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## "A meruelous thinge!": Elizabeth of Spalbeek, Christina the Astonishing, and Performative Self-Abjection in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 114

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“A MERUELOUS THINGE!”:  
ELIZABETH OF SPALBEEK, CHRISTINA THE ASTONISHING,  
AND PERFORMATIVE SELF-ABJECTION  
IN OXFORD, BODLEIAN LIBRARY MS DOUCE 114

by

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THESIS

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## ABSTRACT

Contributing to the spirited discussion regarding feminist and pro-feminine readings of Middle English hagiography, this dissertation challenges the tradition of grouping accounts of medieval holy women into a single genre that relies on stereotypes of meekness and obedience. I argue that fifteenth-century England saw a pro-feminine literary movement extolling the virtues of women who engaged in what I term “performative self-abjection,” a form of vicious self-renunciation and grotesque asceticism based on Julia Kristeva's model of the abject. The corollary of women's performative self-abjection is *ex-gratia* spiritual authority, public recognition, and independence, emphasized in the English corpus of fifteenth-century women's hagiography. Performative self-abjection is exemplified in the *vitae* of Elizabeth of Spalbeek and Christina the Astonishing in the Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 114; their extreme demonstrative affective piety made them unimpeachable in their religious authority as they taught, preached, gave absolution, and lived freely as solitary *mulieres religiosae*. Translation, redaction, and *mouvance* over the course of roughly one hundred years altered the ostensible purpose of these *lives*. Focusing on outrageous dramatics and minimizing scriptural contextualization, these texts evolve into works of subversion rather than conscription in relation to the church. Using Foucault's approach to literary transformation and history, I argue that these texts constitute a previously unacknowledged “second wave” of women's hagiography, distinct from Lynda Coon's notion of the patchwork saint stories found in the early church's “sacred fictions.” Finding commonality in the third wave feminist theory of R. Claire Snyder, these biographies employ tools of the male-dominated literary tradition in order to subvert the

patriarchal church's order while appearing to conform to its agenda. These works signify a quiet literary revolution aimed at vernacular women readers, and demonstrate an influential connection to the contemporaneous "Lyf of S. Elyzabeth" by Osbern of Bokenham and *The Booke of Margery Kempe*, texts long considered anomalous and frequently characterized as works without influence. The subversion inherent in performative self-abjection is initiated in physical action and, in the case of Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 114, resurrected through literature.

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## Chapter 1

### The Blossoming of Mysticism and the The Golden Age of Devotional Literature

*“The use made of the book by privileged readers constitutes it as a secret of which they are the “true” interpreters. It interposes a frontier between the text and its readers that can be crossed only if one has a passport delivered by these official interpreters, who transform their own reading (which is also a legitimate one) into an orthodox ‘literality’ that makes other (equally legitimate) readings either heretical (not ‘in conformity’ with the meaning of the text) or insignificant (to be forgotten).”*

-Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (172)

*“. . . it seems to me that our curiosity has been blunted by a particular model of the nature of religious sentiment...long after the issue of the rise of the cult of saints has been removed from its confessional setting in post-Reformation polemics, scholars of every and of no denomination still find themselves united in a common reticence and incomprehension when faced with this phenomenon. Plainly, some solid and seemingly unmovable cultural furniture has piled up somewhere in that capacious lumber room, the back of our mind. If we can identify and shift some of it, we may find ourselves able to approach the Christian cult of saints from a different direction.”*

-Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (12-13)

The late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries was a “golden age” for devotional literature in England (ca. 1340-1450), according to Nicholas Watson (“Censorship” 823-4). This golden age produced a body of subversive texts recounting the lives of female saints who had lived and acted during what Bernard McGinn refers to as “The Flowering of Mysticism” circa 1200 to 1350 (2). Although literary scholars and historians have traditionally categorized all medieval hagiography as a single genre, I propose that these transgressive Middle English accounts of female saints must be set apart from early church hagiography as a distinct sub-genre. This second-wave hagiography was unusual in that it told stories of women saints who used *performative self-abjection* to empower themselves through acts of demonstrative spirituality that included self-humiliation and

