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Becoming the mouthpiece of God: female Christian mystics from the twelfth-to the eighteenth-century

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Becoming the Mouthpiece of God: Female Christian Mystics from the Twelfth- to the Eighteenth-Century

By

Carly Florine Thompson

Accepted in Partial Completion
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

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MASTER'S THESIS

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Carly Florine Thompson
October 6, 2010

Becoming the Mouthpiece of God: Female Christian Mystics from the Twelfth- to the Eighteenth-Century

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Carly Florine Thompson
October 2010

To my professors, colleagues, family members, and friends who offered me endless wisdom, support, and faith throughout this process. I am blessed to be able to study a subject so thoroughly worth the time, frustration, and effort I have put into this work. Whatever becomes of my life, I am now better prepared to embrace and comprehend my world.

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Introduction

“The Soul [in response to Virtues]: I am a sinner who fled from life; I must come to you full of sores, that you may offer me the shield of redemption.”¹ Hildegard of Bingen, one of the greatest theological minds of the medieval period, found herself in an environment where it was a problem to be perceived as a woman who possessed brilliance. Most of her contemporaries perceived most intelligent females who showed an aptitude for understanding theological matters as being a perversion of the proper gender order. In this surrounding Hildegard was left with a choice: either she ceased her intellectual efforts or found way to present her writings and knowledge so they would not be viewed as a distortion of the assigned place of women in her society.

The purpose of this work is to look specifically at the writings of ten female mystics from the late medieval and early modern period and examine the intentional use of rhetoric by female mystics to procure the agency to address concerns about religion and society. The initial chapter concerns the role mystic women constructed for themselves in relation to the conception and presentation of their visions and subsequent written works. This chapter examines how they specifically positioned themselves as recipients of divine knowledge which God provided. They achieved this by emphasizing specific traits about themselves which supported this presentation, such as often mentioning how unworthy and unwilling they were to be used by God. Also, they played down their intelligence to support the perception by the clergy that they could not have possibly created the work without divine aid. They also reinforced accepted social traits

¹ Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Jane Bishop and Mother Columbia Hart (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 531.

associated with the female gender. This was most commonly done by pointing out traits linked with Eve, the women responsible for the fall of mankind, or the Virgin Mary, a perfect woman who gave birth to the savior of all humanity.

The second and third chapters address the use of metaphor to speak about a range of topics in a safe and orthodox manner. The second chapter focuses on the treatment and presentation of corporeal bodies, with an emphasis on how female mystics treated their own bodies and what they understood this treatment to mean. This chapter studies how female mystics emphasized the exterior and interior destruction of their bodies to validate as well as prompt divine interaction. The third chapter examines how these visionaries allotted a metaphorical body to asomatous entities, beings which lack a current physical body on earth, as a means of explaining theology and social interactions. By first describing these divine bodies and then offering a divine interpretation as to what that description meant, these mystics addressed contemporary theological and social debates. The most common appearance was that of the crucified Christ, but other members of Trinity figured prominently in their visions as well as social bodies like the Church and Nation. Through the metaphor of the body, medieval and early modern female mystics validated and reinforced the orthodoxy of their experiences and written works.

The fundamental factor which appeared in all ten of the written works this study addresses is the clearly deliberate presentation of the thoughts, ideas, and musings of these ten mystic women that allowed them to procure validation for their written or transcribed words. It was this validation which allowed these ten female mystics to voice

their own ideas concerning theology, social concerns, and politics. It is not a coincidence that the contemporary religious and political leaders did not permanently ostracize these ten female mystics who utilized the literary devices this study addresses. These women came from differing economic and educational backgrounds yet they all clearly understood the importance of properly presenting religious works. Mystics, male and female, claimed to experience the divine without the assistance of the clergy and the sacraments. Mysticism could potentially threaten the established power of the clergy as the voice of divine knowledge, and the mystics studied here all recognized the potential challenges they faced. They utilized rhetoric and religious polemic, with the help of their fellow nuns and male confessors, and overcame cultural and social resistance against them and their works. Revelations gave them the authority to speak on religious and political issues and to venture into the male realm of theology and politics.

Mystic Women and the Late Medieval Church's Battle with Heresy

Mysticism has been an element of Christianity from its emergence as a world religion. Many of the elements that the four gospels² emphasized Jesus possessed were traits mystics would continue to strive to possess throughout Christianity. The most prevalent of these would be the ability to heal, attributed to be the work of the Holy Spirit. While the women addressed in this study did not typically claim the power to heal, they did emphasize God's healing power over them, either healing them from a life-threatening illness or prolonging their lives after the physical abuse they subjected themselves to brought them to near death. Jesus also demonstrated advanced learning and comprehension although he had no formal educational training. While several of the

² The first four books of the New Testament of the Christian Bible which detail the life and works of Jesus.

mystics in this study did receive a formal education, they all attributed their knowledge as originating from God and themselves and lacking the capacity to construct their written works. Jesus Christ's dual nature also meant that he could serve as an exemplar of the Spirit-filled state so desired by medieval and early modern mystics.

The Christian Church of the first-century was composed of mystics. Christians proved their authenticity by experiencing intense spiritual interactions. The Holy Spirit filled Jesus, which he then imparted to his disciples. The miracles and revelations the apostles attributed to this proved themselves as legitimate followers of Jesus. However, a community of believers that all had constant revelations became problematic for this growing religion. By the second-century it was clear the Church no longer believed that possession by the Spirit was required of all followers of Christ as proof of being a true believer and was instead something Christianity primarily attributed to its leaders.³ For the foundational mystics of the early medieval period, mostly males, the way to achieve this communion with the divine was through living an ascetic life of contemplation. However, the rise of popular religious movements in the later middle ages encouraged forms of spiritual devotion which broadened the scope of mystical practice. One effect of this was that the later middle ages witnessed more female mystics, often nuns or Beguines, than male mystics. As the clergy established a more strict definition for themselves they also more completely excluded women from holding positions of formal power. The female mystics in direct spiritual connection with the divine gained a spiritual authority they could not have procured any other way.

³ Steven Fanning, *Mystics of the Christian Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2001), 19-20.

The twelfth- and thirteenth-century mystics witnessed the medieval Inquisition.⁴ This introduced inquisition procedure, a modernization of previously accepted Roman legal procedure but applied to the ecclesiastical courts. Medieval inquisitors were appointed by church officials, often members of a mendicant order, and were given jurisdiction in a specific region over baptized Christians. They remained under the authority of the Pope and their purpose was to root out the heresy which threatened the Church, and thus the whole of society. The doctrines and procedures of the inquisitors were also developed out of both theology and canon law, utilizing early works of Church founders as well as contemporary works from the twelfth- and thirteenth-centuries.

Whereas the more well-known inquisition, the Spanish Inquisition, focused on fighting the heresy inherent in other religions, the medieval Inquisition addressed heresy found within Christianity, primarily in the beliefs of the Waldensians and Cathars. The main objection to the Waldensians was that they believed anyone called to preach did not require the blessing of their local clergy to answer this calling. This directly undermined the power and influence of the local clergy and thus the Church at large. The Cathars' primary transgression was a dualistic theology which presented two opposing Gods of equal power, one inherently good and the other intrinsically evil. They also believed that love and power were innately incompatible, and that matter was so strongly linked with power that it was incapable of coexisting with love. They preached that the purpose of humanity was to transcend matter and thus to be able to truly unite with love.

⁴ The medieval Inquisition is often meant to encompass the Episcopal Inquisition, lasting from 1184 to the 1230s, and the Papal Inquisition beginning in the 1230s.

To combat heresy, the Church accepted the help of the new mendicant religious orders, newly prominent in later medieval society. The oldest and most prominent of these orders appeared in the early thirteenth-century. All of them renounced wealth; the Dominicans, Franciscans, and Carmelites all embraced a itinerant life of apostolic poverty and became far more involved with their communities as they worked to battle heresy and save the Church. Initially papal authority was uncertain how to react to the appearance of these new groups, but after it condoned them as a bulwark against heresy, the mendicant orders were there to stay. There was also a group of religious women that gained support in the thirteenth-century, specifically in the Low Countries, called the Beguines. These lay women took no formal vows, forcing them to permanently remain unwed or renounce their worldly wealth like nuns who joined convents. These communities generally formed on the edges of towns and primarily worked to serve the poor. The Beguines emphasized the importance of contemplation and began the style of mysticism called “Bridal Mysticism,” which took the language of mystical marriage and added to it the contemporary poetic style of Courtly Love to describe being ravished by God or Jesus.⁵ Rather than support their efforts with begging, as the mendicants did, the Beguines performed services, generally manual labor. The significance of this religious group is that it allowed women a religious life supported by their actions out in their communities and not by the experiences in their sequestered convent settings. Although, both of these settings produced significant mystical women: Mechthild of Magdeburg was a beguine and Hildegard of Bingen was not.

⁵ Fanning, 94.

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) was born in Germany, the tenth child of a noble family, with whom she lived until she turned eight and her family gave her to the Church, as was the custom with tenth children as they were seen as the proper tithe. As a child she often fell ill and it was during this period of her life she began experiencing mystical visions. Fearing the reaction of her elders, she initially kept these experiences to herself.⁶ Hildegard flourished in the convent environment and after learning to read the Latin Bible, with an emphasis on Psalms, she made her formal profession of virginity as a teenager. In 1141, Hildegard experienced the vision she later describes in the beginning of *Scivias*, the first of her visionary writings, where the Lord imparted to her knowledge of the Scriptures.⁷ She produced numerous visionary writings, theological works, mystery and morality plays, medical writings, extensive correspondence, and musical compositions. In Hildegard's pieces she wrote or dictated in Latin, made use of scientific knowledge, and revealed significant insight of major pillars of thought, both secular and ecclesiastical. Hildegard's influence was extensive, and she crossed both secular and ecclesiastical boundaries as she corresponded with authorities in both worlds and offered advice and knowledge to all who sought it. She founded a convent near Bingen, the Rupertsberg, where she often denounced the sins of her contemporaries in her sermons, and abbots travelled to her to acquire moral advice about reforming their lives and

⁶ Frances Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 1992), 15, 16.

⁷ Barbara Newman, introduction to *Scivias*, by Hildegard of Bingen, 12.

becoming more holy. Theological questions which were brought before Hildegard often included topics such as mysticism and scriptural exegesis.⁸

Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1285) also came from a noble Germany family but unlike Hildegard, she began her religious career as a Beguine, in her early twenties. She later entered the Cistercian nunnery at Helfta around the age of sixty. While Mechthild avidly proclaimed in her writing that she was uneducated, her works showed a comprehensive understanding of both the structure and framework of the contemporary secular German high court.⁹ Exposure to this knowledge before arriving at the convent implies she received some education in her youth. Around 1250, she revealed to her confessor the extraordinary visionary experiences she had, and he urged her to have them written down. The product of this effort produced Mechthild's only published work, *Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, which appeared in a low German dialect, unlike Hildegard's works in Latin. While this would seemingly make Mechthild's work accessible to a less educated audience, this does not appear to be the case, as her greatest support still came from educated religious men and women. Shortly after her death, Dominican monks translated all but the last book in this work into Latin. However, these men rearranged the work by subject matter, and toned down both her critique of the clergy and her erotic imagery. Mechthild's other writings consisted of letters, the product of correspondence with various churchmen in Magdeburg. Her eventual move from Magdeburg to Helfta was prompted by both physical illness and threats issued to her about her written work.

⁸ Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1984), 59.

⁹ Frank Tobin, introduction to *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, by Mechthild of Magdeburg, trans. Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 4.

However, Mechthild was well respected and accepted by a large number of her peers. In Helfta, the nuns, who received a formal education and could read and write Latin, often sought her out for spiritual advice.

Whereas the twelfth- and thirteenth-centuries were accentuated by the rise of inquisitorial procedure to fight heresy, the fourteenth-century began with a far more explicit battle. In 1305 a Frenchman, rather than an Italian, found himself elected Pope. Seventy-two years later when Gregory XI finally returned the seat of the papacy to Rome the Church was hardly at ease. Spurred by Gregory XI's death in 1378 and the election of a new Italian pope, Urban VI, the French Cardinals seceded, returned to Avignon, and elected a new pope of their own, Clement VII. Each branch continued electing their own popes and when a meeting was held in 1409 to attempt to resolve the conflict it failed, only increasing the drama by electing a third pope, Alexander V. This conflict was finally resolved by the Council of Constance, lasting from 1414 to 1418, where the cardinals elected a single pope, Martin V, as the head of the Roman Catholic Church.

Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), a mystic from whom Gregory XI and Urban VI both received council, was born to a wool dyer of comfortable means, the twenty-fourth of twenty-five children, in Italy where she lived her entire life. At the age of eighteen she received the Dominican habit and became a Mantellate, meaning she was affiliated with the Order of Saint Dominic and wore a habit but remained in her own home and served the poor and continually sought the guidance of the friars. Catherine's writings consisted of the *Diologo della Divina Provvidenza*, series of prayers, and numerous letters. None of Catherine's works appeared originally in Latin, but appeared in her own native Siennese

dialect, a feature which contrasts her to a mystic like Hildegard who wrote in Latin due to the formal education she received because of her aristocratic background. However, much like Mechthild, this did not limit her respectability and acceptance in educated religious circles. Modern scholars find it hard to discern to what extent Catherine was able to read, but they do agree she certainly had a way with words. Catherine's influence which extended to the highest authority within the ecclesiastical community allowed Florence to use her when it needed a voice to help mend their relationship with the papacy. Gregory XI accepted her council regarding reforms and his eventual return to Rome, and Urban VI eventually ordered her to Rome, where she lived out the rest of her days.

Historians assume Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) was born around Norwich, England. This is difficult to confirm as there are no known records of her birth. However, it is assumed Julian was born in affluent circumstances in eastern England.¹⁰ Julian was most likely a Benedictine nun at the convent at Carrow before she became the anchoress¹¹ at St. Julian's church. The job of anchoress was a position of relative freedom as the anchoress was only subject to God and not an abbess of any sort. Julian had two main writings, *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* and *A Revelation of Love*. She produced these works sometime between the mid-1370s and her death, around forty years later. It is very likely the latter of the two was written around twenty years after the former appeared. A vision she had while suffering a near-death illness when she was

¹⁰ Jacqueline Jenkins and Nicholas Watson introduction to *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love*, by Julian of Norwich, ed. Jacqueline Jenkins and Nicholas Watson. (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 4.

¹¹ An anchoress is a woman who lived in seclusion for religious reasons. Julian of Norwich lived in a cell which was connected to St. Julian's church.

thirty prompted both works. In *A Vision* Julian appeared more concerned with narrating the actual vision, while in *A Revelation* she included more speculation and analysis about the nature of God, humanity, and creation. One of the reasons that *A Revelation* receives attention from modern scholars is because of the way which Julian presented God as being both father and mother.¹² Also, the two works are often seen as two drafts of the same text: the first one a shorter initial attempt and the second a more fleshed-out description and interpretation of the visions she examined in the previous draft.

Margery Kempe (1373-1438) was born in Lynn, England, where her father later became mayor. Unlike many other mystic considered in this thesis, she did not show a leaning towards the mystic lifestyle initially. She married and bore fourteen children before she began her journey as a mystic. Shortly after the birth of her fourteenth child, she felt God telling her she needed to embrace a lifestyle of chastity, which she could only do with her husband's consent.¹³ After three years of pleading, Margery convinced her husband they needed to enter into a chaste marriage. She reported in the eleventh chapter of her book that to obtain her husband's consent she agreed to pay off his debts and to eat and drink with him on Fridays, as she had previously done. Shortly after she obtained his permission, she left on a pilgrimage which led her to the two most sacred sites of medieval Christendom: Rome and Jerusalem. While on the journey to Rome, Margery stopped to meet Julian of Norwich, who offered Margery counsel about her

¹² Julian of Norwich, *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love*, ed. Jacqueline Jenkins and Nicholas Watson (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 309.

¹³ Chaste marriage would have been a serious commitment as, in the eyes of the Church, the sexual activities that were considered legitimate in marriage became sinful again if both parties took the oath of being in a chaste marriage.

visions and revelations.¹⁴ Her only written work was *The Book of Margery Kempe*, in which she tracked her visionary experiences in the form of an autobiography. Too illiterate to write it down for herself, Margery employed scribes to record her dictations. *The Book* was not disseminated widely in late medieval Europe, but even without it Margery was respected and considered legitimate by a fair number of her contemporaries. Her book was rediscovered in 1936, published in 1940, and has since received study and attention.

Mystic Women and the Age of Protestant and Catholic Revolutions and Reforms

With the appearance of the printing press, in the middle of the fifteenth-century, religious discourse was forever changed. When the ability to produce written works became easier and far more cost effective, heresy became harder for the Church to control. 1478 marked the beginning of the Spanish Inquisition, a historic event sparked by the Spanish monarchy's fear that forced converts to Christianity had reverted to their previously held faiths, most commonly Judaism and Islam. This was a clear break from the medieval Inquisition in authority, focus, and procedure. While the legitimacy of the Spanish Inquisition initially came from the Pope, the power truly lay with the Crown. Unlike the medieval inquisitors, who functioned separately without answering to a centralized office, the Spanish Inquisition consisted of inquisitors appointed by the Crown which established an institution to root out heresy. The inquisitors answered to a centralized office and because of this they were a unified body, unlike their medieval predecessors. Also, the jurisdiction of the inquisitors, which had previously just extended

¹⁴ Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Prof. Sanford Brown Meech (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), 42.

to baptized believers, now extended to nonbelievers, primarily Jews and Muslims. The monarchy felt the need to ensure the orthodoxy of their newest converts, who they fearfully imagined to be leading clandestine lives that involved unorthodox beliefs and rituals. These fears would prompt mystics like Teresa of Avila to distance themselves from or completely hide their Jewish heritage.

