] running after the smell of his ointment which are his precious wounds, from which He, for his great mercy, wanted to be anointed and wants to anoint those who he chooses for him.

The narrative text, her secondary written document, allows the primary marks to become legible to others (*manifestar a los que saberlo quisieren aquello que en mí manifestado parece*, 38f.). The autobiographical writing thus stages an alternative scriptural performance both of and upon the female self, as a “form of self-intervention and self-control over bodies that are often felt to be at the mercy of powers and forces”.³³

This self-performance by means of doubled writing, on the body and in the text, plays with a metaphorical dimension and addresses the legibility of corporeal marks. The heart-inscription is a liminal case for bodily inscription, as it unfolds the hidden interiority of the self, opening it to the gaze of the reader. Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians establishes the book of the heart as a literary trope already for early Christianity: “[You] are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men [...] written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart” (2 Cor. 3:2f.).³⁴ The success of this trope is impressive, as Eric Jager explains:

For example, romances tell of lovers’ hearts inscribed with signs of the beloved, and saints’ legends celebrate martyrs whose hearts received marks of special divine favor. Clergy are instructed to let their inner scribe copy God’s commands onto the pages of their hearts, and ordinary believers pray for Christ to write the memory of his Passion in their ‘heart books’.³⁵

However, not every inscription written “in fleshy tables of the heart” is a metaphorical one. For instance, the *Legenda Aurea* recounts the martyrdom of Saint Ignatius of Antioch, who claims in front of his executioners to have the name of Christ written on his heart: “After his death those who had heard him say this were driven by curiosity to find out if it was true, so they took the heart out of his body, split it down the middle, and found there the name *Jesus Christ* inscribed in gold letters”.³⁶ Human curiosity, searching for tangible “truth”, unveils the mystery of the mystic union and delivers the intimate inscription.³⁷ The allegory becomes material substance.³⁸

³³ Healy 2016, 1239.

³⁴ For the Old Testament tradition see Carr 2005; Küsters 1999.

³⁵ Jager 2000, xiv.

³⁶ Jacobus de Voragine 2012, 143.

³⁷ For an Iberian version of this story, see the paragraph from *Sermones de la Real Colegiata de San Isidoro de León*, cited in Stephanie Béreiziat-Lang’s chapter on Iberian inscriptions in this volume: *E quando muere el bueno de Inaço, abriéronle el corazón en muchas partes e en cada parte le fallan el nonbre de Ihesús escrito de letras de oro*. (*Sermones en Romance* 2002, 236). It is interesting that in this version the heart-inscription gets multiplied and is omnipresent *en cada parte*.

³⁸ In the hagiography of Clara de Montefalco, after the death of the nun, people discover the image of the crucifixion engraved in her heart. Although a pictorial incision is substituted for scripture, the

Mystics, such as the female actors of hagiographic testimonials, play with this materialisation for a poetic staging of their own performances of holiness. In such a performance, the passive attitude towards a divine inscription switches to an active *écriture de soi* implying a textual constitution of the subject.³⁹ Heinrich Seuse, a fourteenth-century German mystic, recounts a certain moment in his autobiographical *Vita* when he, inflamed with divine love, grabs his stylus and carves the letters *IHS* into his chest, right over his heart, as an eternal sign of love.⁴⁰ In chapter XIV, *Wie er den minneklichen Namen Jesus uf sin Herz zeichnete*,⁴¹ between two scenes of prayer, the protagonist gives material form to his wish for an eternal union with God:

“ach, zarter got, wan könd ich etwas minnezeichens erdenken, daz ein ewiges minne zeichen weri enzwischan mir und dir ze einem urkünde, daz ich din und du mins herzen ewigü minne bist, daz kein vergessen niemer me verdilgen möhti! [...] nu gib mir hüt kraft und macht ze volbringen min begirde, wan du muost hüt in den grund mins herzen gesmelzet werden.” Und vie an und stach dar mit dem grifel in daz flaisch ob dem herzen die richti, und stach also hin und her und uf und ab, unz er den namen IHS eben uf sin herz gezeichnet. [...] Do er dis getet, do gie er also verserte und bluotige uss der cell uf die cancell under daz crucifixus und knüwet nider und sprach: “eya, herr mine und mins herzen einigü minne, nu luog an mins herzen grossen begirde! Herr, ich enkan noch enmag dich nit furbaz in mich gedruken; owe herr, ich bite dich, daz du es volbringest und daz du dich nu furbaz in den grund mins herzen drukest und dinen heiligen namen in mich also zeichnest, daz du uss minem herzen niemer me gescheidest.” (15f.)