the self-administered infliction of physical injury as performative spiritual asceticism. Extreme demonstrative affective piety rendered these women unimpeachable in their religious authority, according to their *vitae*; they enjoyed personal agency as they taught, preached, gave absolution, and lived freely as solitary *mulieres religiosae*. Perceived as living saints, they drew pilgrims to their communities. Demonstrably imbued with divine energy, they were often afforded accommodations and provided with the necessities of life, facilitating the avoidance of risky marriages and dangerous childbirth, many attaining the right to live independently. Performative self-abjection, defined in this paper, validates women's spiritual authority, reversing the power structure; it is an act of insurgency, of deviance, an act that "project[s] women into power through reversed images . . . integrating the woman more fully into clerically controlled structures" (Bynum, *Holy Feast* 46). Thus, the subversion inherent in performative self-abjection is initiated in physical action and, in the case of Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 114, resurrected through literature.<sup>1</sup> This manuscript informs an understanding of women's lives and religious praxis in the Middle Ages – an understanding that clearly contravenes the church's history and challenges the research of many scholars.

Likely commissioned and read by women who had or aspired to some measure of autonomy alongside male pro-feminine allies,<sup>2</sup> these texts differ drastically from traditional hagiography in both content and purpose. MS Douce 114, produced at the Beauvale Carthusian Charterhouse between 1420 and 1450 (Brown, *Three Women*

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<sup>1</sup> "if one imagines . . . the experience of *want* itself as logically preliminary to being and object – then one understands that abjection, and even more so abjection of the self, is its only signified. Its signifier, then, is none but literature" (Kristeva, *Powers* 5).

<sup>2</sup> Use of the term "profeminine" rather than "profeminist" or "proto-feminist" originates in Alcuin Blamires' use of the term to signify positive texts about women from the pre-modern period (11-12). R. Claire Snyder remarks that third wave feminist readings of identity "embrace notions of contradiction, multiplicity, and ambiguity" so that the pro-feminine label, while complex in meaning, is an appropriate descriptor for favourable pre-modern stories written about women by men (187).

11,14), is the prime exemplar of second-wave golden age hagiography concerning women exercising their spiritual authority after the blossoming of female mysticism had occurred. The accounts of Elizabeth of Spalbeek, Christina the Astonishing, and, to a lesser extent, Mary of Oignies found in this *compilatio* epitomize the use of performative self-abjection as a means of creating religious power and authority for women. *The Booke of Margery Kempe*, long considered an anomalous text and frequently characterized as a work without influence, can now be linked with MS Douce 114 as related evidence of an early fifteenth century pro-feminine readers' community in England that sought out narratives featuring the excitement of romance, the exploits of dynamic, powerful religious women, and the triumph of female religious authority. This is a perspective that has been neglected by historians and critics to date.

Elizabeth of Spalbeek, a woman living in thirteenth-century Europe, performed the Passion of Christ daily, displaying the stigmata each Friday as she expressed her spirituality in "a newe and unherde manere" (Philip 32); in the late twelfth century, Christina the Astonishing displayed her piety in ways "neuer harde heer byfore" (Thomas 64), including dying only to be resurrected with an impermeable body. Neither woman is recognized as an official saint by the Catholic Church. We know little about these exceptional women in comparison to the very public stories of Saint Francis, Hildegard of Bingen, or Catherine of Siena. The *vitae* of Elizabeth and Christina contain what is clearly embarrassing and confusing information that dilutes and is an affront to the original purpose of devotional literature and hagiography. But their stories, found in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 114, epitomize a fifteenth-century English literary movement that reveals a women's world of radical ascetic practices leading to an

unimpeachable spiritual authority that could not be controlled by the medieval church. These women's behaviours blatantly flew in the face of medieval social and church sanctions; in the modern world, rather than take note of the exceptional nature of these women and their *vitae*, scholars frequently bend these lives to conform to a procrustean bed of generic hagiographical expectations.