The publishing of Martin Luther's *The Ninety-Five Theses* in 1517 and its dissemination among the literate German population was crucial in establishing a strong foundation for the Protestant movement. To respond to the rise of Protestantism, the Council of Trent was held from 1545 to 1563. In these eighteen years the Council witnessed the death of Charles V, a major advocate for its initiation, and the shift of power to his brother Ferdinand and his son Philip II. It also witnessed five popes, Paul III, Julius III, Marcellus II, Paul IV, and finally Pius IV. However, the purpose of this council constantly revolved around the two problems of reform and heresy. By the time the Protestants arrived in 1552 the council had already proclaimed the truth of transubstantiation, a point of doctrine that Protestants rejected. While the Council respectfully received the Protestant representatives, their presence clearly did not affect the proceedings. By the time the council came to a close, Lutheranism had achieved legal recognition and Calvinism was a growing force apparent in Europe, particularly in France. A crucial reform decree, for religious women, appeared during the final year of the Council of Trent, and was reinforced by a papal bull three years later. This reform established the enforcement of strict enclosure on all female communities and provoked resistance well into the next century.

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), as her name implies, was born in the town of Avila in Spain. Teresa was a daughter from her father's second marriage and had a large immediate family. In the 1940s historians discovered that Teresa's heritage was one of mixed blood, Jewish and Christian, a fact which never appeared in her works. Her grandfather, Juan Sánchez had been declared a relapsed Jewish convert by the Spanish Inquisition but had accepted a pardon, in 1485, offered to relapsed converts if they participated in a public *auto da fe*.¹⁵ At the age of sixteen, Teresa began her formal education by becoming a boarder at a school run by the local Augustinian sisters. Around the age of twenty-one, she took the Carmelite habit and later became a well-known voice for reform within the Carmelite Order. The first of many books she wrote was *Libro de la Vida*, which she wrote in her native tongue. She penned this autobiography at the behest of her confessor after she suffered a serious malady from her early twenties to her early forties. As commonly found in mystical works, this illness preceded the initiation of her interaction with the divine, and she completed it by the end of 1565. During the last decade of her life, her correspondence with ecclesiastics, as well as powerful patrons, both male and female, increased as she fought to defend her reformed order of the Discalced Carmelites. The Unreformed Carmelites wished to suppress them, but Teresa remained in constant correspondence with many ecclesiastics, nuns from the Discalced Carmelites, and men and women from the Court. The latter of these aided her through endowments and all of them helped her combat the attacks the Discalced Carmelites suffered at the hand of their unreformed brethren. Aside from

¹⁵ Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 8.

already being considered a saint, her historical and theological importance was endorsed recently in 1970 when she was named Doctor of the Church by Pope Paul VI.

Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi (1566-1607) was born in sixteenth-century Italy, to a noble Florentine family. In 1574 she entered a convent to get an education on the advice of her family's confessor. Eight years later she joined a Carmelite monastery, and within a year had taken the Carmelite habit. Within a few years, like her fellow Carmelite Teresa of Avila, she fell extremely ill and experienced her first ecstasies. From this time onward, the monastery's confessor had her words transcribed whenever she fell into a trance. Anywhere from two to four of her fellow nuns constantly were present and worked together to transcribe her spoken words in their entirety. While Mary Magdalen did help with the editing of some of these transcriptions, it was a task she did because her confessor forcefully suggested it. For Mary Magdalen, the most important interaction with God occurred orally and thus she rejected the written word, which she viewed as a corruption of her experiences. When once left alone with one of the many transcripts of her experiences, she burned it, provoking the rage of her confessor. During the concluding years of her life, Mary Magdalen showed an increasing desire to communicate with the outside world. She wrote letters to bishops, priests, and even the Pope, but her fellow nuns intercepted these letters, and they never left the convent. She was canonized in 1669. Over the centuries, Mary Magdalen's work had been preserved in several manuscripts, where it remained largely undiscovered until unearthed by several scholars and published, between 1960 and 1966, as a seven volume set.

Ursula de Jesus (1604-1666) was born in Lima as the legitimate daughter of Juan de Castilla and a slave woman, Isabel de Rios. She lived in the house of the man who owned her mother, Gerónima de los Rios, until 1612 when she went to live with and serve as a slave for the mystic Luisa de Melgrarejo Sotomayo. Ursula stayed with Luisa until 1617, when she entered the Convent of Santa Clara to work for Gerónima's niece. The life of a slave in a convent consisted of an exhausting regime of work which left little to no time for personal spiritual deliberation. She was expected to prepare all the food for her mistress, as well as wash all her clothing and linen. Once Ursula finished these tasks, there was communal labor to be done with the servants in the kitchen and infirmary until very late in the day. Ursula's propensity to attempt to address spiritual matters in her own life caused misunderstandings between her and her owner, who felt Ursula was neglecting these obligatory daily tasks. When Ursula requested to leave the convent to search for a new owner, one of the nuns bought her freedom in an attempt to convince Ursula to stay in the order, where they increasingly revered her as a holy woman. Ursula finally gained her freedom in 1645. After initially resisting the idea, as she was not sure she wanted to stay in the convent or remain under the will of another person, she became a religious servant.¹⁶ It was shortly after this life change that Ursula began having visions and more regularly communicating with God. When her confessor ordered her to record her visions in 1647, she started keeping a diary in Spanish which was later preserved in the Franciscan archives in Lima.

¹⁶ Nancy E. van Duesen, introduction to *The Souls of Purgatory: The Spiritual Diary of a Seventeenth-Century Afro-Peruvian Mystic, Ursula de Jesús*, by Ursula de Jesus, tran. Nancy E. Van Duesen. (Albuquerque: University of new Mexico Press, 2004), 4.

While records of the birth, death, or possible marriages of the English mystic Elizabeth Poole have yet to be discovered, there is still quite a lot about her life which is known. The first written record which included Elizabeth was published in 1645: *A Brief Remonstrance* by William Kiffin. This publication was presented as a written exchange with Robert Poole, Elizabeth's respected Presbyterian father, who protested when Elizabeth became a follower of Kiffin, a Baptist who advocated adult baptism as the only real form of baptism. Historians assume Elizabeth was around the age of sixteen at the time, and Robert declared her conversion as equivalent to his daughter being seduced. William published this exchange to ridicule Robert and highlight the inadequacy of infant baptism, which clearly failed to keep Elizabeth from embracing the Baptist faith. Later she parted ways with Kiffin. While the details remain unknown, it is speculated that Elizabeth challenged Kiffin about a doctrinal matter and the congregation expelled her for this departure from accepted behavior.¹⁷ Soon after joining a new Baptist congregation, rumors surfaced implying her former congregation had removed her due to sexual promiscuity. It was strongly suspected that Kiffin started the rumors, but this was never proven.¹⁸ The General Council, or Army Council, appeared in 1647 as a composition of Army officers and elected representatives that functioned as the ruling head of the Army and its voice in Parliament. At Elizabeth's initial appearance before them, she revealed to the Council a vision which condoned their rise to power during the

¹⁷ Manfred Brod, "Politics and Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England: The Case of Elizabeth Poole," *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 31 (1999): 397.

¹⁸ Katharine Gillespie, *Domesticity and Dissent in the Seventeenth Century: English Women Writers and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 156.

English Civil War.¹⁹ While the Council condoned her legitimacy as a divine messenger on this visit, it did not react similarly after her second visit, where the vision she relayed urged it to spare the life of the King, Charles I. After this message, the Council withdrew its support of her and began to work to discredit her voice as being truly inspired by the divine. Her works,²⁰ written in English, were all prompted for or by these two interactions.

Bathsheba Bowers (1672-1718) was a Quaker who lived primarily in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She was born in Charleston, Massachusetts, but fearing religious persecution her parents moved her, along with three of her sisters, to Philadelphia. She was the daughter of Benannuel Bowers, a much-persecuted Quaker, and Elizabeth Dunster, the niece of the first president of Harvard. Most of what is known of her life is taken from letters written by her niece, Ann Bolton, to her physician, in an exchange that began in 1739. All three of Bathsheba's sisters, who moved to Philadelphia with her, soon married. Ann wrote that Bathsheba remained single but she had been in love at the age of eighteen and it end poorly,²¹ suggesting that Bathsheba had not always desired such a solitary life, or that perhaps like Margery Kempe she received her calling later in life. Once older, Bathsheba withdrew from society and lived alone in her house where she read as much as she could. It was in this studious life of solitude

¹⁹ The English Civil War is often used to encompass three wars fought from 1641 through 1651 about the leadership and manner of ruling used. These wars lead to the death of Charles I, in 1649, and the subsequent exile of Charles II. While the monarchy was restored in the aftermath, it was done at the consent of the Parliament which set the stage for the establishment of a parliamentary monarchy later.

²⁰ *A vision: Wherein is manifested the disease and cure of the Kingdome* (London, 1648); *An Alarum of War, Given to the Army and their High Court of Justice* (London, 1649); *An Alarum of War* (2nd edition, London, 1649); *A Propheisie Touching the Death of King Charles* (London, 1649)

²¹ William John Potts, "Notes and Queries," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 3 (1879): 111.

that she wrote her life story. Her niece stated it was printed and distributed widely²² but the actual circulation is hard to confirm. She wrote her spiritual autobiography in 1709, titled *An Alarm Sounded to Prepare the Inhabitants of the VWorld To Meet the Lord in the Way of his Judgements*. In the final years of her life she moved to South Carolina, for unknown reasons, and lived the last of her days there.

The Evolution of the Historical Study of Gender, Mystics, and Ritual

The way historians perceive and present female rituals within late medieval and early modern Europe has progressed through significant changes over time. Initially, historians did not separate women from men when they studied history. What this really meant was women were not really studied at all. Historians overlooked the effect women had on their surroundings and the influence their environment had on them. Starting in the 1930s, historians began to intentionally study ordinary people, rather than just political leaders, military events, or major intellectual movements. The research this produced led to the discovery that among the common populace some things, such as diet and essential attitudes regarding the world around them, stayed the same. The 1960s witnessed the rise of what was termed New Social History, which incorporated techniques regularly utilized by other social sciences, such as the interpretation of symbols in anthropology, and took what was discovered about the past to support the need for change in the social and political fabric of the present. The feminist movement also felt reinvigorated by the many social movements on the 1960s and contemporaries pushed for a better understanding of the lives of women in the past. Students of the late 1960s and early 1970s began to study women, stressing that any study of the past needed

²² Ibid.

to examine both sexes. By the late 1970s, colleges in both the United States and Canada began offering classes in women's history.

Historians discovered many works by Christian mystics in the 1940s and 1950s, after the desire for the writings of less prominent authors prompted such a detection. However it was not until the 1980s, after the development of the field of women's history, that these works began to receive the specialized study they required. Rudolf Bell and Donald Weinstein deal with the difference between what was considered morally unacceptable for male and female saints in their 1982 work *Saints & Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1100-1700*.²³ They address that the moral errors of male saints were blamed upon outside influence and the moral failing of female saints were believed to have arisen from the women themselves. They also stress the significance of the rise of mendicant orders in thirteenth-century Europe. The rise of these orders coincided with a rise in the class base from which saints were drawn, and now the middle to lower classes also supplied pious women to be saints. Bell and Weinstein also note that an increase in the number of female saints in this period does not mean they achieved equality with men. The inclusion of the middle and lower classes sparked an equivalent rise in the number of male saints recorded.²⁴ When reading Bell and Weinstein, as they depict of the lives of religious women in their vitae, the existence of religious women appears quite bleak.²⁵ In this work the female saints seemingly possessed no control over their lives and little defense against oppressive forces which

²³ Rudolph M. Bell and Donald Weinstein, *Saints & Society: Christendom, 1000-1700* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 224.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

appear in power. Bell and Weinstein argue that even if religious women escaped to female monastic communities, they were still under the control of a gendered understanding of human ability to interact with God and seek personal salvation. However, the assumption that religious women lacked agency did a great disservice to these women.

Three years later Bell addresses the interpretative tools which historians utilize to understand the religious expressions of female saints from the eleventh-century through the sixteenth-century, in his book *Holy Anorexia*.²⁶ Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*,²⁷ which appeared eight years later, expanded this argument by also addressing the importance of not interpreting the female perspective through masculine theories of experience. In *Holy Anorexia*, Bell also highlights how the thirteenth-century mendicant movement placed a new emphasis on personal responsibility in relation to salvation. This theological shift allowed both women and men new capabilities. If partial responsibility for their salvation was their own, then they gained the ability to assert themselves in their communities.

Women could also gain agency, Bell explains, through denial of food. Due to this act mystic women stepped outside traditional social and religious norms. As Bell suggests, this also gave them some measure of control over their own lives. For the women that did not choose to maintain this life style until their death, anorexia could also be seen as an affliction, which could only be cured by the Church, through the help of a priest. Afterwards women could be integrated back into respectable society. Although

²⁶ Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

²⁷ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

holy anorexia often shortened their earthly lives, Bell argues that the pious ability to control their bodies bolstered the significance of their spiritual visions and experiences.

In the early 1990s feminist historians reacted to Bell's analysis of mysticism, strongly cautioning against the use of a term like "anorexic," which did not surface before 1900, to describe the religious experience of women in the medieval and early modern Church. They pointed out that labeling the experience of religious women as "anorexic" changes the lens utilized to understand mystical experience and choices, recasting experiences such as fasting as a medical condition or a sickness. Labeling a theological and religious practice with a term which implies medical and secular understanding, they argue, undermines the historical understanding of the reasons why people abstained from food in religious practice. As Martha Reineke points out, medieval theology and practice linked eating behavior to the definition of what it meant to be a Christian. Fasting was something which caused someone to stand out as a truly devout Christian,²⁸ female and male alike, which Bell's work largely overlooked. Food imagery often played a crucial role in the symbolism and ritual proliferated within the cultural practices of medieval Christianity.²⁹

In her seminal work, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, Caroline Walker Bynum concentrates on the gendered practice of fasting by religious women. Bynum's work focuses on the intrinsic connection between food, spirituality, and religious practice for women in medieval Europe. She argues that contemporaries viewed gluttony as an expression of extreme lust. As this

²⁸ Martha J. Reineke, "„This Is My Body’: Reflections on Abjection, Anorexia, and Medieval Women Mystics,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58, no. 2 (1990): 252.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 248.

would imply, they also perceived fasting as one of the most serious renunciations a person could make of their worldly desires. Most importantly, medieval Europeans saw food as the most simple and literal way of encountering God through the sacrament of Communion.³⁰ To gain a better perspective on the incentives behind the ascetic behavior of these religious women, the religious connotation imbedded in the contemporary theological understanding of food must be taken into account. Mystics certainly viewed their actions as religious in nature, so it is extremely important to give significant weight to the religious nature they inherently possessed.

Bynum's work, much like Bell's, also emphasizes the necessity of recognizing the differences between male and female religious rituals and actions. Bynum argues that while the actions women performed utilized the physicality of the female body, it is evident male deeds employed the concept of reversal found in renunciations of worldly temptations like wealth. Both were a form of denunciation: women deprecated their bodies, while men condemned their worldly possessions. Female saints were models of physical suffering; male saints were models of action.³¹ The sufferings of female saints were things that happened to them and were deserved by them. The abilities they gained were buttressed by what they could prompt to happen to them, not what they caused to take place. It was not seen as equally shocking if a male saint, as opposed to a female, attempted to elicit theological or structural change in the preexisting religious system. It is important to note Bynum stresses that while this dichotomy appeared to only allow the women a passive role, they clearly utilized these traditional stereotypes and roles to

³⁰ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 2.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

further their own interests; a clear example would be how they drew power from the established association they had with food.

Food became the logical medium through which women could exert control over themselves and their circumstances, as it was one of the areas of their lives over which they had control. Due to the assumed place of the woman as the meal provider, food was also an acceptable medium for women to use to express themselves. Because food held such a stable social importance it intrinsically held a solid religious one for mystics. As Reineke argues, cultural order, at this time, can be understood as influenced by the control of the consumption of food. Thus, people who could achieve control of their bodies could exert control over the larger social body.³² Gisela Muschiol suggests that because of the connection women perceived between food and the Eucharist their influence created a new meaning for fasting.³³

Aside from the spiritual effects of fasting, such as divine revelations or visions, female mystics also experienced the strong physical effects of fasting. Contemporaries were aware extreme fasting caused a cessation of menstruation in women,³⁴ medieval hagiographers often noted holy women did not menstruate.³⁵ Menstruation was a reminder of women's carnal nature that drew them into the world of the flesh and devil, where they repeated the sins of Eve. Due to the strong link menstruation had with

³² Reineke, 251-252.

³³ Gisela Muschiol, "Time and Space: Liturgy and Rite in Female Monasteries of the Middle Ages," in *Crown and Veil: Female Monasticism From the Fifth to the Fifteenth Centuries*, ed. Jeffery F. Hamburger and Susan Marti (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 193.

³⁴ Bynum, 214.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 211.

impurity and vulnerability, the lack of menstruation was understood widely as indicative of a woman's religious purity and higher spiritual state.

The clear desire mystics had to gain control over their physical bodies is an indication of their understanding that their bodies were indicative of either spiritual purity or corruption. This dichotomy also meant that acts of self-abuse could be a vehicle for divine communication. Bynum addresses that in an imitation of Christ's suffering on the cross, including but not limited to self-flagellation, self-starvation, and illness, the women felt they became the abused body of Christ. It was often during this union they experienced visions.³⁶ Medieval women were more likely than men to inflict injury on themselves, after all it was the female body which their communities perceived as being a site of impurity. Thus, these mystics emphasized that they controlled and purified their bodies. It was also additionally probable that the physical effects of these actions on the bodies of religious women would be recorded by followers and biographers.³⁷ In *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris*³⁸ Barbara Diefendorf traces the widespread practice of bodily mortification as it appeared in Post-Tridentine France. She shares how pious women would go in large numbers to listen to sermons from clerics known for being excellent orators and practicing self mortification. Inspired by this vivid example, women often sought to incorporate these practices into their own religious routines.³⁹ Self mortification rituals encouraged the belief that their

³⁶ Ibid., 114.