“oh, gentle god, if I could devise a token of love to be an eternal token of love between me and you, as a charter, documenting me to be yours and you to be my heart’s eternal love, never to be erased by oblivion. [...] Now, grant me strength today and power to accomplish my desire because today you are going to be melted into the bottom of my heart.” And he began and pierced there with the stylus into the flesh right above the heart and incised back and forth and up and down until he had drawn the name *IHS* on his heart. [...] When he had done this, he went, thus injured and bleeding, out of the cell up to the pulpit beneath the crucifix and kneeled and said: “Alas, my lord and my heart’s only love, look now at my heart’s great desire! Lord, I am not able to—and I know not how to imprint you deeper into myself; oh lord, I pray you to finish it and to imprint yourself deeper into the bottom of my heart, incising your holy name into me, so that you will never ever be removed from my heart.”

Making the mystical allegories “reality”, the protagonist attempts to force the divine will by enacting the unifying incision upon his own chest. Thus, driven by his own *begirde* (desire) he claims to open up a mutual contract.⁴² Compared to Ignatius’s or Clara de Montefalco’s heart-writing, it is significant that Seuse’s sealed document

principle remains the same. The medieval theory of intromission, where vision involves emissions from an object entering the eye, offers another form of textual incorporation: repeated contemplation and meditation of the Passion is considered capable of leaving physical marks in the viewer.

³⁹ Foucault 2004.

⁴⁰ See Küsters 1999, 105–108, Landfester 2012, 131–148.

⁴¹ Seuse 1907, 15.

⁴² As Küsters notes, the *IHS* monogram had a documentary character in medieval legal prac-

aims to “possess” divine favour through his own action (*daz ich din und du mins herzen ewigú minne bist*). Seuse himself admits the impossibility of forcing this grace, and perceives the supplementarity of his gesture (*Herr, ich enkan noch enmag dich nit fúrbaz in mich gedruken*). Human writing is, once again, a simulacrum of the authentic divine writing. But it is no coincidence that the object of self-mortification is the stylus. It is the process of writing, doubled in the corporeal incision, which tortures and challenges the protagonist. Seuse’s dramatic attempt at auto-sanctification through self-inscription fails; nevertheless, his secondary act of writing, his autobiographic text, supplements that corporeal auto-graphy to constitute a self-conscious writing subject with greater agency.

3 Empowering Marks and Dynamic Letters

This “auto-poietic” aspect of bodily inscription is also constitutive for the hero’s performance in secular narrative texts.⁴³ What has been, in hagiographic accounts, an eternal mark of the union with God, can now become a dynamic factor of self-articulation. When Gregorius of Nyssa overwrites Macrina’s saintly body, or when Seuse mutilates his own body, the writing on and over human skin deals with power relations. Seuse, taking matters into his own hands, empowers himself in the face of an unobtainable divine instance. This empowering gesture is even more drastic when imposed on others, as we have seen in the historical tattoo practices of antiquity. Epic poetry then brings together the aspect of cultural and social stigmatisation (slavery, for example) with the self-conscious gesture of a subject using writing to signify personal agency.

One striking example is the scene in the Middle English romance *Richard Coer de Lyon*. When King Richard has the heads of his Saracen prisoners of war cooked, he inscribes their skulls with their names and lineages.⁴⁴ Marking the dead soldiers, the English fix their power on their enemies’ bodies. Furthermore, in the context of the broader plot, this desecration is clearly part of a larger pattern of taboo behaviour, particularly cannibalism. Similar to the cannibalism, the inscription appears in *Richard Coer de Lyon* both as a motif of transgression and as a radical appropriation strategy. As in Eucharistic mysticism, ingestion and inscription are interrelated in this battle for supremacy. The breaking of a taboo by writing on a human skull is integrated in an account of the genesis of a King in the context of cultural confrontation. As a

tice. Seuse’s body figures as a “charismatic accreditation” half-way between corporeal inscription and manuscript (Küsters 1999, 106, 108).

⁴³ Hahn 1993, 209.

⁴⁴ *Richard Coer de Lyon* 2015, 3425–3589. For more on this romance, see Christine Neufeld’s and Ricarda Wagner’s chapter on British literature in this volume.

step in Richard's vital course, the breaking of taboo and the use of corporeal inscription are complementary modes in the affirmation of the heroic subject. This epic account seems to prefigure also the configuration of a "wild subject" in narratives of the first colonial contacts in the Americas, or, indeed of the Pacific Islanders whose inscriptional practices gave us the word "tattoo".⁴⁵ There we find again the combination of Othering and becoming other, inscribing one's own logics on the very bodies of the others and, at the same time, adopting a "cannibalistic logic", i. e. ingesting their bodies while using writing for the process of acculturation.⁴⁶