After examining the current critical literature regarding medieval hagiography concerning women, I will explore the historical context of this misunderstood spiritual literary movement and position the manuscript *in situ*. In chapter two, I will provide a close reading of the Middle English *vita* of Elizabeth of Spalbeek, who bridges the gap between liturgical drama and mystery plays in her repeated enactment of the betrayal and crucifixion of Christ. In this account, she inverts gender roles and traditional concepts of authority through performative self-abjection. The redaction of numerous biblical references found in the Latin version of Elizabeth's story turns the Middle English translation into an account of a woman who subverts typical saintly behaviours expected of women, rejects the sickness embraced by her spiritual ascetic peers, and exists as the antithesis of the submissive role of female saints, acting (both performatively and in her personal life) with impunity. Chapter three examines the Middle English *vita* of Christina the Astonishing, a woman who aptly fits Sarah Salih's description of medieval saints as "superheroes and celebrities" (1). Her story has long been a source of confusion for numerous critics, who cannot easily categorize her actions. This Middle English translation of her story highlights her ability to "out-saint" all other saints, exercising her "super powers" while demonstrating complete immunity to the church's sanctions. Finally, chapter four addresses MS Douce 114's relationship to *The Booke of Margery*

*Kempe* and the larger readership of English hagiographical literature in the early fifteenth century.

#### WHAT THE CRITICS SAY ABOUT WOMEN'S HAGIOGRAPHY

When scholars examine accounts of female saints, the consensus appears to be that those truly deserving of recognition have been celebrated as arbiters of faith who are empowered through God's divine intervention. There is a standardized perception of their activities: women saints are exemplars who tend to represent an idealized passive female spirituality, "imitating the virgin martyrs" (Sanok xv); female saints are regularly praised for self-abasement and great humility enacted through subservience and obedience (Jacobus 135). Peter Biller describes these women as "concept-laden puppets" (132) whose literary accounts, it must be acknowledged, were embellished by clerics to promote the church's agenda of proselytization as well as establishing and reinforcing the concept of the inferiority of women. Traditionally, male and female subjects of hagiography served different purposes for the church: as Lynda Coon points out, the hagiographical tradition features male lives that echo the courage and prophecy of biblical heroes while their female counterparts represent "the double-edged biblical *topos* of impenitent woman as sinful humanity and repentant woman as harbinger of universal salvation" (27). Caroline Walker Bynum notes that the theological, philosophical, and scientific consensus in the medieval world placed women in a wholly inferior position. The attributes of men, consisting of reason, intellect, and action were contrasted by the medieval understanding that women are irrational, passive, and lacking in self-control

(*Fragmentation* 151).<sup>3</sup> With this prevailing understanding of women, a hagiographical account featuring a woman saint ostensibly demonstrates that even the weakest, most inferior female figure can be an exemplar in terms of conversion and soteriological value. Bynum also argues that “female saints are not canonized or revered unless they are in some way religiously useful to men” (*Fragmentation* 17). Coon affirms that the content of hagiography can frequently be read through the lens of the “theological and didactic agendas of their authors” (xv). Catherine Sanok agrees when she writes: “Understood as normative, female saints’ lives are egregiously misogynist,” rightly noting that, in the majority of cases, “[t]he structural misogyny of the genre has meant that it occupies only a tangential place in histories of medieval women’s literature” (xiii). Barbara Newman points out that “[v]itae often had institutional aims; many were written to enhance the prestige of religious houses or orders by advertising the holiness of their founders” (*Thomas* 17). These observations apply most aptly to the *vitae* that emanated out of the early church; my concept of a second-wave hagiography moves beyond these generalizations. Sarah Beckwith points out that the French feminist philosophers have debated

the question as to whether female mysticism is a possible space for the disruption of the patriarchal order, or whether, on the contrary, it exists to act out rigorously its most sexist fantasies, to reinforce the relegation of “woman” to a transcendent, mystified, and mystificatory sphere where female masochism is spectacularly redeployed in the post of crucifixion/crucifixion. (“A Very Material Mysticism” 197)

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<sup>3</sup> Bynum states: “*Male* and *female* were contrasted and asymmetrically valued as intellect/body, active/passive, rational/irrational, reason/emotion, self-control/lust, judgment/mercy and order/disorder (*Fragmentation* 151).

I contend that medieval mysticism, and its literature, do both: first-wave hagiography tends to fall under the latter rubric, frequently sexist, conformist, and masochistic; second-wave hagiography, particularly the Middle English versions of Elizabeth of Spalbeek and Christina the Astonishing found in MS Douce 114 as well as the *Booke of Margery Kempe*, clearly disrupt patriarchal order.