³⁷ Ibid., 212.

³⁸ Barbara B. Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³⁹ Ibid., 58.

bodies were a way to access the divine.⁴⁰ Just as the cessation of menstruation was a key trope of sanctity in medieval hagiographies, the practice of self mortification was very prevalent in religious biographies.⁴¹ This strengthens the argument that text can have an influence on what women perceived as their role in religious devotion. Bynum outlines in other works why the persecution which flagellants received in the fifteenth-century rested in their belief that redemption could be found in their own blood, when shed in imitation of Christ's sufferings. What Church authorities feared from this belief and practice was the possibility that people would see blood as a more intimate and achievable means of gaining salvation than any sacrament the Church could offer.⁴² Diefendorf tells of the shift, for Protestant women in Reformation France, from exterior mortification of the body to interior mortification of the will. Turning flagellation to an interior mortification manifests as practices like extreme fasting.⁴³ This even further solidifies the link between both fasting and flagellation as the bodily ways of reaching God. It also supports the link between the rituals of Protestant and Catholic women. While the actual mediums they have access to differ, the beliefs which offer them validation are the same. Susan Juster also argues for the continuity of rituals across boundaries such as period, late medieval to early modern, and location, Europe to colonial America.⁴⁴ The rituals of the body meant to reach out to the divine are constant although they do adjust to fit the theology of their dominate society.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 75.

⁴¹ Ibid., 146.

⁴² Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 35.

⁴³ Diefendorf, 242-243.

⁴⁴ Susan Juster, "Mystical Pregnancy and Holy Bleeding: Visionary Experience on Early Modern Britain and America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2000), 249-288.

Pushing the Boundaries: Resistance and Agency in Mystical Practice

In “Writing to Redundancy: Approaches to Spiritual Journals and Early Modern Spirituality,” Tom Webster considers how the writings of early modern Protestant women, primarily diaries, could be used as a medium to structure and maintain a pious self.⁴⁵ When they wrote in journals, women could construct the godly self while showing the progression of their journey through many stages and much self-examination.⁴⁶ The creation of religious diaries stemmed out of the scriptural literalism upon which Protestantism relied. The roots for this belief can be found in scripture where God often prompted male biblical figures to write down the experiences he provided or the words he spoke to them.⁴⁷ However, this gendered presentation did not stop early modern Protestant women from aligning themselves with this biblically rooted practice. Webster asserts, the mere act of writing in itself seemingly had a power which made it become a way to validate experience. Writing affirmed and retained the feelings and revelations of the writer which occurred during a religious experience. This understanding prompted the writers to record their experiences as quickly as possible, as this was seen as the best way of capturing the original meaning.⁴⁸

Webb Keane expands on this idea by affirming that while activities like speaking, reading, and writing, or their suppression, should be studied as a prerequisite for possible divine interaction, these methods also needed to be treated as a possible response to that

⁴⁵ Tom Webster, “Writing to Redundancy: Approaches to Spiritual Journals and Early Modern Spirituality,” *The Historical Journal* 39 (1996): 40.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

contact.⁴⁹ The means by which humans present communication with the divine often reflects contemporary assumptions regarding the divine, humans, and the relationship between the two.⁵⁰ In the works of post-Tridentine mystics confined to their convents, Ronnie Po-chia Hsia suggests that images and intentional language allowed nuns to evade some clerical authority and control.⁵¹ Often when the male confessors and spiritual advisors of female mystics spoke against their visions, experiences, or revelations, the mystics would be comforted and reassured in a vision that God condoned and ordained their actions. An example of this can be found in the often erotic language used to describe their experiences. This language, rooted firmly in the traditions of medieval mysticism, concealed sexual struggles which faced religious women bound to retain their virginity and forbidden to leave their convents.⁵² The strength of the sexual temptation, and the consequent mystical experiences they encountered, often aligned with the development of their lives. The early years of their sexual maturation were often where they encountered an abundance of temptation, divine revelation, and bodily abuse, either in the form of a life threatening illness or through the practice of self-mortification.

Another important element of the lives and written works of female mystics was their male spiritual advisors, confessors, and scribes. For the majority of the women in this study, this figure was undeniably influential. In his article “Gender and the Authority of Friars: The Significance of Holy Women for Thirteenth-Century Franciscans and

⁴⁹ Webb Keane, “Religious Language,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 26 (1997): 48.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁵¹ Ronnie Po-chia Hsia, *The World of Catholic Renewal*, 2nd ed, (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 149.

⁵² *Ibid.*

Dominicans,”⁵³ John Coakley addresses the relationship between friars and mystics primarily emphasizing the importance of this interaction for the friars. Friars had clear authoritative sacerdotal roles in the lives of female mystics, as the administrators over the distribution of the sacraments, and obvious roles as pastoral authorities and as directors of spiritual affairs and the affairs of convents in general. However, another important relationship between mystic and friar which emerged was the mystic as “embodiment of holiness” and the friar as “witness to that holiness.”⁵⁴ While the divine interaction the women experienced could have established the friars as subordinate, this interaction was not emphasized and at times intentionally deflected⁵⁵ by both mystic and friar.⁵⁶

Anne Clark also addresses the relationship between mystic and confessor in her study of the relationship between Elisabeth and Ekbert of Schönau.⁵⁷ Ekbert became the filter through which his sister’s discourse passed but he also affected what her dialogue addressed by suggesting what needed to be investigated.⁵⁸ Clark does not imply that Ekbert merely manipulated Elizabeth into producing what he desired, but rather that she address the relationship between the oral expressions of Elizabeth’s religious experiences and the documents Ekbert penned which claimed to report them verbatim.⁵⁹ After Ekbert’s arrival there was a clear shift in what Elisabeth’s revelations addressed but it is important to note that while she began to address controversial topics, clearly with

⁵³ John Coakley, “Gender and the Authority of Friars: The Significance of Holy Women for Thirteenth-Century Franciscans and Dominicans” *Church History* 60, no. 4 (1991), 445-460.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 451.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 457.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 459.

⁵⁷ Anne L. Clark, “Repression or collaboration? The case of Elisabeth and Ekbert of Schönau,” in *Christendom and its discontents: Exclusion, persecution, and rebellion, 1000-1500*, ed. Peter D. Diehl and Scott L. Waugh (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 151-167.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 155-156.

Ekbert's guidance, she still retained her independence and addressed other topics without his prompting, and stated views that clearly went against beliefs he held or would simply refused to answer a question he asked.⁶⁰ Clark argues that while it is clear that male confessors and spiritual advisors utilized the divinity of female mystics to address theological concerns they had, it is also clear that the mystics utilized the authority of these men to develop and present their message to the public.⁶¹ This relationship is also addressed by Allison Weber in her analysis of the interactions between Teresa of Avila and her confessors. Teresa clearly accepted and respected the relationship of penitent to confessor, but Weber argues Teresa did not view the writer to reader relationship as equally static. This latter relationship Teresa remodeled to affect the hierarchy of power and thus allowed a greater range of expression, in both how she disseminated her work and the techniques she used for description, which she utilized.⁶² Comprehension of the symbiotic elements between mystic and confessor is vital to the study of the written works it produced.

In his chapter "Pastoral Care in Female Monasteries: Sacramental Services, Spiritual Edification, Ethical Discipline,"⁶³ Klaus Schreiner points out that even though religious women needed pastoral care, vitally for sacerdotal purposes, late medieval nuns would still find a way to function if pastoral care was withheld from their communities. The mendicant groups which often took responsibility for convents would at times

⁶⁰ Ibid., 160-161.

⁶¹ Ibid., 165.

⁶² Weber, 64.

⁶³ Klaus Schreiner, "Pastoral Care in Female Monasteries: Sacramental Services, Spiritual Edification, Ethical Discipline," in *Crown and Veil: Female Monasticism from the Fifth to the Fifteenth Centuries*, ed. Jeffery F. Hamburger and Susan Marti (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 225-244.

attempt to distance themselves from these duties. They often saw the nuns as a burden which distracted them, prompting violations of the laws of enclosure, and diverted them from their true vocation, preaching to the masses to combat the threat of heresy.⁶⁴ When one mendicant monastic group stopped giving nuns the attention they needed, those religious women turned initially to other mendicant groups and when this failed they turned to communities which were seen as heretical to access the leadership, guidance, and spiritual abilities of men.⁶⁵ In this act, the agency of these religious women is evident. While acknowledging the religious traditions that required a male leader, they exercised their ability to seek out such a leader from heretical groups when orthodox ones abandoned them. For historians to view the abilities religious women did not have as the definition of their faculty does not factor in the actions of those female monastic communities. By turning to heretical groups to receive the pastoral interaction they needed to access God, they exercised the ability to affect their own salvation.

Extremely religious women began to use visions as a weapon to fight the choices their social environment made for them and forced on them.⁶⁶ Visions allowed mystics the ability to address deep-seated fears and concerns which they could not have easily stated otherwise.⁶⁷ Visionaries often utilized visions to gain the support of powerful males, especially when their words supported the actions or desires of these men.⁶⁸ Jodi Bilinkoff writes of the interaction between Ferdinand of Aragon and the mystic María de

⁶⁴ Ibid., 237.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 230.

⁶⁶ Bell and Weinstein, 229.

⁶⁷ Cordelia Warr, "Clothing, Charity, Salvation and Visionary Experience in Fifteenth-Century Siena," *Art History* 27, no. 2 (2004): 190.

⁶⁸ Jodi Bilinkoff, "A Spanish Prophetess and Her Patrons: The Case of María de Santo Domingo," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 23 (1992): 27, 29.

Santo Domingo. She asserts that one of reasons Ferdinand responded well to María was that her presentation was impulsive and delivered avidly. Because of how starkly this contrasted with the other members in his court, this presentation provided her with credibility.⁶⁹ Manfred Brod presents a similar argument using the seventeenth-century mystic Elizabeth Poole. He suggests her role to the General Council had much in common with the modern position of a consultant. When Elizabeth came before the Council, she provided them with divine guidance that clearly supported the actions they had already taken and desired to carry out.⁷⁰ They wished to use military power to overthrow the King, and Elizabeth supplied a divine vision which validated those actions.

The General Council also accepted Elizabeth because, as a prophetess, she was restricted from taking political positions in her own name. This confined the amount and type of power available to her in the political realm.⁷¹ Once female mystics presented themselves as a mouthpiece of God they received more than just temporary religious authority and gained some ability to provide commentary on important subjects. While this does not make the lives of religious women simple, as they had to be careful religious authorities did not perceive their revelations as heretical, it did allow them a place to stand among the religious authorities to offer commentary on their respective religious cultures.

Another medium which religious women utilized for religious visual validation was clothing. In “Clothing, Charity, Salvation and Visionary Experience in Fifteenth-Century Siena,” Cordelia Warr traces the importance and meaning of the religious habits

⁶⁹ Ibid., 29.

⁷⁰ Brod, 407-408.

⁷¹ Ibid., 410.

worn by nuns. Clothing had religious significance as something which could pass through both the mortal and immortal worlds.⁷² People perceived clothing relics as retaining the power of the original saints who wore them, even after that saint had passed away. The reasoning behind this lay in the extensive contact clothing experienced with the saint's physical body during his or her lifetime. Because the clothes of saints were understood in this manner, it gave clothing an independent and recognized power.⁷³ It was understood that clothing had the ability to really be one with the person who was wearing it.⁷⁴ While clothing could be a visible sign of holiness when worn, as in the case of a nun's habit, it could also be a way to affect one's own salvation. Giving clothes as a gift was seen as an act of mercy which could only aid on someone's path to salvation.⁷⁵ Numerous popes offered continued support for an indulgence which stated that being buried in a habit could decrease one's time in Purgatory. This habit indulgence gave people such power to affect their own salvation that even some men opted to be buried in nuns' habits.⁷⁶

The body is seemingly everywhere a historian turns when studying religious women: the saints had visions of blood coming from the body of Christ; the bodies of these female saints were physically damaged or controlled. Religious rituals like these were among the first to gain attention. Through examination of these rituals historians came to realize that within ritual lay power for religious women. When they received access to the divine through religiously accepted means, mystics received a voice they

⁷² Warr, 188.

⁷³ Ibid., 201.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 191.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 192.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 196.

previously did not possess. Recognition of the female agency imbedded in feminine religious rituals is what led historians to look at the importance of rituals outside of the body. They began to study specific rituals in specialized areas of Europe. Studies now shift to an acceptance of fluidity across time and geographic barriers which previously were treated as definitive. Transatlantic study has recently broadened how historians understand colonial America and its relationship to Europe. Historians are also beginning to view time between late medieval and early modern as permeable. These views allow for a better understand of the rituals religious women utilized. Ultimately, the field is constantly changing and attempting to establish new ways to view ritual and gender in late medieval and early modern Europe. It is that constant determination to find what has been previously overlooked which allows the field to always move towards a more comprehensive and thought provoking understanding of the many uses of ritual in history.

Chapter One
The Unworthy, Unlearned, Unwilling, and Perfect Receiver

The sixteenth-century Spanish mystic, Teresa of Avila, defended her divine interaction and the information presented to her in her visions by stating she did not understand how God could possibly present the information so vividly to her. She testified comprehension of such things was “a matter for the learned: the Lord has not wished to show me how it happens.” She continued to explain she was “so ignorant and have such a poor understanding that although many attempts have been made to explain it to me, I have never managed to comprehend the way of it.” Thus while people may assume she was quite intelligent Teresa emphasized that she was merely a passive recipient of God’s revelations and wisdom: “I have discovered again and again that I never grasp anything unless it is fed to me, spoonful by spoonful...” Even her confessor was “astounded by my ignorance” and never attempted to explain her encounters with the divine to her. She concluded by claiming, “If there were a question of sin or no sin, I would ask; but, for the rest, all I needed was to realize God did everything.”⁷⁷ By presenting her intelligence as so pitiful that even when her confessors attempted to explain her own experiences to her later she was incapable of comprehension, Teresa confirmed that her visions and spiritual wisdom had come from God alone. Her lack of ability proved that her theological and religious commentary had not originated in her mind. Teresa’s proclamation of intellectual modesty was not unique. Medieval and early

⁷⁷ Teresa of Ávila, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila by Herself*, trans. J.M. Cohen (London: Penguin Books, 1957), 198.

modern mystics, especially women, often utilized the trope of intellectual weakness and mental inadequacy to support the divinity of their visions and written works.

The apparent presentation of female mystics that they themselves made in their works as unworthy and unwilling participants in their divine encounters spoke to their understanding of their role in the Church. Their reinforcement of the traits associated with the dual nature of the female sex, either resembling the wicked Eve or striving to reflect the traits of the virtuous Virgin Mary, shows their understanding of the perception of their gender in their respective environments. Most importantly, their use of this knowledge in their writings displays their ability to use these constructive elements to strengthen the positive reception of their works.

Roberto Franzosi addresses the properties, construction, and empirical evidence found in narrative. One aspect of narrative he identifies is the six different actants which appear within written narrative.⁷⁸ One of these relationships he outlines in his work is between a sender and a receiver. The sender, perceived as a *deus ex machina* often given magical or nonhuman powers, conveys an object to a receiver. Looking at the women addressed in this work, it appears they might fall into the category of sender due to their mystical interaction with the divine. While there was a necessary supernatural aspect to the writings of these female mystics, the mystics made sure to establish they were not a *deus ex machina* and that their chief function was to use their divine encounters for the benefit of the Church.⁷⁹ In the writings of these ten women all of them solidified God as

⁷⁸ Sender/receiver; helper/opponent; subject/object. Roberto Franzosi, "Narrative Analysis-Or Why (And How) Sociologists Should be Interested in Narrative," *Annual Review of Sociology* vol. 24 (1998): 523.

⁷⁹ John Coakley, "Gender and the Authority of Friars: The Significance of Holy Women for Thirteenth-Century Franciscans and Dominicans," *Church History* 60 (1991): 456.

the sender, their revelations, knowledge, and visions as the object, and themselves as a thoroughly unworthy and generally unwilling receiver. In the mystic writings of these various women, the reoccurrence of two very important interactions they used to firmly establish their receiver role and exclude themselves from being a possible sender are present. One of the ways they did this was to emphasize they were unlearned, unworthy, and God saw them as unwilling, but ordered or reassured them they were doing as he wished.

The Incapable Mystic

As Hildegard of Bingen wrote in *Scivias*, when God advised her to describe her visions simply as she saw them, he clarified this must be done because Hildegard was “...simple in expounding, and untaught in writing...”⁸⁰ In this intentional presentation, Hildegard established herself as the receiver and God as the giver. This saved her from being regarded as vain and made her a medium through which God expressed his thoughts. Because Hildegard was not presented as the originator of these thoughts it became acceptable for her to express them. Another example of this can be found in how she also attributed her impressively comprehensive understanding of the scriptures as an instant and momentary gift from God. Hildegard claimed to not have comprehension of Latin words and text or any understanding of “the division of the syllables or the knowledge of cases or tenses.”⁸¹ In this sender/receiver relationship, knowledge was obviously the object getting passed from one party to another.

⁸⁰ Hildegard of Bingen, 59.

⁸¹ Ibid.

When Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi atypically spoke in Latin during one of her sessions, the nuns transcribing her every utterance made a note in the transcript of how amazing this was because to their knowledge she did not possess an understanding of Latin required to speak it. The nuns even took the time to point out the apparent difference in knowledge she displayed during the visions versus what she normally possessed. They explained that typically she did not understand the Latin psalms she read daily, but at this moment in her vision she spoke with the grammar knowledge of a Doctor.⁸² The nun's explanation was really just a more detailed version of a point Mary Magdalen made in the very first colloquy⁸³ when she described her lack of continued understanding of her visions by saying, "...many things that I then understand I am not able to understand /later/...I cannot express them as I understand them and I do not have them so clearly in my mind."⁸⁴ Mary Magdalen constantly emphasized the importance of the original moment of divine interaction and stressed that to describe the moment of true divine interaction was almost impossible to explain or document. However, in this case it also worked to support her strategic presentation that she lacked the basic intelligence to make up any of her points, and also showed how unworthy of a recipient she was because she lacked the ability to even retain the understanding granted to her by God in the moment. Once that moment had passed, and the Lord was no longer aiding her in her understanding, she lost that previous comprehension. Much like Teresa, her apparent

⁸² Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi, *The Complete Works of Saint Mary Magdalen de'Pazzi: Carmelite and Mystic (1566-1607)*, vol. 2, tran. Very Rev. Gabriel N. Pausback, (Fatima, Portugal: Blessed Nuno House, 1974), 229.

⁸³ Each of her colloquies, or conversations with God, was described in full in a single colloquy. Each transcription generally began by listing the date of the specific encounter.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

minimal understanding to explain her own divine interaction was a shrewd way to support that the message came from God and she was merely an available vessel. The use of modesty as a literary justification to address what one is presumed to lack the expertise to understand was not newly crafted by mystic women or limited to the female gender. It has roots in Christian documents going all the way back to the Bible.⁸⁵ Mystics such as Teresa creatively used this established formula also as a means of securing supporters. Teresa utilized this interaction to add a slightly ambiguous aspect to gender hierarchy when she wrote at the request of García de Toledo but then stressed that as his spiritual teacher she had a right to expect his humility in the acceptance of her spiritual supervision.⁸⁶ By establishing humility as a trait they both shared, Teresa destabilized his ability to properly function as a possible critic.⁸⁷

Mechthild of Magdeburg's *Das fliessende* used a similar narrative construction to justify and make her writing not offensive or heretical. Mechthild notes that God relayed to her that the reason he used her was her uneducated status as he preferred an "unlearned mouth"⁸⁸ to teach his word. By presenting an uneducated person as God's preference for a mouthpiece, also implying how unworthy the educated clergy appeared, she even further supported the perception that the words could not have originated from her own creative mind. Julian of Norwich also presented herself as a "simple creature unletterde"⁸⁹ and Margery Kempe submitted her communication with the Holy Spirit as

⁸⁵ Weber, 49.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 68.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 71.

⁸⁸ Mechthild von Magdeburg, *Flowing Light of the Divinity*, trans. Christiane Mesch Galvani (New York: Garland Publishing, 1991), 57.

⁸⁹ Julian of Norwich, 125.

being “not of hir owyn cunnyng.”⁹⁰ Much like the women previously mentioned, Julian and Margery utilized these labels to emphasize they were not attempting to preempt the roles of learned church doctors and trained clerics but merely existing as unworthy vessels prompted by divine forces to present the message of God.

When Catherine of Siena considered the question of what prompted God to select her she was sure to point out quite specifically that it was not her “virtues” but completely his “charity.”⁹¹ By accenting her lack of intrinsic merit and highlighting God’s necessary assistance, Catherine firmly positioned God in the position of sender and herself in the position of receiver. Margery also called herself “þe most vnworþi creatur” on the entire earth⁹² to make sure it was very clear she was the undeserving “receiver.” This apparent lack of initiative on the part of mystics due to their unworthy nature was useful when establishing they did not undermine the authority of ordained clerics by challenging long-standing traditions which forbade women from preaching or teaching. It was crucial to confirm their role as meek so they would not appear ambitious and beyond the boundaries of both social and religious gender conventions. Bathsheba Bowers echoed this when she stated, “Why it pleased the Almighty to bend his Bow and set me as a Mark for his Arrow...I know not but even so it has been...”⁹³ Bathsheba thus emphasized her lack of ultimate understanding as to why she was chosen by God while strongly stating it was surely God who had chosen her. She used her lack of understanding of the causes or reasons behind her divine interaction as proof for the

⁹⁰ Kempe, 113.

⁹¹ Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, trans. Suzanne Noffke (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 364.

⁹² Kempe, 49.

⁹³ Bathsheba Bowers, *An Alarm Sounded to Prepare the Inhabitants of the VVorld To Meet the Lord in the Way of his Judgements* (New York: Penn. Mag. Of Hist.,1709), microfilm, 5.

validity of that very interaction. The texts and utterances of female mystics had to be perceived as similar to what the Church and its ministers presented, but they also had to show their work to be distinctly different.⁹⁴ In these works the message being presented was considered the constant between the words of both the Church and the mystics. The male religious leaders and the female mystics both submitted themselves as having different roles in the creation of their written works; this was the divergence.

For many mystics, their divine experiences and subsequent role as mouthpiece for God's revelations created tensions between them and the male advisors who often vetted their work. This interaction is apparent in Teresa's work when she recorded an encounter where she was scolded for speaking too strongly towards clerics who believed she had tried to instruct them. She tried to explain this encounter by writing she had responded to their questions "without consideration" and this had ultimately been her problem.⁹⁵ She attempted to carefully defend her passionate delivery by switching the focus to her untrained abilities as a female mystic. She used her problematic delivery to show her message was from God because her presentation of God's words was flawed due to her nature.

Perhaps even more acutely than the other women presented in this study, Ursula de Jesus fully realized the disbelief which would form in the minds of people as they attempted to simultaneously deal with her message and its voice, the voice of an Afro-Peruvian female mystic. She combated this head on by establishing she also had doubts about herself as the vessel of God because of her race and gender. Ursula's explanation

⁹⁴ Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations on the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 98.

⁹⁵ Teresa of Ávila, 203.

for why these visions should come to her, “a poor little woman who means nothing,”⁹⁶ was her unworthy nature associated with her social status as a black female slave. To present herself as an acceptable vessel for God’s divine message, it was essential that Ursula establish her unworthy nature. Thus she linked her traits with the unworthy mediums God used in the Bible and other accepted Christian written works.

Aside from establishing their thoroughly unworthy nature, female mystics also emphasized their unwillingness as Mechthild did when she wrote, “Now I am forced to write these words after all/ Which I would much rather withhold,/ For I greatly fear/ The secret impulse of vain honor./ But I fear much more/ God’s judgment,/ Were I, poor creature, to keep silent.”⁹⁷ Told by her male confessor, Heinrich, that her book needed to be “destroyed by fire,”⁹⁸ Mechthild, always playing the submissive role, appeared upset and turned to God for advice. How advantageous for her when this prompted God to reassure her that this work was thoroughly his. By making this divine exchange public knowledge, Mechthild reaffirmed that she was in the ultimate right because while she was beneath men, all humanity resided beneath God. Thus she was not usurping any established social hierarchies; she merely existed within them.

Bathsheba’s defense of her works appeared similar to Mechthild’s. Bathsheba explained that when she investigated the validity of her work she found scriptures and received reassurances from God which lead her to realize there was not “any reason to suspect but all this proceeding was from the Lord...”⁹⁹ Just like Mechthild’s,

⁹⁶ Ursula de Jesús, 85.

⁹⁷ Mechthild von Magdeburg, 161.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 55.

⁹⁹ Bowers, 3-4.

Bathsheba's work was now publically verified to not be dubious. Just as Mechthild presented that she was "forced" to write by God, Bathsheba shared "That 'tis best known to me self how long I laboured under a reluctancy, and how very unwilling I was to appear in print at all..."¹⁰⁰ By stating her aversion to the idea of publishing, Bathsheba was able to state it was only due to God's will she wrote in the first place. Literacy, for women, was not as simple as the possession of the knowledge necessary to produce text. Traditional justification for preventing the publication of female work was a combination of the traits of both Eve and the Virgin Mary. Dominant religious thought saw the words of Eve as the precursor to the downfall of Adam, and exalted the Virgin Mary for her holy silence. Writing or dictating these texts meant female mystics had to prevail over rigorous psychological obstacles about written expression.¹⁰¹ Bathsheba was unwilling but, like Mechthild, was left with no other path after she was commanded by God to publish.

The Tempted and Afflicted Mystic

When Catherine was caused to doubt by the Devil she turned to God. She then submitted that God quickly reminded her that it was solely he who made her ask these vital questions so she would be his consecrated vessel and relay his message to the world.¹⁰² In this way Catherine combated anyone who spoke against her saying she had not truly discerned the visions and revelations of the Devil from those of God. All mystics knew the importance of pointing out that their messages came from God, but

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰¹ Ronald Surtz, *Writing Women in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain: The Mothers of Saint Teresa of Avila* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 5.

¹⁰² Catherine of Siena, 361.

they also knew they had to combat dissenting voices which might proclaim their visions actually came from elsewhere, specifically the Devil. In this instance Catherine illustrated, to any dissenting voices, she had already questioned herself and the most heavenly and incorruptible God informed her she was doing his will.

Ursula even stated her visions caused her “such terrible distress” she “asked God to free me from such visions,”¹⁰³ highlighting her unwillingness to participate. As previously stated, while other female mystics had to battle to establish they were not stepping out of gender roles, Ursula had to display she was not stepping outside of racial ones as well. When she asked God how she could possibly have the worth to be used for these visions she was told, “*I choose whom I want.*”¹⁰⁴ Like the previous women, she also told God she was afraid her message was from the Devil, and Ursula wrote, then God himself provided assurances: “*When you follow God’s will you have nothing to fear.*”¹⁰⁵ Thus in mystic narratives, God offered true acceptance and the power to grant grace to them, contravening the authority of the established clergy.

In Mary Magdalen de’ Pazzi’s forty-fourth colloquy she stated, “O loving Word, You do not test by means of the elect, but by means of Your enemies.”¹⁰⁶ This declaration established she was being tested and also affected how this testing was to be understood which was as something conceived at the hands of the Devil. This same idea was presented by the nuns in the thirty-ninth colloquy, where they explained God always

¹⁰³ Ursula de Jesús, 81.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 125. The italics are as they appear in the text.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 121-122. The italics are as they appear in the text.

¹⁰⁶ Mary Magdalen de’ Pazzi, *The Complete Works of Saint Mary Magdalen de’ Pazzi: Carmelite and Mystic (1566-1607)* vol. 3, tran. Very Rev. Gabriel N. Pausback, (Fatima, Portugal: Blessed Nuno House, 1975), 105.

tested Mary Magdalen with some “great affliction,” and as this was such a normal occurrence they had learned to expect her to receive “some particular grace and gift” after each episode.¹⁰⁷ Even as her affliction raged, Mary Magdalen understood she needed to link her deliverance from this torture to the merciful hand of God. She exclaimed to the Devil in the forty-fourth colloquy, “Oh, begone! Begone with your other devils, because for the present my Word no longer wants to give you power over me!”¹⁰⁸ As she explained, even when God allowed Satan to test her it was ultimately still the hand of God which caused her to become be what he desired. Thus, she presented the whole situation as being completely in God’s control. Mary Magdalen utilized devilish involvement to prove the presence of God in her life because God always rescued her from this hellish plight.

This presentation is not unlike the one found in depictions of demonic possession, where the afflicted woman functioned within specific boundaries that defined their expected behavior. Failure to adhere to these precepts exposed demoniacs to be labeled a witch or mentally insane. Success allowed them, however, to procure a voice which they utilized to address concerns and fears.¹⁰⁹ Often the issues and sins brought to light were matters which directly affected their lives. They confessed sins of direct relatives, addressed theological concerns, and spoke to the spiritual questions of their time.¹¹⁰ A primary difference between demoniacs and mystics is that the former did not attempt to

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 15.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 107.

¹⁰⁹ Moshe Sluhovsky, “A Divine Apparition or Demonic Possession? Female Agency and Church Authority in Demonic Possession in Sixteenth-Century France,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 27 (1996): 1045.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 1049, 1050.

attain the religious authority often associated with the latter. A demoniac's concerns were typically more immediate and had a comprehensive influence on their lives.¹¹¹ Another crucial difference between these two groups of religious women is that a demonic possession was a spiritual affliction for which the Church offered a divine cure. By alleviating the demoniacs of this spiritual malady, the Church relieved them from the burdens and expectations associated with their divine connections.¹¹² Demonic possession was also a phenomenon which greatly intensified during the Counter-Reformation in areas of great confessional conflict.¹¹³ Public knowledge of a demonic possession often prompted other cases to occur. They offer another important insight into the relationship between male clerics and religious women as often the demoniacs renounce male clerics but still required their services for their exorcisms.

The Rhetoric Reliant Mystic

Julian of Norwich emphasized in *A Revelation of Love* that, "This is a revelation of love that Jhesu Christ, our endles blisse, made in sixteen shewings."¹¹⁴ This is a rhetorical strategy meant to reassure the reader the revelations which followed this introduction belonged solely to Jesus, who is the all powerful giver, and he had merely just shown them to Julian, obviously the submissive receiver. Julian also painted herself as the receiver when she stated her visions came to her "frelly without any seeking."¹¹⁵ Margery made it clear in her introduction it was God who prompted her to write this book

¹¹¹ Ibid., 1053.

¹¹² Ibid., 1055.

¹¹³ Hsia, 154.

¹¹⁴ Julian of Norwich, 123.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 127.

so “hys goodnesse myth be knowyn to alle þe world.”¹¹⁶ Similar to the women before her, Margery was sure to have asserted from the beginning that her work was specifically from God and expressly intended for the world.

Clearly establishing the origins of her vision, Elizabeth Poole stated, “I Have been (by the pleasure of the most High) made sensible of the distresses of this Land...”¹¹⁷ She understood the importance of establishing what role she had in the creation of her vision before describing it. Her use of the Lord, as sender, to add validity and meaning to her message was clear as she stated, “...Wherefore I beseech you for the Lords sake, whose I am, and whom I serve in the spirit, that you let not goe the Vision which I showed you concerning the cure of *England*, as it was presented to mee...”¹¹⁸ This was how she began the conclusion in *An Alarum*. She initiated and concluded her presentation of her vision by establishing she spoke, not because these things occurred to her of her own volition, but because God presented them to her and left her no option but to share her vision with God’s chosen audience. Even when she was actually describing her vision she stated she was given the vision after “many dayes mourning” and presented that the only gift she really had was faith, which was only bestowed upon her so she could serve God better.¹¹⁹ Thus her understanding of the vision was limited to her overwhelming emotional encounters. Even her faith had to be given to her from God because this gift could not have originated in her. This presentation would have rung true with her

¹¹⁶ Kempe, 4.

¹¹⁷ Elizabeth Poole, *An Alarum of VVar, Given to the Army, And to their High Court of Iustice (so called) revealed be the will of God in a Vision to E. Poole, (sometime a messanger of the Lord to the Generall Councel, concerning the Cure of the Land, and the manner thereof.)* (London: University Microfilms International, 1649), 1.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6. The italics are as they appear in the text.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

audience, exposed to the meek, inept, and unexpected people God utilized to prove the extensive reach of his power and ability in the stories present in the Bible.

Teresa actively used the voice of God to combat those who would verbally condemn actions which she felt instructed by God to take. She wrote that whenever God instructed her in one course of action and her confessor instructed her otherwise, God would prompt her again to do the original action. In addition to divine reassurance, God would also “change that confessor’s mind, so that he would come back and tell me to do the opposite.”¹²⁰ Establishing the divine providence of her message was one of the methods she used to defend herself while she appeared already at odds with her confessors. However, as a receiver it was not Teresa’s place to defend God’s message, only to trust that he would validate it. Her role was only to relay the message. The confessor’s experience was recorded because it validated hers.

Another idea present in all ten of the writings of the female mystics in this study was the reinforcement of traits expected to be innately possessed by women. They simultaneously showed they were not altering the perception of women while creating an extra method to teach those ideas to other women. Generally, this description was achieved through one of two ways. Either the women stressed the negative traits associated with a sinful Eve or they emphasized women should strive to emulate the perfect traits of the Virgin Mary. One example showed the inherent flaws of women while the other was a picture of perfection, and while they could not actually hope to attain this perfection they expected to constantly strive to achieve this flawlessness. For example, both Eve and the Virgin Mary appeared as justification to silence women: the

¹²⁰ Teresa of Ávila, 186.

words of Eve lead to the fall of Adam and the humility of the Virgin Mary supported the victory of Christ.¹²¹

Aside from using these idioms in the main presentation or defense of their works, mystics often utilized the image of an evil Eve to reinforce their understanding of their own sins, the sins of their gender, and the need to properly work to preserve the innocence of women. In opposition to the display of Eve's wickedness, mystics also presented the unattainable perfection of Mary. At times, stressing their own humility was far more advantageous to their work than listing the evil traits of women. The message presented by displaying their attempts to be like Mary while admitting they were inherently evil like Eve was that they were at least partially successful at controlling this evil nature. Much like the idea of an aberrant Eve, the concept of a virtuous Mary was useful in teaching the way women should live while also showing the audience an acceptance and understanding of how they also were to be handling their lives.

Mechthild and Catherine employed this method of defense when they found their works under attack and they wished to reprove masculine faults. When Mechthild found herself needing to defend against her confessor, "Master Heinrich," who spoke against the "...masculine style of this book..." she immediately referred to herself as "a sinful woman" and her words as "insignificant."¹²² While also making her instantly appear more humble, she defended her work by presenting it as clearly feminine by drawing attention away from the work and onto the author, herself. To protect her writing, Mechthild emphasized her corrupt nature and acknowledged the trivial quality of her

¹²¹ Surtz, 5.

