For medieval Christians, pilgrimage was a desirable activity for three overlapping reasons. This remarkably flexible practice provided consolation of the body in the form of healing, consolation of the soul in the form of indulgences and deepened religious devotion, and (in spite of its inconveniences) also the opportunity to experience the sheer excitement of travel. As we have seen, access to these benefits sometimes lay beyond significant social and economic barriers such as cost, family responsibility, cloistation, and contested interpretations of the practice. Given this combination of desirability and difficulty, it is unsurprising that pious Christians sought ways to accrue the benefits of pilgrimage without the bother of travel. Concepts such as posthumous penance done on behalf of a Christian suffering in purgatory, location-based indulgences, and even the experiences of visionaries had, by the fifteenth century, contributed to the invention of a variety of non-corporeal pilgrimage practices. These were pilgrimages taken by proxy or in the imagination, rather than by an individual in the flesh. All types of non-corporeal pilgrimage had two things in common: they all involved a journey, either of persons, objects, or thoughts; and they all conferred at least one of the benefits of pilgrimage listed above. The participants in non-corporeal pilgrimage were as diverse as medieval society itself. In particular, because non-corporeal pilgrimage removed the complexity of actual travel from the equation, it was a practice women might undertake with little fear of recrimination. Indeed, some versions of non-corporeal pilgrimage were designed expressly for women’s use.

This chapter will explore women’s participation in three varieties of non-corporeal pilgrimage. The first, proxy (sometimes called vicarious) pilgrimage, posed the largest economic challenge to the would-be pilgrim. In this ritual, another person’s travel was sponsored by the non-corporal pilgrim, and the spiritual benefits of the pilgrimage were conferred upon the sponsor. Proxy pilgrimage allowed women to avoid the social
inconveniences of religious travel, but did not eliminate the costs of the journey. Still, scattered examples of the practice remain, particularly in wills. In another form of non-corporeal pilgrimage, devotees sought and kept small objects that had either visited a shrine or been collected or produced there, and were carried back home by fleshly pilgrims. These objects were thought to carry some of the benefits of a visit to the shrine back to the stationary devotee. This practice is extensively documented in the pilgrimage narratives that formed the basis of Chapter Four; the objects they describe were often thought to offer benefit for women’s health. Finally, devotional guides of the later Middle Ages advised their readers on how to perform a non-corporeal pilgrimage through prayer and imagination alone. These spiritual pilgrimages could be conducted at no cost and no risk, and hence might have been ideal for women who sought the benefits of pilgrimage; indeed, at least two of them, Fra Francesco Suriano’s Treatise on the Holy Land and Felix Fabri’s Die Sion-pilger, were designed specifically for the use of women religious.

Proxy or Vicarious Pilgrimage

The most direct way of taking a pilgrimage while not moving was to send another person as a substitute. This practice was based on a significant body of Christian theology. The crucifixon was an act of penitential sacrifice that atoned for the sins of others, and thus Jesus himself had set an example of such ritual substitutions. Christians also prayed on behalf of other people, both during those people’s lives and after their deaths; the prayers of others were considered efficacious enough, for example, that they formed one of the centralmost social and spiritual utilities of the monastic life.1 By the later Middle Ages, it was also considered effective to send another person to take a pilgrimage on one’s own behalf. Labande associated the development of proxy pilgrimages with the thirteenth-century practice of commuting personal pilgrimage vows in favor of large charitable donations.2

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