Beckwith's term "crucifiction" is an appropriate descriptor for first-wave hagiography. Similarly, Coon refers to these texts as "sacred fictions:" "hagiographical motifs driven not by historical fact but by biblical *topoi*, literary invention, and moral imperative" (xv). And while she concedes that some *vitae* have factual bases, many do not. There is little information available that might affirm the details of an early saint's life, let alone confirm the existence of these storied women. Hippolyte Delehaye clarifies why the ambiguous nature of an early saint is unimportant to the church; the *record* of a saint's life as a tool of conversion is privileged over the actual individual's existence. He posits that hagiography must

be of a religious character and aim at edification. The term then must be confined to writings inspired by religious devotion to the saints and intended to increase that devotion . . . . The work of the hagiographer may be historical, but it is not necessarily so. It may take any literary form suited to honouring the saints, from an official record adapted to the needs of the faithful to a highly exuberant poem that *has nothing whatever to do with factual reality* (3-4; emphasis added).

It follows, then, that saints' lives may be composites, exaggerations, or even outright fabrications, wholly acceptable as long as they are of religious character and aimed at

edification. Early church hagiographies fit ideally into this classification as sacred fictions created to “increase devotion.” It is worth noting that Delahaye’s book, which contains this description of hagiography, is accompanied by a *nihil obstat* certification, signifying that his perceptions regarding hagiography are upheld and approved by the church.

When it comes to female saints, Coon argues that although the women of sacred fictions perform miracles, they are at the same time undercut in their power by atoning for being the daughters of Eve. Only intense physical deprivation and impositions of violence would serve in “[making] their bodies impenetrable through militant chastity, self-entombment, spiritual exile, or institutionalized clausturation” (xv), performed as acts of contrition. Accordingly, the church promoted accounts of early church women who were martyred for their adherence to the Christian faith and the preservation of their virginity, plot points found in the lives of women such as Saint Lucy (Jacobus 29-32), Saint Agnes (Jacobus 113-7), and Saint Juliana (Jacobus 177-8). Even women saints of questionable moral history including Saint Mary of Egypt (Jacobus 247-51) and Saint Pelagia of Antioch (Jacobus 674-6), referred to as “harlot saints” by Coon (71-94) and “holy harlots” by Virginia Burrus (*Sex Lives* 128), live lives of subversion only to return to the Christian fold and ultimately find redemption for their sins. Early church hagiographies, as a rule, conform to the purpose of serving the church, prioritizing rhetorical stories meant to facilitate religious conversion over narrative authenticity. The facile understanding of hagiography has traditionally been that “female saints [are] models of suffering and inner spirituality, male saints [are] models of action” (Bynum, *Feast* 25).



In the twenty-first century, academics tend to read women's hagiography as though the entire corpus consists of early church sacred fiction: there is a pre-supposition that in hagiography, the women suffer and the men act. It is generally accepted that most *vitae* chronicle obedient women who are moved (voluntarily or involuntarily) by the divine, serve the church and the Lord, and are praised for their obeisance. All of this fits nicely into the saint narrative, conforms to the standard hagiographical model, and comfortably places the literature into a clear-cut genre classification. The reader knows what to expect; the *vitae* are accounts of good women who serve God. Anke Bernau provides a basic list of hagiographical literary and spiritual qualities requisite for traditional saints:

Hagiography deals with the lives of holy individuals representing a wide range of gendered lay and religious positions: male and female virgins, widows, monks, nuns and so on . . . husbands and wives are either living within chaste marriages or have numerous children, virgins are either sexually aroused and must fight temptation or have already overcome fleshly desires . . . prostitutes copulate extravagantly until they repent, often also extravagantly (Bernau 104).

#### FIRST AND SECOND WAVE HAGIOGRAPHY (PARADOXOGRAPHY)

Therein lies the problem, as the early hagiographical models are justifiably assessed and criticized for their formulaic plots that follow the structural format of the hagiographical genre (proof of holiness at a young age, demonstrations of piety, accounts of miracles) dictated by the early church, which influence the majority of first-wave hagiographical accounts. However, high medieval women's religious practice, borne of

Innocent III's call for all to engage in the *vita apostolica* as a result of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, changed the lives of pious medieval women and had a profound effect on hagiography thereafter. The subjects of the texts in the late twelfth through fourteenth centuries lived in and around the time their stories were written; they were real women who engaged in their communities. They were very different from their predecessors because they were actual, observed actors rather than vague composites of female characters drawn from an undefined period in the past. Their stories involve eyewitness accounts, recorded by visiting clergy who often witnessed these women's activities and miracles. The significance of "real" women as subjects of these narratives is that the *content* and ostensible purpose of the hagiographical account was *no longer of greater importance than the saint herself*. In second-wave hagiography, the saints take centre-stage in their respective *vitae*, enacting their physical expressions of religious piety, rebuffing clerical sanctions and living (for the most part) without fear of repercussion. Biographers attempted to keep these accounts in line with the traditional tropes of the lives of saints, but the subjects frequently leapt off the pages, their actions violating the text's presumable purpose by telling stories of religious women who were subversive and autonomous, breaking the laws of the church and transgressing social mores.