¹²² Mechthild von Magdeburg, 140.

words. Catherine clearly linked the feminine with the perversion of good when God told her that selfishness, among some men, “has made a lady of their sensuality...”¹²³ Extreme masculine perversion was implied as Catherine described it with feminine terms. The perversion of these men was so severe that she could use feminine descriptors and address their faults. While her topic was the corrupt nature of selfish men, her descriptors relied on the acceptance and assumption of the inherent flaws of women.

As helpful as female descriptors were to help mystics critique men, they also presented the flaws of their gender to validate their own writings. Hildegard mentioned Eve by name when she reinforced her function as the weaker sex and ultimate seducer of Adam in her writing.¹²⁴ Eve was presented by Hildegard as insidious and contrary to the natural and perfect way man should have existed, clearly the weaker of the two sexes. Margery also emphasized the female gender as feebler when she presented that she had troubles with lust so she told God that “Sche thowt sche was worthy no mercy for hir connsentyng was so wylfully...”¹²⁵ Teresa reinforced the idea that women who were not being properly supervised in groups could not be trusted, due to their susceptibility for wrong doing, when she spoke of the sins she committed before she became a nun. She stated that the bad company she had previously kept greatly impaired her ability to strive for a more sacred lifestyle as “great harm comes of bad company, since we are inclined by nature to follow the worse rather than the better.”¹²⁶ Bathsheba established the sinfulness of pride and female susceptibility to this transgression when she stated, “...I

¹²³ Catherine of Siena, 235.

¹²⁴ Hildegard of Bingen, 77.

¹²⁵ Kempe, 16.

¹²⁶ Teresa of Ávila, 27.

was afraid Pride would one day be my Destruction.”¹²⁷ Margery touched on the idea that women were more susceptible to sin because they were inherently more willing, Teresa stated how women needed to be watched because they were probably up to no good if left unsupervised, and Bathsheba emphasized the innate struggle women had with pride. All of these were subtle but consistent reminders throughout their writings of their acceptance and awareness of the specific flaws attributed to their gender.

One of Elizabeth’s most emphatically presented points made before the General Council was that if the crown was unjust then it was the duty of the army to step in and protect the kingdom from royal corruption and abuse. Her vision went as follows:

A man who is a member of the Army, having sometimes much bewailed her [the kingdom] state, saying, “*He could gladly be a sacrifice for her*, and was set before me, presenting the body of the Army; and on the other hand, a *woman crooked, sick, weak and imperfect in body*, to present unto me, the weak and imperfect state of the Kingdome; I having the gift of faith upon me for her cure, was thus to appeal to the person on the other hand, That he should improve his faithfulness to the Kingdome, by using diligence for the cure of this woman, as I by the gift of faith on me should direct him.”¹²⁸

Elizabeth had two major things in her favor when delivering this message; her instructions were exactly what the military men wanted to do, and she used an acceptable metaphor to present these instructions. She described this woman, corrupt by nature, who was greatly in need of salvation given by a male figure. This masculine representation of the Army received almost no description other than his noble willingness for self sacrifice when required for the good of the Nation. On the other hand, the female figure received plenty of description. To emphasize the strong need for the Army to save the

¹²⁷ Bowers, 11.

¹²⁸ Poole, 1.

kingdom, Elizabeth was certain to supply ample connection between the Nation and this helpless woman.

The second time Elizabeth approached the General Council she was not as well received for several reasons. The use and understanding of metaphors was not always predictable for female mystics and the audience often, intentionally or accidentally, misread the meaning of the words they utilized.¹²⁹ When Elizabeth advised them not to kill the king, she presented her vision of a wife who when beaten by her spouse was allowed to stop her husband from beating her but was not permitted to take his life.¹³⁰ The Council did not agree with this message and the metaphor was one they could discredit. The metaphor of King as husband of the people had been a personal favorite of James I, father of Charles I. They used this to infer that Elizabeth had engaged in earthly politics.¹³¹ She made a great error by utilizing a metaphorical language which was quite familiar to the officers.¹³² The Council had initially accepted her because they needed someone like her, a person possessing an additional understanding of divine will and how it pertained to their actions.¹³³ What Elizabeth achieved in the former vision by pointing out the wickedness of women she did not duplicate in this latter vision. A beaten wife was neither Mary nor Eve and due to its previous use by the crown it was not as accessible to her.

To best elucidate the desirable traits for women, Mechthild wrote, “You shall be silent in humility,/ And suffer pain lovingly,/ And in all places,/ And at all times preserve

¹²⁹ Wiseman, 57.

¹³⁰ Poole, 5-6.

¹³¹ Brod, 399.

¹³² Ibid., 411.

¹³³ Ibid.

your virginity/ And so you will live in chastity.”¹³⁴ Statements such as this one made the work as a whole less threatening to the established gender hierarchy because Mechthild addressed and reinforced the ideas she was encouraged to be striving for herself which were the need to be silent, humble, and most importantly chaste. Mary Magdalen, in her first colloquy, also emphasized the importance of virginity when she relayed she heard Jesus tell her “all we nuns of this monastery were following the Lamb along with these little innocents, because we were in this state of virginity.” She also shared that Jesus stated he “so willingly found His joy in us and loved us.”¹³⁵ This passage clearly linked their virginal status as divinely desired and appreciated. This view would have been crucial for a mystic, such as Mary Magdalen, living in the environment of the Counter-Reformation. While chastity had always been the ideal for religious females, the Church now placed it over all other aspects associated with spiritual women.¹³⁶

Julian described the characteristics of the Virgin Mary as “so litille and so lowe, so simple and so poor”¹³⁷ and if these were the traits ascribed to Mary, the greatest example of a woman in the history of the world, then Julian could suggest possessing these traits should be something women should constantly be striving to attain. Even Ursula reinforced previously established roles about gender and race in her work when she presented that her immediate actions after her major vision of seeing three crosses¹³⁸ was to prostrate herself on the ground and “Then she returned to what she had been

¹³⁴ Mechthild von Magdeburg, 95.

¹³⁵ Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi, vol, 2, 16.

¹³⁶ Hsia, 42.

¹³⁷ Julian of Norwich, 145.

¹³⁸ After providing care for the women who had bought her freedom in the infirmary she made it to the doorway and she then saw three crosses in the sky. She initially thinks it is an illusion and looks away but open looking up again she saw it again and deduced that it must be real.

doing,”¹³⁹ caring for the woman who had previously bought her freedom. Ursula showed the ideal role of a woman and a slave was a submissive caregiver and worker. She displayed her understanding of this role in how she handled herself after this essential episode with the divine.

Female mystics clearly utilized narrative to intentionally present themselves as the perfect receiver of divine instruction and experience. The details they emphasized in this presentation offers insight to the contemporary views of the attributes, traits, and desires of female mystics. The views of the Church regarding women can clearly be seen in the descriptions these women gave of themselves as constantly unworthy, unlearned, and unwilling. Their colorful description of the traits inherently linked to Eve and the Virgin Mary painted a picture of the contemporary understanding of the attributes women possessed and should have strived to obtain. This intentional manipulation of narrative brings to light the abilities of female mystics to construct a dialogue in which they could have a voice to address matters of the heart and mind.

¹³⁹ Ursula de Jesús, 118.

Chapter Two The Bruised, Bleeding, and Starved Women of God

When Mechthild of Magdeburg wished to address the worth of self-inflicted suffering, versus divinely-inflicted suffering, she began by stating, “As long as a person has the ability to sin, he needs suffering as well as virtues.” She argued self-inflicted suffering was “very profitable,” but that the suffering which God inflicted on humanity was “much nobler and more useful” as he was “nobler than all tormentors.” For Mechthild, Christ did not merely inflict pain upon himself to redeem humanity but also to teach us “how we should serve him in toil and suffering.”¹⁴⁰ This passage illustrates Mechthild’s obvious emphasis on suffering as a divine calling. For Mechthild as well as many other mystics, illness was a spiritual rather than a physical affliction. The body of the female mystic became a battleground for her struggles and those of the Church. The female body represented opposing ideas: order and chaos, that which should be denounced and venerated, or authority and fragility.¹⁴¹ These contradictions made the female body ideal to represent the battles of the Church against external threats.¹⁴² The status of the female body also made it a perfect place for the Church to wage a battle representing their psychic struggles.¹⁴³ Because of the views held by the contemporary Christian community about suffering, when Mechthild emphasized the aspect of affliction present in her religious practices she established an essential link to the divine.

¹⁴⁰ Mechthild of Magdeburg, 180.

¹⁴¹ Reineke, 258.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Hsia, 150.

This association affirmed her spiritual identity as well as influenced her understanding of her experiences.

Medieval and early modern mystics utilized the metaphor of the body, and the treatment and presentation of their physical bodies to either explain their ideas or to gain the agency to publically present them in written form. Religious women stressed the corporeal body as they realized they had some semblance of control over what went into their bodies and how they treated their bodies. This sometimes caused them to starve themselves and physically damage the outside of their bodies. Both male and female mystics perceived illness as a sign of a larger cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil. It is crucial to study the way female mystics understood, described, and used their physical sufferings to legitimize their activities and empower their messages because otherwise it is impossible to fully comprehend or analyze their works.

One common theme evident in the use of the physical bodies of mystics was the belief that understanding and interaction with the divine could be attained through experiencing the brutal extremes of bodily abuse. Female medieval writers understood the language of the body to be a method which allowed them to say extraordinary things that were otherwise generally out of their reach. Utilizing bodily imagery allowed women to express seemingly repressed ideas from their unconscious in their written works.¹⁴⁴ The visions of these medieval mystics empowered them because they provided

¹⁴⁴ Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 204.

a public language for the women to utilize.¹⁴⁵ The language of the body provided mystic women with the means to address indefinable and inconceivable subjects.

After the Council of Trent, female mystics found themselves strictly enclosed in convents, exposed to extreme ideas about celibacy, and managed by male clerics. Early modern mystics utilized the erotic language of ecstasy instituted by medieval mystics to address their sexual struggles and enforced enclosure.¹⁴⁶ The struggles of these mystics also were represented on their bodies; their extreme sicknesses, brutal pains, and fainting spells echoed their physical and spiritual confinement.¹⁴⁷

Catherine of Siena utilized the concept of how negation of the body allowed a link to the spiritual by describing her loss of “bodily sight” as what allowed for “spiritual vision.”¹⁴⁸ This tied directly into the idea that abstaining from bodily urges, such as eating for nourishment, prompted the opportunity for spiritual enlightenment. Catherine’s aversion towards food, shown in her extreme fasting, was inseparable from her desire for the Eucharist.¹⁴⁹

Mystics also abstained from sex. By attaining the status of a consecrated virgin, mystic women presented themselves as “safe” and “sexless” which placed them in a social class that differed from that of ordinary women.¹⁵⁰ By breaking away from the class of ordinary women, these female mystics gained an ability to work around gender barriers. This was yet another example of how the ability to control their bodily urges

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 206.

¹⁴⁶ Hsia, 149.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 150.

¹⁴⁸ Catherine of Siena, 210.

¹⁴⁹ Lochrie, 40.

¹⁵⁰ Bilinkoff, 30.

gave them spiritual legitimacy which they often turned into a voice able to address contemporary theologians and political leaders.

Just as the pain they put themselves through was used as a sign of legitimacy, the pain which was inflicted upon them by God was an even greater indication of their true devotion and divine purpose. Ultimately, no matter how much they deprived themselves, the prized way to suffer was at the hand of God. Elizabeth was able to “groan with you [General Council] in your pains” with the help of the “Spirit of sympathie.”¹⁵¹ Her comprehension which followed this experience was thus perceived as born out of corporeal suffering, prompted by the divine. Thus, any understanding she displayed was inspired by this divine interaction.

Catherine of Siena felt confident enough in her connection to divinely inspired suffering that she addressed the participants of its problematic extreme, flagellation. Addressing the idea of a perfect soul, Catherine gave prime place to flagellants as those who were “punishing their bodies by performing severe and enormous penances.” She continued, “To keep their sensuality from rebelling against reason, these have all set their object more in mortifying their bodies than in slaying their selfish wills.”¹⁵² However, Catherine also pointed out the potential dangers of self-mortification rituals that could lead to the sins of pride and deception. In a vision Catherine then stated that the voice of God informed her that this pointed focus on self-mortification was inherently flawed. As she argued, if flagellants never mended their selfish wills then this self-interested outlook

¹⁵¹ Poole, 3.

¹⁵² Catherine of Siena, 186.

would only lead them to become judgmental and deceivers of themselves.¹⁵³ Catherine continued to have doubts concerning the devotion of flagellants being truly focused towards God. She laid these out in another vision in which she claimed the voice of God stated that perfect souls “have, it is true, mortified their bodies, but not as their chief concern. Rather, they have used mortification as the instrument it is to help them slay their self will....And this is what you should do.”¹⁵⁴ While a sign of devotion, bodily mortification was not by itself a path to salvation. Her text warned against taking devotional rituals to extremes which removed God from the center focus due to man’s belief in his power to control his own eternal fate. Catherine’s words appear to be foreshadowing the theological objection to flagellants which appeared around a century later. As Caroline Bynum has shown, the persecution the flagellants of the next century received was due to their belief that their redemption lay in their own blood when shed as an imitation of Christ’s sufferings.¹⁵⁵ Church authorities worried these beliefs would cause people to see blood as a more intimate and achievable means of gaining salvation than any sacrament the Church could offer.¹⁵⁶ This is clearly an example of a female mystic involved in a theological debate, specifically the one addressing self-mortification.

Just as physical pain could be a marker of the purifying process, the failure to acknowledge physical pain often signified spiritual transcendence. During ecstatic raptures, mystic women frequently failed to register bodily pain. The nuns writing down Mary Magdalen de’ Pazzi’s every utterance and movement reported that during one

¹⁵³ Ibid., 186-187

¹⁵⁴ Catherine of Siena, 189.

¹⁵⁵ Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, 34.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 35.

particularly intense vision Mary Magdalen initially was sweating “as when one is in agony,” after which she threw herself forcefully to the floor, and began vigorously beating herself against it. They eventually held her back to stop her from causing greater harm, even though “she did do some little harm to herself, for her face and her nose swelled and became livid, so that she retained signs of them and had to treat them for several days.”¹⁵⁷ To the nuns, Mary Magdalen’s divine torture and sustained inflammation and bruising of her face and nose were a sign of her link with the divine and a sign of her transcendence. Her failure to register physical pain affirmed her body as immaterial and her experience as purely spiritual. This event added credence to the visions which followed and preceded it because it inherently linked her with the divine. The detail and attention given to this moment by the nuns is a great example of the emphasis this specific type of physical interaction with the divine received in the presentation of legitimate divine interaction.

These nuns also recorded Mary Magdalen’s empathetic understanding and interaction with the pain of Christ by outlining a time where she showed she felt the pain of being nailed to the cross¹⁵⁸ and an instance where after examining, in a vision, the beaten and bruised body of Christ “she entered into the pain that He had suffered in His passion.”¹⁵⁹ These experiences, the greatly desired moments of true identification with the sufferings of Christ, which commonly appeared in the writings of other female mystics as well, physically linked her with the divine and thus her subsequent comprehension was also connected with the holy.

¹⁵⁷ Mary Magdalen de’ Pazzi, vol. 3, 106.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., vol. 2, 294.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., vol. 3, 219.

Hildegard assured martyrs of their salvation in a poem, and while listing their many holy traits she pointed out that “Alive you followed the Lamb, and despised your bodies,/ Adorned His pains, and so recaptured your portions.”¹⁶⁰ In her visions, Mechthild stressed that those who were drawn to follow Jesus were destined to “suffer much pain because of it.”¹⁶¹ Clearly she understood pain to be a sign of salvation. Both of these passages illustrated the strong bond mystic women understood as a perceptible link between bodily harm and true devotion to God. The perception of self-mortification had laid the foundation for mystics to understand the abuse of their bodies as a way to access the divine.¹⁶² So, when Mechthild stated the bodies of God’s followers had to be tormented, “For he wants them to resemble his beloved Son who was tormented in body and soul,”¹⁶³ she affirmed physical sufferings as a part of the process of sanctification.

Mystic women were also obsessed with the ultimate end of their earthly suffering, constantly mentioning their own deaths, as a further sign of their break with the material world and its temptations. For example, in the grips of “a violent Fever, which brought very extreme pain upon me...”¹⁶⁴ Bathsheba Bowers took stock of her life and pondered her own death. For Protestants as well as Catholics, preparing for their earthly death meant recognizing their sinful nature and confessing it before God and man. To both traditions, the moment of death was a liminal phase which preempted the believer’s

¹⁶⁰ Hildegard of Bingen, 527.

¹⁶¹ Mechthild of Magdeburg, 325.

¹⁶² Diefendorf, 75.

¹⁶³ Mechthild of Magdeburg, 52.

¹⁶⁴ Bowers, 6.

crossing over the threshold into the spiritual afterlife.¹⁶⁵ She provided an eloquent assessment of life when, keenly aware of her horrid nature, she stated, “I thought now was the time that I had from my Infancy feared: now I must dye, and to Hell I must go...”¹⁶⁶ For Bathsheba and other mystics, awareness and acceptance of their mortal state was a sign that they were at a spiritual turning point. Accepting the assumed death of her physical body set the stage for her understanding of the divine. It established her existence in a liminal state which assumed she was in transition from one state to another. Often this state prompts the participant to physically withdraw from others and view the world as an observer as opposed to an active participant. After this, the participant often crosses into another level of existence.¹⁶⁷ Establishing her fear of imminent death allowed for her to claim a closer relation to divine and religious understanding. This same trope was evident in Mary Magdalen’s work when she came out of a taxing divine encounter and she was described as “like one dead.”¹⁶⁸ She mentioned the extreme draining effect her encounter had on her physical body to endorse her experience as truly divine.