The empowerment writing offers, as we have seen in both sacred and profane texts, goes along with the formation of a coherent narrative, forging a hero's personality and qualities. Legible or hidden inscriptions on the body of the hero accompany the hero's development, and figure as guiding threads for the reader. This can be, as in Seuse, a self-inflicted incision, or on the contrary, an event which overcomes the hero and forges his course. In both instances the narrative constitution of the hero depends on the dynamism of the corporeal writing, a principle Dante elegantly illustrates. In the *Divina Commedia* (c.1320), the protagonist Dante passes through the imaginary spaces of the Christian afterlife, which materialise abstract religious knowledge. In *Purgatorio*, half way to purification, the guardian angel accompanying Dante inscribes seven Ps (for *Peccata*, sins) on his forehead, requiring him to remove them step by step during his journey:

*Sette P nella fronte mi descrisse
col punton della spada, e „Fa che lavi,
quando se' dentro, queste piaghe” disse.
(IX, 112–114)*

Seven P's he inscribed upon my forehead with
the point of his sword, and "See that thou wash
these wounds when thou art within," he said.

The corporeal inscription is a visible mark of his inner sinful condition. Like the biblical mark of Cain, the *Peccata*-sign literally subjects the protagonist to God's master plan. But these signs are removable; they reflect the protagonist's state of mind, a condition which is supposed to evolve as the narrative progresses. The inscriptions thereby make the narrative program of the text legible to the reader on the very body of the hero, a program that is fixed beforehand: "*Quando i P che son rimasi / ancor nel volto tuo presso che stinti, / saranno, come l'un del tutto rasi*" ("When the P's which, almost extinct, still remain on thy forehead shall be, as one is, quite erased", XII, 121–123).

As the text is written in first person, the reader experiences this progressive inscription as a corporeal phenomenon with Dante the narrator. The erasure of the signs is represented somatically, as the touch of a cool wind from the passing of wings, the scent of ambrosia, an easing of the body's painful heaviness:

⁴⁵ See Kiening 2006.

⁴⁶ Kiening 2006, 111–162 concerning "cannibalistic logics" in colonial accounts.

*tal mi senti' un vento dar per mezza
la fronte, e ben senti' mover la piuma,
che fe' sentir d'ambrosia l'orezza.*
(XXIV, 148–150)

such a wind I felt strike upon the middle of my forehead, and I clearly felt the motion of the plumage, which made me perceive the odor of ambrosia.

In this somatic narration, corporeal writing is an ephemeral phenomenon, closely linked to the dynamics of the narration itself. The process of inscription, or, in this case, of the erasure of writing, forges a narrative character, and empowers a subject to articulate his dynamic self-constitution. In Dante's text, human agency is in play against the divine master plan.

To conclude, let us examine one last example at the crossroads between Dante's divine purification and Seuse's self-empowerment. The first account of the Faust legend, *Historia von D. Johann Fausten* (1587), also shows corporeal writing as a temporary and dynamic phenomenon in the context of a dramatic power struggle. After some discussion with the devil Mephistophiles, Faust picks up a pointed knife and punctures a vein in his left hand to sign a diabolical contract in his own blood. As this happens, the narrator interjects and states that one could allegedly see engraved (*eingegrabne*) in Faust's hand bloody letters saying *O Homo fuge* ("oh man, flee", 854). In this story about a necromancer who makes a deal with the devil, this is the only occasion where God directly intervenes. This intervention is, in terms of its content, addressed to humanity as a whole; and in terms of its material addressed directly to the protagonist—but to no avail. God's message, this attempt to seek contact and to warn, misses the addressee. Faust chooses his own bloody writing instead of the divine incision, privileging—like Seuse—his own expressive agency. The letters of the divine inscription are no longer (as in mystical stigmata) a stable affair but an ephemeral narrative effect, and no longer guide the protagonist's course (as they did Dante). In this early modern account of mortal overweening, the human has definitively appropriated the power of writing.

As ancient witnesses like Ötzi demonstrate, one of the notable features of corporeal inscriptions is their physical permanence (even if the skin itself does not easily withstand the ravages of time). This makes the imagined exceptions, when script on the skin is treated as a temporary phenomenon, all the more fascinating. As we have seen, fictional accounts of corporeal writing and tattooing are easier to grasp against the backdrop of cultural practices and historical contexts, but their imaginative potential goes much further. Unlike in Ötzi's case, the accessibility of these corporeal inscriptions is not simply an issue of cultural transparency. We must also work to comprehend the inner narrative strategies and aesthetic dimensions of the phenomenon which help to enact the complex relationship between humanity, our corporeality and the problem of writing itself.

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