Consequently, first wave sacred fiction of the early church is an entirely separate literature that must be distinguished from second wave hagiography. Traditionally, critical readings of hagiographical literature are influenced by the genre to which the texts have been assigned, permitting scholars to treat first and second wave texts as though they are similarly formulaic, serving the same purposes. As Michel de Certeau notes, critical research by scholars is often directed by the genre in which a text is

presumed to fit. He argues that the name of a generic classification creates a set of rules that limit what the scholar can do with a work. In describing how a mystical text should be read, he argues that

the problem is not to find out if an exegetic treatise by Gregory of Nyssa is based on the same experience as a discourse later called “mystic”, nor if they are both constructed upon partially analogous rhetorical devices, but to determine what occurs in a field delimited by a *name* and within which work is being done in obedience to a relevant set of *rules*. A corpus can be considered as being the effect of the relationship between a name (which symbolizes the circumscription of a space) and rules (which specify a production), even if, as in many other cases, the name is also used to enlist earlier or different formations in the unit it isolates. (*Mystic Fable* 16)

The confines of genre are not the only restrictions to an open reading of hagiographical materials. Larry Scanlon remarks that religious *exempla* texts are too easily categorized as logocentric works stemming out of, and solely in service to, religious authority, to the detriment of the text. A closed reading of religious texts (that is, deferring to religious authority as the correct and only context) makes hagiography and other devotional texts formulaic:

Because modern scholars have considered the *exemplum* entirely dependent on established authority, they have also considered it at its most characteristic when the authority it transmits is most purely religious.  
(Scanlon 29)

But what happens when the texts are perhaps not “most purely religious”? I would suggest that second-wave hagiography concerning women saints frequently features performative self-abjection working in concert with religion to facilitate a parallel storyline for readers, detailing women’s empowerment and autonomy. A saint serves as an *exemplum* of the saving grace of God, but she may also serve as an *exemplum* of female agency. These parallel events should not render the hagiographical account confusing, but rather, they should signify a change in social mores, a subtle movement of resistance, as well as a change in the genre and readership of hagiography.

Until now, many highly-respected feminist scholars of medieval literature, it seems, have surrendered to traditional readings of women’s hagiography, declaring that most *vitae* of medieval women saints inevitably succumb to the controlling religious agendas of both church and cleric. No matter how innovative the saint’s story, numerous critics continue to read these texts as inexorable instruments of the church. I would argue that this is a kind of essentialism, understood in this context as the acceptance of the idea that all women who participate in the rituals of the church and express their faith are in some way subject to patriarchal control. While this may be the case for certain women saints, it is definitely not the case for Elizabeth of Spalbeek and Christina the Astonishing. Nor is it applicable to other women saints who use performative self-abjection to attain their goals. Therefore, I am challenging the critical “strategy of affirming fictitious commonalities amongst women” of the Middle Ages, which is regularly applied to readings of hagiographical accounts (Stone 20). Instead, my research has similarities with the perspectives of third wave feminism, which, in line with Foucault’s notion of discontinuity, finds “the gaps between dominant discourses and the

reality of women's lives" (Snyder 184). This reading puts aside pre-conceived notions about women saints, freeing the text from the confines of genre to facilitate a genuine open analysis of MS Douce 114.<sup>4</sup>