Clothing as a Means of Identification

Another way female mystics would physically harm their bodies was the clothing they wore. Clothing could damage the body, as seen in the wearing of hair shirts, but also could clothe and hide their flesh. The clothing of religious women was another useful symbol in their writings because clothing had religious significance as something

¹⁶⁵ Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, 2nd ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 54, 58.

¹⁶⁶ Bowers, 7.

¹⁶⁷ Muir, 21.

¹⁶⁸ Mary Magdalen de’ Pazzi, vol. 2, 266.

which existed in both the mortal and immortal worlds.¹⁶⁹ The Church illustrated this attribute by supporting the belief that making a gift of clothing was an act of mercy which aided in a person's path to salvation.¹⁷⁰ The social connection can be understood from societal details such as the jobs women held, like being a laundress, spinner, or weaver. Also, sumptuary laws were already in place which told women what they could wear. Often, these laws made the connection between the dress and inherent morals of women so strongly that clothing was often understood as a direct representation of a woman's chastity.

Teresa illustrated this connection when she used clothing to show depravity and virtue in her writing. When Teresa was speaking of her youthful troubles with vanity she stated, "I began to wear finery, and to wish to charm by my appearance."¹⁷¹ Her clothing and her reasons for wearing this finery elucidated the gravity of the negative path her life was on at the time. Inversely, when she spoke of her virtuous mother, Teresa told her readers that although her mother was only thirty-three when she died she "already dressed like a woman advanced in years."¹⁷² Teresa offered up her mother's clothing as proof of this woman's angelic modesty, virtue, and aged wisdom. Bathsheba similarly used clothing as a way to show virtue. When trying to make her transformation into a devout woman of God clear, she listed, among a few other traits, that she now preferred "cheap Clothes better than rich or costly" ones.¹⁷³ Her desire to stay away from

¹⁶⁹ Warr, 188.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 192.

¹⁷¹ Teresa of Ávila, 26.

¹⁷² Ibid., 23.

¹⁷³ Bowers, 22.

expensive clothing was noted because it buttressed the presentation of herself as pious and devout.

Utilizing their connection to clothing and its religious affiliations, mystic women often used it as a metaphor in their works. Julian used the metaphor of how the body was clothed, along with intentionally biblical language, to describe how the “soule and body” were “cladde and enclosedde in the goodnes of God.”¹⁷⁴ Here clothing described the theological concept of God’s omnipresence as he was illustrated as being always near them and constantly around them. For Margery Kempe, God expressed how greatly it pleased him when she was “silens & sufferyst me to speke in thy sowle,” which he illustrated by then proclaiming it was more than she pleased him when she wore a habergeon, a penitential garment, and a hair shirt.¹⁷⁵ Clothing was the medium through which God chose to explain himself to her because her contemporaries would have found clothing to be an acceptable medium for her to discuss the differences of spiritual and physical pain. The evident assumption is that Margery, as well as her audience, would have knowledge of God’s appreciation regarding those religious garments and thus grasp the implied level of his joy. Using clothing, Mechthild laid out what she felt were the specific tasks with which Christians should fill their lives when she said:

Whenever virgins in all ages are clothed according to the will of their Bridegroom, they need nothing more than their wedding dress. This means being racked with pain in sickness, in days of suffering, in temptation, and in much anguish of heart. We find much of this among sinful Christians. These are the wedding dresses of loving souls. But the everyday work clothes are fasting, keeping vigils, scourging oneself, going to confession, sighing, weeping, praying, fearing sin, severely curbing the senses and the body in God for love of God, sweet hoping and ceaseless loving desire and a constantly praying heart in all

¹⁷⁴ Julian of Norwich, 145.

¹⁷⁵ Kempe, 89.

one's works. These are the work clothes of a good person. When we are sick, we wear wedding dresses; and when we are healthy, we wear work clothes.¹⁷⁶

Mechthild used the distinction between a wedding dress and work clothes to describe the desired life and apparent struggles of Christians. This clothing metaphor would have been especially moving to religious women who had forever renounced the option of taking earthly bridegrooms. Work clothes which one wears when "healthy" are the actions of a strong, devout, and pious follower. The wedding dress worn by "loving souls" who were "sick" was an indication of the extreme trials and hardships believers go through. Mechthild made the distinction between the two to illustrate a point. The times in which people struggled and hurt the most held such a place of love in God's eyes that at these moments he adorned them with a highly significant piece of clothing, their wedding dress they metaphorically wore as they were wed to him. Mechthild used the idea of normal and special clothing to address God's interaction with humanity's actions and struggles.

When The Soul, presented as Mechthild's, prepared to see The Prince, the trinity, Mechthild wrote that the soul:

...puts on the slip of soft humility, so humble that it cannot bear anything underneath it. Over it comes a white dress of spotless chastity, so pure that it cannot bear anything in thought, word, or touch that might soil it. Then she puts on the cloak of her good name, which she has gilded with all the virtues.¹⁷⁷

By describing the clothing of her soul, Mechthild was able to speak about the attributes of the soul and the desired character of a religious woman. Due to the social understanding of the link between the clothing of women and their moral status and presumed character,

¹⁷⁶ Mechthild of Magdeburg, 335.

¹⁷⁷ Mechthild of Magdeburg, 58.

this metaphor portrayed, in a familiar way, perfect clothing as a description of the ideal qualities of the soul. The ideal soul was depicted as having a foundation of pure humility. That foundation was covered in the purest form of chastity and secured by upholding a good name by being a beacon which exuded all of the virtues.

When Catherine of Siena was conversing with the divine embodiment of Truth, she requested that it clothe her with itself “so that I may run the course of this mortal life in true obedience and in the light of most holy faith.”¹⁷⁸ Catherine addressed the holy nature of women in a manner acceptable to her contemporaries by asserting that “holy faith” was something which was given to her by God and was not something she could give. Thus, Catherine used an accepted symbol to portray this interaction by describing it with the concept that clothing was linked to the overall moral status of a woman.

When Elizabeth Poole published *An Alarum* she offered a defense of her own validity to combat the attempts of the General Council to cast aspersions upon her message. Her argument against the General Council was clear; she posited that once the General Council decided against her message it chose to assert she was no longer truly enlightened by God. The Council presented a witness that, Elizabeth explained endeavored “to weaken the Message by scandalizing and reproaching the Messenger...”¹⁷⁹ To discredit her message they attacked her character. They utilized rhetoric suggesting women were either homemakers or whores. This allowed them to expel a woman because her involvement in worldly business meant she had strayed from

¹⁷⁸ Catherine of Siena, 366.

¹⁷⁹ Poole, 7.

God, her highest husband.¹⁸⁰ Elizabeth reminded readers that Jesus had also suffered people attempting to discredit his work by deceitfully hurling false accusations at him: “For it is not unknowne to thee (good reader) how the Lord Christ, when in flesh, was called a glutton, a wine bibber, a friend of Publicans and Harlots, and shall Christ in spirit, thinke you fare any better?”¹⁸¹ Thus Elizabeth artfully used the attacks against her to underscore her affinity with Christ; her acceptance of her fate solidified this link.

Food and Agency

It is worth noting that Elizabeth presented the insults of gluttony and bad company in the same breath. Obviously, another important factor in understanding the use of the physical earthly body in the writings of women has to be a comprehension of how they dealt with and perceived their interactions with food. There are several reasons food was given such significance for women. Due to the assumed place of the woman in the home, food was an expected medium for women to understand and explain the world around them. Food was also a way to nurture and guard the bodies it entered, offering a means of controlling those bodies.¹⁸² The role of woman as housewife emphasized her ability to transform items and make them cultural and controlled, such as transforming naturally occurring milk into cream. This interaction established women as a group who would and could preserve the borders of the public and ethnic realms.¹⁸³

The symbolism utilized by female mystics was intrinsically connected to the biblical imagery and language to which they found themselves exposed in their religious

¹⁸⁰ Gillespie, 156.

¹⁸¹ Poole, 7.

¹⁸² Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-century Representation* (London: Routledge, 1996), 108.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 97.

surroundings. Medieval and early modern society already emphasized the act of eating as religious in nature and it treated gluttony as an extreme extension of lust. As Bynum argues, food was harder to come by and live without than sex, so the community perceived abuse of food as more perverted than sexual promiscuity and repression of eating was seen as a more significant control of the body.¹⁸⁴ When Margery wrote about going without wine and meat for four years¹⁸⁵ she proved her holy nature by showing her ability to abstain from food while emphasizing the importance of what people put in their bodies.

Mystic women placed themselves in a position of control with their decisions to eat or not to eat. If they controlled their basic needs then they had properly prepared themselves to be worthy of divine interaction. Bynum argues that feeding others, or being fed, were essential ideas related to how religious women perceived they united with God.¹⁸⁶ For women in particular, fasting induced physical damage to their bodies' natural functions, such as their menstrual cycles, which laity and clergy alike perceived as constant reminders of their carnal nature. Disruptions like this, in effect, neutered them and transformed their dangerous, reproductive bodies into more neutral ones. For women, purity required more extreme actions to chasten their flesh and the bodies that constantly betrayed them. For Mechthild, rejecting food was not just the precondition for her mystic experiences, it was equivalent to it. When Mechthild wrote "Thus I think relieving my most basic need counts as much in God's sight as if I were in the highest

¹⁸⁴ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 2.

¹⁸⁵ Kempe, 61.

¹⁸⁶ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 114.

state of contemplation that a human being can attain,”¹⁸⁷ her sentiment regarding the importance of fasting as it related to other religious experiences was clear: she saw fasting as more important. As Mechthild was aware that her intellectual successes might work against her she presented her bodily treatment as her equivalent action and protection.

One of the most important ways women gained faculty through food was to emphasize its link to Communion. For the medieval Church, the sacrament of Communion, eating and drinking the blood and flesh of Christ, was the most simple and literal way of encountering God.¹⁸⁸ Thus, the celebration of the Eucharist became one of the most privileged moments in Christian ritual. The true communion with God which the doctrine of transubstantiation offered heightened clerical authority over the sacraments. After all, it was the priest that transformed the host and wine into the body and blood of Christ. However, religious women of the late medieval church also possessed the ability to affect the meaning and celebration of the Eucharist.¹⁸⁹

When Hildegard of Bingen spoke of the Eucharist she made this connection clear: “For this sacrament is to be received with spiritual desire, not with carnal greed, and therefore it should be taken fasting and not after a meal except in an emergency, if a person is thought to be about to leave the world.”¹⁹⁰ Just as fasting provided a means to separate oneself from the material world, Communion similarly necessitated a break with the material world and carnal physical needs. Just as the actions mystic women took

¹⁸⁷ Mechthild of Magdeburg, 53.

¹⁸⁸ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 2.

¹⁸⁹ Muschiol, 193.

¹⁹⁰ Hildegard of Bingen, 261.

before Communion could strengthen the connection to the divine, partaking in the sacrament further reinforced this divine connection. Ursula de Jesus' diary noted that before she received a particular vision she had just taken Communion, which prompted her immediately to enter into "a state of recollection," and only after this event did her vision begin.¹⁹¹ As female mystics emphasized the importance of distancing oneself from the physical world before taking Communion, they also accentuated how taking the sacrament strengthened or perhaps even prompted the mystical experience.

Early modern Catholic mystics, like Ursula de Jesus, often described the Eucharist as the catalyst to their most intense visions. In so doing, they buttressed the importance of the doctrine of transubstantiation, which Protestants had repudiated. In her autobiography Teresa of Avila repeatedly made the connection between Eucharistic devotion and ecstatic religious experience; no doubt a link encouraged by the male clerics vetting her writings. When addressing her visions of the Lord she declared, "Sometimes He comes with such majesty that no one can doubt it is the Lord himself; this is especially so after Communion, since then we know that He is there, for the Faith says so."¹⁹² She also affirmed that the Lord typically appeared to her in his resurrected body and that "it was the same when I saw Him in the Host."¹⁹³ No matter what the details of each vision of Christ were, "always His body was glorified."¹⁹⁴ In an age of tumultuous reform, Catholic mystics offered an extremely powerful affirmation of the truth they believed to be inherent in this contested belief.

¹⁹¹ Ursula de Jesús, 119.

¹⁹² Teresa of Avila, 199.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Participating in the sacrament of Communion was not the only method female mystics utilized to prompt interaction with the divine. Aware fasting would cause a cessation of their menstruation and thus place them in a position to experience a closer relation with the divine, they used fasting to prompt their raptures. Bathsheba Bowers, for example, made a vow “To eat no Flesh, nor to drink Wine till the Lord appeared to me again.”¹⁹⁵ She wrote later that God granted her this appearance after she had experienced even more trials and tribulations.¹⁹⁶ Just as Hildegard added importance to communion by declaring it something which followed fasting, Bathsheba engaged in a devout and purposeful fasting to bring on her visions. She routinely used her food and her ability to consume or abstain to provoke a divine interaction. As previously stated, during a great illness she requested a final glass of beer which she promised, if she could consume, would be a sign God had not abandoned her. Not surprisingly, the beer “found passage down comfortably” and she soon recovered.¹⁹⁷ By utilizing both consumption and starvation to promote her divine connection, Bathsheba thus understood how food functioned as a prelude to divine revelation. At the same time, she also emphasized the importance of her own actions by making the important act whether or not she partook or abstained from food.

Medieval and early modern mystics drew on their connection and perceived spiritual understanding of the relationship food had with the body to develop elaborate food metaphors. To explain the importance of love in the life of a believer, Catherine of Siena wrote that God told her “love is your food” because humanity could not live

¹⁹⁵ Bowers, 16.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

without it.¹⁹⁸ Teresa of Avila explained her understanding of the information she presented in her writing as an experience comparable to a meal where she discovered “everything cooked and eaten” for her and she “had only to enjoy its nourishment.”¹⁹⁹ Mary Magdalen de’ Pazzi stated she wished another person could “taste this profound, loving and impatient colloquy.”²⁰⁰ For all three, food metaphors became a way of communicating complex spiritual idea as well as their own roles as passive instruments of divine revelation. As Mary Magdalen explained she wanted someone else to “taste” because she was “not sufficient to be able to understand...” on her own.²⁰¹ Catherine was always careful to present herself as merely the mouthpiece delivering the message. Teresa also described herself like a man who was never educated in any form but suddenly found himself “in possession of all living knowledge.”²⁰² When speaking of her specific experience she used food, but when speaking of the experience in general she was more explicit, but changed the main character to a male.

Aside from the desire to encounter and understand the divine, female mystics accessed the most vital and important ability this association granted them, a voice. Due to the social and religious understandings of the corporeal bodies of female mystics they procured a voice which could speak on a range of topics normally off limits to them. They utilized ideas related to the destruction of the outside of their bodies, such as flagellation and clothing, along with beliefs linked with the treatment of the inside of

¹⁹⁸ Catherine of Siena, 208.

¹⁹⁹ Teresa of Avila, 190.

²⁰⁰ Mary Magdalen de’ Pazzi, vol. 2, 270.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Teresa of Ávila, 190.

their bodies, such as fasting, to buttress their words to withstand the attacks their ideas might prompt.

Chapter Three The Bodily, Bloody, and Intentional Description of Asomatous Entities

In Hildegard of Bingen's third vision, entitled "The Church, Bride of Christ and Mother of the Faithful," the famous mystic described seeing a woman who was "as large as a great city," but lacked her legs and feet. Hildegard noted she was unable to make out the woman's attire except for the crown worn on her head. She also observed the womb of the woman was so open that many could pass in and out of it with great ease. As Hildegard records, the woman in the vision declared she was conceiving, giving birth to an unnamed entity that Hildegard noted she had seen in a previous vision. This entity then went over to the people who had been traversing in and out of the woman's womb. When it encountered the ones who possessed black skin, it removed their skin and newly adorned them in white. This individual then preached salvation to all.²⁰³ God, Hildegard wrote, then explained the complexities of this vision to her. The woman was the Church who "always bears her children by regeneration in the Spirit and in water..." and also "...expels unbelief and expands belief, by which it should be understood that in the mortal world each of the faithful is an example to his neighbor..." The crown on her head symbolized her origin as solidly located in the blood of Jesus "since in His blood she faithfully formed herself into a firm edifice of holy souls."²⁰⁴ The Church possessed no feet or legs because she was not yet at her full "strength" or "purity," and would only

²⁰³ Hildegard of Bingen, 169.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.

become truly complete at Christ's second coming.²⁰⁵ Her attire remained ambiguous because of the weakness inherent in the intellect of humans who "cannot fully understand her secrets..."²⁰⁶ The strange being ripping skin off people was the "true Trinity," and the removal of skin was a sign of the salvation Christ offered. Hildegard presented herself as mystified when God explained that it was because of Christ that everyone was "clothed in the purity of salvation, and through Him the brightness of the blessed inheritance, from which the first human being was expelled, is opened to them."²⁰⁷

This vision bore much in common with many of Hildegard's other visions. Hildegard expertly presented and lovingly crafted her narrative. Linking metaphorical bodies to asomatous entities, objects which lacked a physical body, such as God, the Church, Jesus, and the souls of the world, Hildegard emphasized, among other things, the Christocentrism prevalent in the fundamental tenets of late medieval theology. Hildegard also addressed the purpose of the Church, to baptize, save, and teach people to live as examples of Christ. She even dealt with criticisms of some of the flaws associated with the Church's imperfections by asserting they were because the time of its true perfection had not yet arrived. When Hildegard spoke of the Church's indistinguishable clothing, she explained mankind's failure to understand the divine by attributing this to the inherently flawed nature of humanity. She ended this powerful vision by reiterating a central doctrine of the medieval church: it was through Christ that mankind was saved.

