From the earliest age, Alice of Schaerbeek was a shining example of Christian devotion.\textsuperscript{1} Like Esther in the Old Testament (Esther 2:15), she was beloved by all and thought highly beautiful, despite her lack of care for her outward appearance (\emph{VAS} 1:2.477). Aged seven, she left her parents' home to forge a life of extreme piety in the Cistercian monastery of La Cambre. Some years later, perhaps around 1240 (aged around 20), Alice was struck with leprosy and her beautiful appearance horrifically disfigured.\textsuperscript{2} This event, and its physical and spiritual ramifications, dominates the short \emph{vita} that records Alice's tale, written approximately ten to twenty-five years after her death in 1250 by an unknown author.\textsuperscript{3} Two thirds of the text is devoted to leprous Alice's tribu-
lations (VAS 2:3:479–83). In recent critical scholarship, Alice of Schaerbeek bears the moniker Alice the Leper, so significant is the illness to her identity. The holy woman’s malady is portrayed not as a terrible burden but a glorious gift from God, revealing a medieval perception of the positivity of a deleterious affliction at odds with the modern understanding of pain and suffering. On the contrary, Alice – shown to be in great pain – glories in suffering as her leprous body withers, oozes, and decays. If she could be cured, she is certain that she would refuse, even if a return to full health entailed similar spiritual benefits (VAS 2:10:479). Central to the “pleasantness” of Alice’s affliction is its utility as a means of spiritual elevation, a tenet of medieval religion that Esther Cohen terms “philopassianism.” Rather than annihilating her personhood, in the vita, leprosy allows an efflorescence of Alice’s devotion, in which her leprous body becomes a stand-in for Christ’s tortured body on the cross. Interrogation of the representation of leprosy in Alice’s biography, contextualized with a study of the polyvalent signification of the malady in the period, suggests that leprous wounds become, at times, synonymous with Christ’s lacerations.

The preoccupation with the usefulness of illness in medieval devotional practice appears to be particularly female, or at least occurs more frequently in

4 Cawley, introduction, viii–ix.
6 Cohen, “Towards a History,” 54; Modulated Scream, 25–51. Robert Mills offers a critique of philopassianism, which Cohen declares is not about pleasure, but utility. By contrast, Mills shows the space for pleasure within philopassianistic narratives: Suspended Animation, 149, referring to Cohen, “Towards a History,” 52.