A clear delineation between "first-wave" and "second-wave" hagiography is also required in order to distinguish between the pastiche utilitarian biographies of the early church and the lives substantiated by contemporaneous witnesses. Lynda Coon has aptly classified early (first-wave) hagiography as sacred fiction; the second-wave requires an equally accurate title: I propose the descriptor "paradoxography." I would like to recruit this Byzantine concept and add further refinements in order to create a term that accurately describes second-wave hagiography. Paradoxography, a recognized literary genre until sometime in the seventh century, was dedicated to "descriptions of *mirabilia*, marvelous or miraculous objects" ("paradoxography"). I argue that women of the first wave of hagiography were employed as largely fictional objects to further a patriarchal church agenda, but in the second wave, saints engaged in performative self-abjection subvert the standard model, their *vitae* frequently featuring non-canonical, embarrassing, and inexplicable details. Flagrant spectacles of self-abjection, performed by some of these second-wave saints, is the differentiating factor between first and second wave women's hagiography. According to Kristeva, the abject can only be experienced by erasing the self in another object (*Powers* 5). In self-abjection, the deject is immersed in pursuing the object of desire—in this case, the divine—and so by this immersion "there is

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<sup>4</sup> Third-wave feminist theory builds on Judith Butler's work, in the "[deployment of] performative strategies that rely less on a dissonance between anatomical sex and gender identity. . . than on a tension between opposing discourses of gender" (Munford 271). For the purposes of this research, gender in and of itself is not the issue of contention; the *discourses* about these women saints through their *vitae* and the manner in which these texts are interpreted by academics, particularly in terms of the feminine performative, benefits from this third-wave perspective. In its most literal sense, this analysis of the MS Douce 114 aims to "unsettle essentialist narratives about dominant men and passive women" in the medieval religious world (Snyder 185).

nothing either objective or objectal to the abject” (*Powers* 9). The self-abjective woman saint exists as living *mirabilia*, a miraculous and marvelous non-object turned subject of her hagiography. But do the self-abjective serve the church? I would argue that they do not. This is the “paradox” present in the sacred biographies of the second wave, consisting of contradictory ideas within the texts: while ostensibly articulating the power of the divine, the need for redemption, and the unadulterated authority of the church, these texts involving second wave women saints acknowledge God’s authority, but have little interest in the influence of the ecclesiastical institution, and in fact, ignore or even supersede the church’s sovereign controls. It is material that stands in stark contradiction to the early church *vitae*, a literary revolution spreading the words and deeds that occurred during what Sheila Delany calls “the new piety” of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries (*Legend* xxxiii). Therefore, accounts of miraculous, marvelous women that carry contrarian messages about the church’s power and authority may be effectively understood as paradoxography.

Early hagiography concerning women, centred on the preservation and authorization of virginity based on biblical tropes, remained popular throughout the late medieval period.<sup>5</sup> But as the face of religious life changed for women in the high and late medieval periods and the age of the martyrs receded into distant history, new stories were being written, based on more contemporaneous figures. These were women whose lives could be somewhat authenticated, even if the details of their stories varied by manuscript. Monks, translators, scribes, and others who wrote accounts of medieval women saints appeared to be more interested in “matters carnal rather than spiritual”, accommodating the more prurient appetites of readers (Pedersen, “Incarnation” 75). Violent affective

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<sup>5</sup> See Coon and Wogan-Brown.

piety, self-abnegation, and sensationalism made for some of the most-read *vitae* in fifteenth-century England (Pedersen, “Incarnation” 75). As early as the late twelfth century, the popularity of outrageous tales of female saints had spawned “mystical” collections aimed at readers who sought out accounts of exceptional expressions of female spirituality: visionaries, ascetics, and those who violated the sanctions of the church by teaching, preaching, and living independent lives of personal authority. Whether these readers were pro-feminine or titillated by the notion of rogue women challenging church and societal conventions, the fact remains that there was a firm readership in place for stories of unusual spiritual practice. Aviad Kleinberg, in discussing the women of the new piety, states that

the saint’s audience did not simply observe and applaud (or boo), it shared the stage with the saint. Together saints and devotees were writing and rewriting the script of sainthood. (20)

Interest in these new and frequently unorthodox stories of extreme affective piety grew: The English Cistercian Roger of Ford visited a Cistercian house in France sometime between 1169 and 1178, from whence he sent to his abbot a copy of *Liber viarum dei* by Elizabeth of Schönau (ca. 1129-1164). The accompanying letter says,

Et quidem nescio quid de hoc opera in vestra regione censebitur; hoc autem scio quod in his nostris partibus non solum ab indoctis, sed ab ipsis episcopis et abbatibus nostris certatim et scribitur et legitur et auditor.