Hildegard's methods of presentation are not unique to her works alone. The practice of allotting asomatous entities a body and a voice was present in the writings of

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 171.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 172.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 174.

all ten mystics in this study. By giving a body to something incorporeal, female mystics were able to add validity to their written words and provide commentary on theological and social matters. While religious women often choose different characters to describe, the practice of allotting a body to something which inherently lacked one was something their writings all shared. It is often crucial to ascertain the importance of how a symbol was used by its writer. When a person utilizes a symbol, she cannot help but have her understanding and personal ideas of the true connotations of that symbol affect her application of it. Importantly, it must also be noted this does not mean symbols are entirely susceptible to the fluctuating urges of society or simplistic by nature and thus open to interpretation by anyone.²⁰⁸ Just as with other actions of mankind, the use of symbols must be handled with care and not treated as something which lacks any middle ground. The symbols female mystics utilized were inherently linked with the scriptural imagery and language to which they had been exposed. This did not remove their agency as they employed these symbols while stressing their own interpretation of them.

Hildegard's longest vision, in *Scivias*, was the sixth vision in the second book which described the crucifixion of Christ and the giving of the "true flesh and true blood" to the church.²⁰⁹ This vision was one of the most detailed in this book, and it was also the vision which employed the symbol of the body most fully and ardently. As with most of the symbols utilized in the writings of female mystics, Christ's body and blood were prominent when they spoke of theological matters such as Communion, salvation, and how Christians should be living their lives.

²⁰⁸ Bynum, "The Blood of Christ in the Later Middle Ages," 706.

²⁰⁹ Hildegard of Bingen, 237.

Blood and Legitimation

These writers were constantly aware of how important it was for their writings to be accepted and not deemed threatening or possibly heretical. Without establishing an acceptable foundation for their writings, these works and possibly their lives could have been in danger of rather harsh treatment. Often by focusing their symbolism on descriptions the Church had already accepted and experienced, they could allot their writings this strong foundation. Julian's fourth vision, the crucifixion of Jesus, focused on physically describing the event as the "...skorging of his tender body, with plentuous shedding of his precious blood."²¹⁰ By focusing on the physical characteristics, she would put to rest any fears she was trying to become a theologian, as it supported the belief that God revealed images like this to her because they were what she was able to comprehend. Teresa described the body of Jesus by saying she saw him "in all the beauty and majesty of His resurrection body, as it appears in paintings."²¹¹ Ursula stated she "saw a crucified Christ dressed in white with His Father and the Holy Spirit at His side."²¹² Both of these instances showed a clear and intentional reference to familiar images of Jesus, present in contemporary images, sculptures, and religious icons. Teresa mentioned she saw an image of Christ like one she previously observed in the paintings in church. Descriptions such as these were subtle reminders throughout their mystical writings that their works buttressed previously established ideas of the image of Christ.

Mystics also received reassurances from Christ, in the images of his crucified body they divinely encountered, and God that their works and their minds were being

²¹⁰ Julian of Norwich, 123.

²¹¹ Teresa of Ávila, 196.

²¹² Ursula de Jesús, 129.

directed by them. Teresa explained that when she truly was suffering and distressed, Jesus appeared and showed her his wounds or appeared on the cross for her.²¹³ When Ursula wished to show it was solely by the will of God she was experiencing her visions, she stated that “while pondering the wounds of my Lord” she asked for her visions to be taken from her. Ursula then affirmed the Lord reassured her that her experiences and visions were his will.²¹⁴ When trying to comprehend why she felt so strongly called to preach, Bathsheba realized that preaching “could be no other service than for a Cross” which she had to bear.²¹⁵ Each of them displayed moments of doubt, weakness, or simple reluctance about the spiritual experiences in their lives, and by being granted experiences with a symbols associated with the body of Christ they established the will of God as in ultimate control.

By focusing intently on the body of Christ it became easier for female mystics to branch into theological topics, such as the sacrament of Communion and the salvation of mankind. Both of these topics were closely associated with the image of the crucified body of Christ. The theological debate regarding the Eucharist was extensive. In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council established the doctrine of transubstantiation. This affirmed that during Holy Communion, when the bread and wine were consumed, these elements transformed into the literal body and blood of Christ. The senses of the participant however, continued to perceive the elements as bread and wine. While doubts regarding the sacramental system of the Church had arisen before the Reformation, it was this movement which left the greatest theological mark on this sacrament. Martin Luther

²¹³ Teresa of Ávila, 206.

²¹⁴ Ursula de Jesús, 91.

²¹⁵ Bowers, 10.

argued for an understanding often referred to as the doctrine of consubstantiation. While consubstantiation preserved the principle of Real Presence, it discarded the idea that any change occurred during consecration. Rather, Luther argued both bread and body, wine and blood, coexisted at the same time.²¹⁶

Most other reformers, however, believed this was not going far enough. Ulrich Zwingli would later assert that this entire debate steamed from a misunderstanding of the word “is.” He argued that when Jesus stated, “This is my body,” he meant that it signified his body, not was the literal manifestation of it. This argument made Communion a representation and no longer a means of presenting God to mankind.²¹⁷ Later, John Calvin took both of their ideas and presented Communion as a symbol, but one that accepted the mystical presence of Christ in the elements of bread and wine.²¹⁸

The importance of this debate was not lost on sixteenth-century female mystics. Several mystics accentuated the importance of the consumption of the Eucharist to be understood as a literal ingestion of the body and blood of Christ. To use their mystical experiences to buttress this theological belief, they often relayed visions which supported of this point of view. During a communications with Christ, Mary Magdalen emphasized, “You give Yourself to us in this Most Holy Sacrament.”²¹⁹ Also she conveyed an experience where she saw the crucified Christ “inasmuch as we had just taken Communion.”²²⁰ Ursula connected the body of Christ with Communion, arguing

²¹⁶ Muir, 180.

²¹⁷ Muir, 181.

²¹⁸ Muir, 183.

²¹⁹ Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi, vol. 2, 90.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

that just as his mortal body entered the body of the Virgin Mary, he also entered the bodies of the faithful when they took in this sacrament.²²¹

Another important theological aspect of Communion was who was directly in control of its distribution. In an attempt to gain access to this holy sacrament, mystics emphasized the sacrament was given to them directly by God. As sacraments could be withheld from people, generally as a means of punishment and control, at the will of earthly Church leaders, the ability to link interaction with this sacrament with a higher power was crucial in maintaining the hierarchy of power within the Church. Catherine stated Jesus “is administered to everyone who will receive him.”²²² Ursula relayed after partaking of the Lord she specifically “thanks Him for allowing me to receive Him.”²²³ Both of them wished to support the understanding that their connection to this highly important sacrament was a divine one which was not limited by the control of men. By focusing on Jesus as the giver and the availability of the sacrament to all willing, they discredited the ability of the Church to control the dispersal of the divine aspect of this sacrament.

Mystic women proved they were just as interested as their male peers in the defining tenet of Christianity, the incarnation of Christ and human salvation. Julian prompted prayer to be directed to God about “the endless life that we have of all this” because it had surely originated from “his goodness.”²²⁴ Mary Magdalen, speaking as the Virgin Mary, asked Jesus why everyone did not “enter into this side of Yours” to receive

²²¹ Ursula de Jesús, 115.

²²² Catherine of Siena, 209.

²²³ Ursula de Jesús, 155.

²²⁴ Julian of Norwich, 143.

salvation seeing as his side was “such a great cavern” and clearly had the necessary room.²²⁵ While the presentation of salvation may appear expansive in these visions, there are commonalities. Many of the mystics addressed concerns with exclusionary aspects of salvation, such as the late medieval understanding that the role of the majority of the laity was to be in Hell,²²⁶ and they all inextricably link salvation as something given solely by Christ. This was problematic because the Roman Catholic Church claimed power in the distribution of salvation to the members of its body. Medieval religious movements, such as the Waldensians and Cathars, which had attempted to recall this power from the clergy were quickly deemed heretical by authorities and corrected, forcibly if necessary. Also, they emphasized divine authority in the aspiration for the salvation of the entirety of mankind. Just as it was important to female mystics that Communion had a sturdy foundation solely in the will of God, it was even more vital that salvation be something only God could administer and not something which could be withheld or granted by man.

Aside from the perceived importance of the body of Jesus, as Caroline Bynum argues, blood began to gain an importance all its own in eleventh-century medieval theology.²²⁷ Just as the spilling of one’s own blood had become an important symbol of devotion to God, specific focus on the blood of Jesus grew. As Christians had once used blood relics as proof of the truth of the Passion story to Jews,²²⁸ mystics utilized the

²²⁵ Mary Magdalen de’ Pazzi, vol. 3, 220.

²²⁶ Watson, 149.

²²⁷ Bynum, “The Blood of Christ in the Later Middle Ages,” 704.

²²⁸ Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, 81.

special importance allotted to the blood of Christ to gain validation and agency when they ventured into the masculine realm of theology.

Julian of Norwich began her first vision by stating that she “saw the red blood trekile downe from under the garlande, hote and freshely, plentuously and lively...”²²⁹ This description grounded her work solidly in the blood sacrifice of Christ. Ursula de Jesus also referenced blood, arguing “that the blood of God would remedy things.” She went on immediately to state she believed in “God the almighty, creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ.”²³⁰ This strengthened her writing by grounding its presentation in an object of great spirituality and power.

Mary Magdalen de’ Pazzi also reinforced medieval understandings of the blood of Christ in her colloquies. In the fifth colloquy for example, she wrote, “...the thoughts, the reasoning, and all the works of that should that is thus transformed in the blood of Jesus are not like those of other creatures.”²³¹ She also later proclaimed the inherent greatness of the light that exuded from “a will drowned and purified in Your blood!”²³² By presenting the strength of a person’s will and intellectual pursuits as something which the blood of Jesus directly influenced, she strengthened the legitimacy of her visions, repudiation any potential counter charges of heresy.

Just as female mystics used the bloody and crucified body of Jesus to put forward commentary, they also utilized the importance of the blood of Jesus on its own to help them procure the agency needed to offer such remarks. Similarly to how mystics viewed

²²⁹ Julian of Norwich, 135.

²³⁰ Ursula de Jesús, 81.

²³¹ Mary Magdalen de’ Pazzi, vol. 2, 48.

²³² Ibid, 265.

the blood of the corporeal bodies of mankind as a way to escape and destroy the earthly ties which kept humanity from communing with the divine,²³³ religious women also saw the blood of Jesus as a specific saving grace. They emphasized the consumption of the blood during Communion, as well as often utilizing it when they metaphorically addressed salvation in their works.

Catherine described the blood of Jesus as a “cleansing bath for you.”²³⁴ The late medieval period increasingly focused on the body of the crucified Christ, but religious texts and theology emphasized the powerful saving ability inherent in Christ’s blood. Catherine’s description of the blood of Christ washing humanity affirmed this ability. Catherine even went further to state that it was from the blood that the powers of all of the sacraments were derived,²³⁵ which continued to bolster the singular power of Christ’s blood.

When Margery was presented with the sight of Christ on the cross, she spoke avidly of his blood which she described as flowing “plentevowsly” from his entire body. She also stated she was aware that he was shedding his own blood specifically for “hir lofe hir saluacyon...”²³⁶ By making this divine interaction so specifically personal, Margery was able to transfer the power which allowed her access to salvation solely to Christ. This effectively removed any agents of this earth from being able to attempt to withhold salvation from her, namely the Church and its male clergy. The Church staunchly held onto the ability to offer or withhold salvation from the members of

²³³ Bynum, “The Blood of Christ in the Later Middle Ages,” 707.

²³⁴ Catherine of Siena, 214.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 215.

²³⁶ Kempe, 70.

Christendom. Margery had to be careful how she presented this divine interaction over salvation. Mary Magdalen similarly urged the reader to focus their feelings and emotions on the blood of Christ, because if they did not then “we shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.”²³⁷ She took this moment to make the believer’s salvation a personal and direct interaction with the divine, effectively and importantly removing the Church as an intermediary. As an Italian Catholic woman, who lived amongst the relatively new emerging heresy of Protestantism, this was a risky proclamation. Mary Magdalen relied on the Church’s treatment of the blood of Christ to protect her assertion regarding salvation.

The vivid descriptions of the metaphorical bodies of asomatous entities was also employed by female mystics to speak about social structures such as the Church and Nation. In Hildegard’s vision “The Church, Bride of Christ and mother of the Faithful,” presented at the beginning of this chapter, she clearly used a vivid metaphor to describe and speak about the Church, its theology, structure, and purpose. Catherine used similar practices to speak more specifically about corrupt priests within the Church. She also presented the Church as a “bride” whose body suffered and showed the corruption of her members. Catherine wrote that God exclaimed, “But look how my bride has disfigured her face! She is leprous with impurity and selfishness. Her breasts are swollen because of the pride and avarice of those who feed there: the universal body of Christianity and the mystic body of holy Church.” Catherine later explained that the breasts of the Church were swollen because the ministers were only feeding themselves and not the body of

²³⁷ Mary Magdalen de’ Pazzi, vol. 2, 274.

Christianity.²³⁸ Also, she explained that the “selfishness [of priests] has poisoned the whole world as well as the mystic body of holy Church and made the garden of this bride a field overgrown with putrid weeds.”²³⁹ The Lord later stated, Catherine wrote, that if these priests “had considered their dignity, they would not have fallen into the darkness of deadly sin nor muddied the face of their souls.”²⁴⁰ She carefully balanced her radical images with references to obedience and honor because she recognized that attacking the clergy in her writing was a bold and dangerous path to traverse. Her descriptions of the Church or soul are couched in the language of the sexuality of female bodies. She aided this also by the fact she never called for any action to be taken against the priests, and actually spoke against such dealings. She clearly stated rebellion against the clergy or judgment of them was a strong sign of disrespect for God, and the only action the laity should take were devoted prayers concerning the actions and souls of corrupt clergy.

Addressing a body to the asomatous components of the Trinity created an opportunity for the voice of a mystic to become something other than just her voice. Also by now having a body to use for description, female mystics created a more tangible Trinity to which the mystics seemingly handed over more than just their voices. When members of the Trinity appeared in the visions of female mystics, the visions then became an expression of divine will. They surrendered their choices to God, the Holy Spirit, Jesus, or just simply “him.” When calling the General Council to action Elizabeth Poole instructed the Council members to place their “swords into his hands for your

²³⁸ Ibid., 50.

²³⁹ Ibid., 234.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 212.

defence”²⁴¹ to clearly link their future actions with the work and will of God and not with her desires or ideas.

When Elizabeth Poole first spoke to the General Council she found herself faced with the problem of explaining why and how she had any understanding of the political state of the nation. To address this, she stated she was a part of its body and thus she was aware of its “dying state.”²⁴² Her knowledge of harm which could befall the physical body allowed her awareness of the possible death of the political structure which she resided in. After she established this connection, she shared a vision she stated God had presented to her as the cure for the nation’s metaphorical body by the army. To speak of the infection of the nation and the capabilities of the army she gave them both bodies. Without this metaphor and her visionary status, her comprehension of the state of the nation or the purpose of the army would have caused suspicion.

Blood and the Problem of Universal Salvation

Julian also presented flowing blood in her writings constantly, often linking it with her theories of salvation. She very distinctly linked flowing blood with joy and dried blood with absence and pain. In a vision where she addressed seeing the “swete flesh dry in my sight,” she explained it was “drying with mervelous paine.”²⁴³ How clearly this contrasted her portrayal of flowing blood which she described as “hote” and appearing so “plentuously” that it became impossible to see the wound it originated from, or the skin presumed to be right under it.²⁴⁴ This was an amount of blood so abundant it

²⁴¹ Poole, 5.

²⁴² Poole, 1.

²⁴³ Julian of Norwich, 179.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 167.

was clearly capable of saving the entire world. The importance of this clear emphasis on the overwhelming amount of blood becomes obvious as she continually linked it with salvation. Julian went on to state in her work that this large amount of “blode overfloweth all erth, and is redy to wash all creatures of sinne which be of good will, have ben, and shall be.”²⁴⁵ Julian emphasized the amount of blood to make the metaphor more powerful and a clear sign God was capable of saving the entire world. She presented, with great joy, the unfathomable amount of flowing, hot, plenteous blood which set up an understanding of a salvation which knew no bounds and could not be limited by size.

While the concept of universal salvation was not unique to the work of Julian, her presentation of it in *A Revelation of Love* was assertive and intentional, which distinguishes it from works such as Margery Kempe’s *Book*.²⁴⁶ When Margery attempted to present universal salvation in her work her ability to align it with orthodox theology prompted her, while clearly under protest, to admit universal salvation was not accepted doctrine. While Margery offered no strong response later in her work to her initial argument in support of universal salvation, she affirmed the power of the Church and the divine justice which would eventually damn some souls.²⁴⁷ While Margery’s orthodoxy derailed her ability to affirm universal salvation, Julian openly refuted accepted belief.²⁴⁸ Julian offered up an exchange where Jesus implied that his word needed to be saved. Thus if there was a discrepancy between the Bible and Julian’s revelation, it was the

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 167.

²⁴⁶ Nicholas Watson, “Visions of Inclusion: Universal Salvation and Vernacular Theology in Pre-Reformation England,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27, vol. 2 (1997): 161.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 153.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 161.

former which required extra analysis to unite the messages which appeared in both of them.²⁴⁹ While this statement clearly appears as something that clerical authorities would quickly have deemed heretical, it was not. Julian artfully challenged the accepted hierarchies of religious truth which placed scripture above revelation. In her work, she clearly defined divine revelation as more authoritative than scripture. This shift also usurped the medieval clerics who at the time enjoyed a monopoly on the highest understanding and interpretation of divine truths due to their role as students and teachers of the scriptures.