[Indeed I do not know how this work will be appreciated where you are, but I do know that in these parts it is eagerly copied and read and heard

not only by the unlearned but also by bishops (themselves) and our abbots.] (Kerby-Fulton, “Hildegard” 6)

The letter indicates a readership within the clergy, but more importantly, it demonstrates that these pro-feminine texts were being “copied and read and heard” by what appears to be a substantial lay audience (*indoctus*, or unlearned/unskilled); texts that were popular in Europe were being ferried to English audiences.

The turn of the thirteenth century saw a growing interest in more sensational accounts of saints and demoniacs, coinciding with the exponential growth of women’s lay spirituality (Newman, “Devout” 35). Else Marie Wiberg Pedersen argues that male hagiographers writing about female subjects in this time tended to overshadow theological and spiritual content, focusing on greater physical drama. She suggests that this turn might be attributed to conflict within the psyche of a community aligning with Siegfried Ringler’s notion of later hagiography as “monastic pornography” or Michael Goodich’s claim that it is simply medieval misogynistic sentiment at work (“Incarnation” 75-6). I contend that the textual progression toward physical drama in *vitae* developed due to a confluence of circumstances that facilitated an inadvertent three-pronged attack on religious literature in England and Europe: the laity was clamouring for access to religious texts in the vernacular; the medieval romance, written in the vernacular, was immensely popular; and Chaucer, Lydgate, Gower, and Langland (as well as Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch, among many others) were also writing in the vernacular.

As women had changed the landscape of spiritual piety through their embrace of mystical religious expression in the eleventh century, they also led the change in the language of religious literature from Latin to the vernacular, responding to the demands



of a laity, both male and female, who wanted direct access to divine knowledge. Hadewijch of Antwerp, Beatrice of Nazareth, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and other thirteenth century Beguines were in the vanguard of creating devotional vernacular works. By the early fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the English women Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe used the vernacular to express their new and unusual understandings of spirituality. This move to vernacular theology changed the face of religion; the physical affective mysticism of women (the feminine) and the intellectual, reason-based theology of men (the masculine) were joined together—and more importantly—disseminated through the feminine “mother tongue” of vernacular language (Blumenfeld-Kosinski 1-2). In the context of medieval gender roles, the vernacular itself becomes a tool of subversion, democratizing the ownership of religious information. Enabling the marginalized who were largely ignorant of Latin to write and transmit spiritual texts, the use of the vernacular removed the purview of spiritual knowledge from the ecclesiastical establishment. It was a subtle revolution, a resistance movement against the patriarchy of the church, and an egalitarian movement involving greater agency regarding faith and religious authority.

From this period emerged a specific branch of second wave hagiography, which, for my purposes, I will position as beginning in England at the end of the fourteenth century. Second wave hagiography differs from first wave in that: 1) The women in the accounts were demonstrably real people visited and documented by pilgrims and clergy, rather than being possible composites or embellishments created by the early church; 2) female subjects in these texts are far more prone to disobedience, expressing personal agency, and defying church sanctions against teaching and preaching; 3) the period from

the late fourteenth to the early sixteenth centuries marks what Anne Clark Bartlett calls the “first generation of English female readers” (7), indicating the development of a new female audience; and 4) these accounts were written in the vernacular, in itself a subversive pro-feminine (and pro-marginalized) medium which further permitted more people, especially those unschooled in Latin, to enjoy devotional literature and hagiographical accounts in greater numbers (Blumenfeld-Kosinski 1-11). In addition to these qualities of second wave hagiography, there are two vital elements that require further investigation: the use of the vernacular, and the accounts of what I term “performative self-abjection” implemented by the female subjects of the texts.

#### THE VERNACULAR

The use of the vernacular in devotional texts was an inevitability; Chaucer, Gower, Langland, and other authors were writing in the vernacular in England, and the romance, another vernacular medium, provided readers with Middle English texts accessible to all who could read. Romance, dubbed “secular scripture” by Northrop Frye,<sup>6</sup> was a medieval literary genre that ran parallel to biblical stories and accounts of saints, featuring:

an opening disruption of a state of order, followed by a period of trial and suffering, even an encounter with death, yet with a final symbolic resurrection and better restoration . . . a secular equivalent to that divine order (Cooper 5).