God's desire and ability to save the entire world was present in Mary Magdalen's writing when, speaking as the Virgin Mary, she declared to Jesus "I nourished You with milk, and You want to nourish all with blood."²⁵⁰ She strongly links the love and nurture a mother can offer with the love and salvation Jesus allowed with his sacrifice. These images also emphasized the love of Christ towards the world as parental. While being allowed to visualize "a large crucified Christ figure," who Ursula noted had blood pouring from his left hand, she was informed "*only one drop of the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ is enough to redeem one thousand worlds.*"²⁵¹ Whereas some of the other women presented an unimaginable amount of blood to signify a divinely all-encompassing ability to save humanity, Ursula established the universal salvation offered by God by repeatedly²⁵² presenting the idea that even one drop of his blood held enough power for the salvation of all. In Ursula's visions this reinforced even more fully the idea

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 164.

²⁵⁰ Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi, vol. 3, 221.

²⁵¹ Ursula de Jesús, 127. The italics are as they appear in the text.

²⁵² Ibid., 158. "One drop of His blood is enough for everyone..."

of complete inclusion of all of humanity in salvation. Due to a cultural affirmation of the legitimacy of medieval mysticism, Ursula buttressed her declarations with those traditions, and addressed the afterlife.²⁵³ In a society which clearly excluded her due to gender and race, Ursula displayed an apparent desire in her work that salvation had no such boundaries.

Affirmation Discovered in Divine Attributes

Mechthild used God's lack of a body to present an understanding of how mankind interacted with God, as a member of the Holy Church, the earthly manifestation of God. She stated God shared with her, "When I shine, you shall glow./ When I flow, you shall become wet./ When you sigh, you draw my divine heart into you./ When you weep in longing for me, I take you into my arms./ But when you love, we two become one being."²⁵⁴ The first two lines noted how the attributes of God affected mankind, mainly that humanity clearly displayed signs of God's attributes. The last line affirmed the Church as the manifestation of God, and that to truly commune with God Christians had to understand his greatest attribute, divine love.

Another important theological point which appeared in the writings of mystic women was the distinction between the mortal and immortal Jesus. Discussion of this contrast allowed mystics to address important theological ideas such as the incarnation and qualities of the trinity. It is obvious Julian intentionally never provided a visual description for the members of the Trinity in *A Revelation of Love*. It is interesting to note, however, that she quite vividly described visions of the crucified body of Christ.

²⁵³ van Deusen, 42-43.

²⁵⁴ Mechthild of Magdeburg, 76.

The concept of the three divinities being separate but ultimately all one is difficult to address, so medieval and early modern mystics favored the use of visualized interaction with the incarnated Jesus. She clearly distinguished the metaphorical body of Jesus from the Jesus present in the Trinity. She explained in one vision that while “Alle the trinite wrought in the passion of Crist” that “only the maidens sonne suffered” while the Trinity remained constantly exuberant.²⁵⁵ This distinction was crucial in her work, it explained her ability to see the body of Christ, as well as presented her understanding of the Trinity as a theological entity outside of her ability to comprehend.

Female mystics also described their souls in physical terms, embodying their deepest spiritual desires. As Teresa of Avila stated, “Although this vision was imaginary, I never saw it or any other with the eyes of the body, but only with the eyes of the soul.”²⁵⁶ Influenced by the theology of Christian dualism,²⁵⁷ Teresa understood she needed to present her physical body as more easily corrupted by the devil and her soul as the true receiver of her visions so they were considered divine. While her physical body itself would have been understood as evil, using body metaphors to describe the actions of the soul was not problematic. Bathsheba referred to her interaction with God as the “Dealings of God with my Soul”²⁵⁸ so that, like Teresa, it was not her corruptible physical body the important revelations were shown to but her divinely linked soul.

In Teresa’s most well-known vision, where an angel pierced her heart with golden spear and left her “utterly consumed by the great love of God,” Teresa offered a

²⁵⁵ Julian of Norwich, 199.

²⁵⁶ Teresa of Ávila, 197.

²⁵⁷ Christian dualism affirmed the inherent goodness and depravity of the material body and the divine soul, respectively. It was believed the two were so incompatible they could not coexist.

²⁵⁸ Bowers, 14.

description of this angel, which was unique as she did not generally describe angels appearing in her visions. She explained that she normally abstained from describing them because she typically did not see them, but rather perceived their presence. However, this angel she described as short, beautiful, and as having a face so aflame she trusted it meant he was one of the highest ranking angels.²⁵⁹ This experience for her was profound and extremely meaningful so her presentation of this angel needed to substantiate her claim to the whole experience. To make the experience tangible she provided him with his great golden spear and presented his appearance as a clear indication of his respected and definite divine nature. Clear validation of the angel provided a strong confirmation of her visionary experience.

To address the theological interaction between the soul and intellect Hildegard stated, “The intellect is joined to the soul like an arm to the body.”²⁶⁰ By presenting the interaction as describable with a body metaphor, Hildegard provided commentary explaining intellect as an important and extremely useful appendage of a person’s spiritual life. When Hildegard wished to speak of baptism and the washing away of someone’s sins, she described it as the moment their soul received a new and flawless garment.²⁶¹ A perfect garment benefited Hildegard’s faculty to address the theological transition the ritual of baptism represented. Clothing worn by a person could be changed, when donned it covered and protected the body, and if of a quality above what someone could obtain for themselves, it was clearly a gift.

²⁵⁹ Teresa of Ávila, 210.

²⁶⁰ Hildegard of Bingen, 121.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 368.

When a medieval mystic witnessed overwhelming and flowing blood and an early modern Protestant saw a weak and dying woman, they utilized the same trope in their descriptions. The divine entities in Christianity were not physically present on this earth any more than the political framework of the nation was actually tangible. By employing an understanding of the description of the bodies these entities clearly did not possess, female mystics spoke about a number of important matters.

They were able to validate their message and themselves by reinforcing the presentation that their comprehension was limited to the physical world not the divine or political. By presenting representations of asomatous figures, which the mystics clearly rooted in biblical imagery and traditional language, they underscored the legitimacy of their visions and their experiences. This allowed for these important figures to interact with each other, and for female mystics to witness and then present the visions in which these divine figures appeared. This seemingly removed female mystics from a place of influence in the world or even in the creation of their own written works, which allowed for their range of acceptable topics to expand. They laid this foundation in their works and gained the faculty to speak about theological concepts, ranging from Communion to salvation, and worldly interactions, extending from the abilities of the Church to the needs of the State.

Conclusion

When the Inquisition condemned Margaret Porette to be burned at the stake in Paris, in 1310, it was largely due to her stubborn refusal to deny the teaching and theology apparent in her written work, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. The initial issue raised was the relationship she described between the characters of The Soul and Virtues, outlined in chapters six, eight, and nineteen. As Edmund Colledge, J.C. Marler, and Judith Grant argue, it is unlikely that contemporary theologians condemned Margaret's work. They posit that it was not a theological staff which decided what traits specifically condemned this work but the Inquisitorial staff itself.²⁶² What was it about this relationship which greatly angered the Inquisitorial staff, but would not have prompted a reciprocal reaction from contemporary theologians? Margaret presented The Soul as free from the "bondage" of the Virtues,²⁶³ the Virtues as something The Soul could "possess,"²⁶⁴ and the Virtues appeared to be a servant of The Soul.²⁶⁵ These are some examples of her failure to properly couch her message in her writing in a beneficial manner, which is clear throughout the book. The theological concept that a soul's perfection, gained through the grace of God, changed its obligation to be virtuous would not have been shocking to a Christian theologian. They understood that the perfection of Jesus was the reason Christians were freed from the laws God bestowed upon the

²⁶² Edmund Colledge, Judith Grant, and J. C. Marler introductory interpretive essay to *The mirror of Simple Souls*, by Margaret Porette, trans. Edmund Colledge, Judith Grant, and J. C. Marler. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), xlv-xlvi.

²⁶³ Porette, 16.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 19 and 39.

Israelites. To the Inquisitors, however, it appeared as though this woman said virtuous actions were no longer necessary. The important role her presentation held in the acceptance or rejection of her work is undeniable.

Where the ten women in this study used narrative to avoid major confrontations with the Church, others were not always so capable and found themselves faced with a far different reception. Margaret Porette is one example of this. She was probably born in the north of France, but like Julian her birth records have been lost and further information is hard to attain aside from the speculation she was a Beguine. *The Mirror of Simple Souls* was her only writing and was the first mystical theological work to be written in the French vernacular.²⁶⁶ Previous to her being brought before the Inquisition, Margaret's book was condemned by the Bishop of Cambrai. Margaret's response to this was to the addition of seventeen chapters and an insertion in the front of letters from three different theologians who supported her work, as proof she was not heretical. The theologians were two monks, a Franciscan and a Cistercian whose names are unknown, and Godfrey of Fontaines, who was the Canon of Paris and regent master there in theology. While all three men agreed in their letters the book was true and divinely inspired, the Franciscan and Godfrey both cautioned against showing this book to the multitudes, as they would not have comprehended it. Perhaps if Margaret had listened to them she would have come to a different end, because even though she published all three letters as part of her book, she disregarded their warnings and published the book in the vernacular French and disseminated it to the general populace as best as she was able.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., vxiii.

Margaret's work failed to establish her in the role of receiver of knowledge from God, and the metaphors she used, when she used them at all, hardly utilized the body as a foundation for explanation. Her behavior, in combination with the presentation of her work, was clearly linked with the reaction of the Inquisition. Margaret did not properly present herself within the giver/receiver relationship in the same manner present in the works of the ten women addressed in this thesis. She did not claim to have experienced an undesired vision nor did she present the work as surely coming from God. The difference between divinely inspired and divinely given was very important in the reception of mystical works. The prologue of Margaret's book stated that The Soul ascended from the first to the seventh state of grace.²⁶⁷ The rest of the work was a dialogue between various characters with the most common speakers being Love and The Soul. These two characters appeared to be the most enlightened and empowered of all which appeared in the book. Rather than paint her words as God's she presented the message as the words of Love and The Soul, both clearly understood to be female. Margaret attempted to link these characters to God as they were both declared at some point to be God. Love stated "I am God...for Love is God, and God is Love, and this Soul is God through its condition of Love, and I am God through my divine nature, and this Soul is God by Love's just law."²⁶⁸ She also declared it was appropriate that The Soul resembled God "for she has been changed into God" and thus "preserved his true form..."²⁶⁹ The authorship of the book was also allotted to both of these characters.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 10.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 41.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 70.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., For the soul 10 and 146, for Love 12.

The confusion this created weakened the role of giver of knowledge being God, and due to The Soul having clear connections to Margaret she damaged her ability to embrace the role of receiver.

Margaret also made the mistake of not talking about female attributes as the others had so eloquently done. Whereas the other women constantly reminded the readers they were unworthy and unintelligent, Margaret failed to similarly align herself with this label. In fact, the character most linked with her, The Soul, was said to have “the knowledge of every creature which ever was and which is and which will be...”²⁷¹ While she clearly portrayed The Soul as knowledgeable, she did have The Soul acknowledge it committed “ugly and hideous” sins in its past.²⁷² This attempt to present this character as less threatening was ruined when soon after Love declared The Soul “must be excused by all men” and she was “freed of any obligation,”²⁷³ which scarcely aided the appearance of this character as controllable and benign.

Margaret’s writing also lacked the affirmation of previously accepted ideas, specifically those concerning the role and abilities of women. While Margaret took the time to restate the truth of the Trinity²⁷⁴ this was not enough to counteract how she talked about women. She did not mention the roles of women often, and one of the few times she did she addressed the biblical story of the interaction between Martha, Mary, and Jesus.²⁷⁵ When she referenced this story she lifted Mary up as overwhelmed with a love

²⁷¹ Ibid., 24.

²⁷² Ibid., 56.

²⁷³ Ibid., 60.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 32.

²⁷⁵ Luke 10:38-42. In this story Mary leaves the house work all for Martha while she sits and listens to Jesus. When Martha inquires to Jesus why he does not appear to care about her sister leaving all the work for her he reprimands her for putting so much weight on tasks and defends the actions of her sister.

of Jesus so great it disabled her from helping her sister with the housework. Margaret also stated Mary left the work and act of serving Jesus to her sister “whose role this was...”²⁷⁶ Her presentation of this story implied while serving could be a role assigned to women there could be exceptions. She argued that if a woman were truly overcome with the love of God this excused her, with God’s blessing, from her expected worldly tasks. This story was shared to affirm Margaret’s actions and due to its nature functioned far differently than the biblical examples of the Virgin Mary and Eve, which appeared in the works of other mystics.

Another thing that Margaret did not properly apply was the metaphor of the body. She hardly mentioned the human body in her writing at all. She called the body “gross”²⁷⁷ and “wretched”²⁷⁸ but never expounded upon this further to address the decrepit nature of humans, or how the very nature of the body inhibited a person from gaining a true connection with God. Also, she argued against the divinely beneficial quality of bodily mortification. Reason stated The Soul “longs for nothing...not contempt or poverty, not martyrdom or tribulations, not Masses or sermons, not fasting or prayers, and so she yields to Nature all that Nature asks with no qualms of conscience.”²⁷⁹ Divine Justice echoed this sentiment by stating it was acceptable to partake of the four elements, brightness, heat, moisture, and earth, as needed because “these bounteous elements are made by God, as are other things, and so such souls use all

²⁷⁶ Porette, 155.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 52.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 57.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 30.

things made and created...”²⁸⁰ The declaration The Soul did not need to abstain from what nature provided damaged Margaret’s work in several ways, the least of them being that she once again went against the accepted idea of how pious women should act. This also injured her because she lost the opportunity to validate herself by showing she resided within those accepted ideas of apparent piety, as the other ten women had done.

Even when she discussed the Passion of Jesus, the perfect place to have really utilized the symbol of the body, hardly any attention was given to describing the actual body of Christ.²⁸¹ When speaking of the “precious” blood of Jesus, Margaret merely made a theological observation that all Jesus would have needed to shed, to save the entire world, would have been a very small amount and instead he shed all of His blood.

Most of the characters involved in the dialogue never received a bodily description, with the exception of The Soul. However, this description’s most intriguing element was that The Soul possessed six wings “just as the Seraphim...” Two of the wings hid The Soul’s face from Jesus to show “God is not comprehended except by himself alone.” The next two The Soul used to cover her feet to show she could not truly understand the suffering of Jesus “for he is not known except by himself alone.” The last two wings The Soul utilized to fly; Margaret noted The Soul hovered and then rested. This was explained as being because “the wings with which she flies are all that she knows and loves and praises of God’s goodness, and she hovers, for she is always in God’s sight; and she is at rest, for she dwells always in the divine will.”²⁸² What is intriguing about this image is most of the ideas she presented would have been beneficial

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 37.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 135.

²⁸² Ibid., 15.

if stated another way. She affirmed she lacked the ability to comprehend God or his suffering while maintaining she was always in line with his will. The obvious problem was that to make these points Margaret created an image of a body which physically would have resembled that of an angel. While the angels of the Bible have often been considered asexual most images of them have a distinctly masculine quality. When Hildegard described the Church as a feminine entity the most important aspect of the body she described was the womb. This is a stark contrast to Margaret's portrayal of The Soul, shown as feminine, which was granted the appendages of angels.

The small number of metaphors used in Margaret's work were problematic, similar to the angel wings of The Soul. She used the relationship between a male master and servant to describe the relationship between the Virtues and The Soul.²⁸³ She compared The Soul with an eagle,²⁸⁴ and how The Soul received the imprint of God with how wax took the form of the seal applied to it.²⁸⁵ These metaphors would not have been problematic if they were interspersed among acceptable metaphors. Instead they stood alone, and on their own they appeared conspicuous. Her work appeared as lacking understandable descriptions, but containing a plethora of analysis. Without hiding her theology behind the proper narrative and symbols, Margaret appeared to be a woman not under the control of man or Church and who was then a threat to the social body.

The ten successful women in this study were not victims of their environment nor were they the complete controllers of their situations; they were active participants who manipulated accepted narratives to present themselves as nonthreatening. When

²⁸³ Ibid., 40.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 41.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 69.

Hildegard of Bingen wished to speak about theology she turned herself into an unworthy and unthreatening receiver of knowledge, provided by God, the ultimate giver of everything. Mechthild of Magdeburg was told her language was too masculine, so she quickly reminded her audience she was not vain and elsewhere utilized symbols of the body to describe all aspects of mankind's relationship to God. Catherine of Siena boldly came before popes and offered advice; she was not punished for this act because she was presented as merely an unworthy medium selected by God because he willed her to be chosen. To speak of God as mother and father Julian of Norwich presented God as the true voice. Margery Kempe wrote an autobiography with such heavy utilization of this narrative it resembles a hagiography. The method she used to present her book was what allowed her to write it. To validate her experiences as a mystic, Teresa of Avila buttressed her work with images of the crucified Christ and visiting angels. Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi validated her divine experience with the recorded and visible abuse she sustained during revelations. Ursula de Jesus presented the idea of salvation being available to all humanity, regardless of their race or gender, with a vision of the crucified Christ which prompted a revelation about the all encompassing nature of the saving grace of his sacrifice. To gain the ability to offer advice about the actions of a council composed of men, Elizabeth Poole described the nation as a weak woman in need of a strong and able man to rescue it. Bathsheba Bowers explained her proximity to the divine by reminding the reader how close she came to the death of her earthly body and how her acceptance of the loss of her flawed and sinful body brought her closer to a God.

These female mystics made the choice to carefully interact with their surroundings, and they worked to present themselves as extremely aligned with social norms, when they might have appeared precariously far from them. A better understanding of the intentional construction of their writings can open the door to understanding women and the worlds in which they lived. The stirring works of these female mystics illuminates many possibilities for a more comprehensive understanding of religion, social construction, and humanity's overwhelming ability to persistently achieve agency to affect the world.

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