The vernacular had always been the vehicle of high and late medieval romance; in fact, the term “*romanz*” referred to vernacular literature clearly differentiated from Latin (Cooper 5). Romance was already accessible to the public, trading on biblical themes (or

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<sup>6</sup> For more on this concept, see Frye.

memes, as Cooper would argue) familiar to the readership. As a result, the Middle English reading public had many texts with which to engage, although most lay outside of the rubric of religious materials. The church, meanwhile, had attempted to keep scripture in its Latin form (with varying results), alongside many devotional and hagiographical accounts.<sup>7</sup> This may have been partly an effort to sustain the mystery of God's power by keeping the texts as esoteric secrets, but most surely it served to preserve the church's privilege as a higher, unchallengeable authority in relation to knowledge of the divine (Somerset 154).<sup>8</sup> As Fiona Somerset notes, the church in England was practicing a kind of "exclusionary censorship" that discriminated against readers and writers of Middle English, and continued to dig in its heels against use of the vernacular:

at the end of the fourteenth and beginning of the fifteenth century the clerical establishment was increasingly anxious to preserve these prerogatives by restricting translation into the vernacular and imposing an increasingly rigid orthodoxy on its own members' views about the possible benefits of translation (146).

Jane Chance agrees that language confers power; she argues that Latin "served as a barrier to that oneness of community and as a constant reminder of [women's] gender difference and their status as second-class citizens" (4).

Most scholars concur that early fifteenth century writers and translators of vernacular theology were caught up in a set of laws enacted through Arundel's Constitutions (1407-1409) and the Oxford Translation Debate (1402-1407) that

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<sup>7</sup> See Ullerston et al.

<sup>8</sup> "For scholars interested in analyzing similar relationships between a debased, common vernacular and an educated language used by a dominant authoritative group, this example can suggest that discussions of that vernacular within the dominant group are often more to do with how education confers power within the groups than with any of those left outside" (Somerset 154).

endeavoured to stem both the Lollard heresy and the activities of the Wycliffites, who were translating and preaching in the vernacular much to the consternation of the established church (Catto 43-4). Nicholas Watson argues that the *Constitutions* were not only aimed at the organized heretical groups, but also attempted to “limit religious discussion and writing in the vernacular” (“Censorship” 824). Use of “the vulgar tongue” for religious texts, although prohibited by the church via the *Constitutions*, was being employed to the benefit of the marginalized as manuscripts, both religious and secular, were being produced and circulated.<sup>9</sup> Use of the vernacular was one of many subversive literary strategies evident in medieval literature that challenged the dominant culture, expressing what Chance calls a “discourse of the marginalized” (18).

It is hardly a surprise that language would play an important role in the subversion of the church’s dictates, because the tradition from which these exceptional female saints (and the texts that recorded their piety) emanate is the Brabant/Liège community that provided succour for women who were part of the *frauenfrage*. Lambert le Bègue, a priest and reformer in Liège, is credited with being the father of the Beguines. He is remembered for creating vernacular translations of The Legend of St. Agnes, The Acts of the Apostles, and other religious texts for the benefit of the women who came to Liège to participate in a woman-centred religious refuge (Grundmann 193; McDonnell 72-3). For his efforts, he was charged as a heretic for “delivering the Holy Scriptures, the sacred

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<sup>9</sup> The controversy regarding vernacular translations of devotional materials and especially scripture was aimed at tamping down independent interpretations of the Bible which could lead to heretical beliefs, particularly concerning the Lollards. Anne Hudson explains the Wycliffites’ motivation for promoting translation and dissemination of a translated Bible: “Wyclif increasingly stressed the importance of a single source of authority in the church, the Bible . . . His aim that the Bible should be better known amongst the laity (an aim that was carried further by his followers) and should be regarded as the single valid form of law by every Christian, prepared the way for what his enemies regarded as social anarchy. If the Bible were accessible to all, and every man were to be his own interpreter of its precepts, then secular as well as clerical authority would come under challenge” (Hudson, “Lollards” 6).

writings, to the unworthy with his translations” (Grundmann 193). This is the community that was the home of the women featured in MS Douce 114; we might say that the tradition of transgressive gender-empowering literature began here, as many women saints and laypersons flourished in or were inspired by the Brabant/Liège Beguine experience, and many of them authored spiritual treatises, including Catherine of Siena.<sup>10</sup>

#### PERFORMATIVE SELF-ABJECTION

There have been identified thus far a number of factors that help distinguish second wave hagiography about women from its first wave analogue. The questionable and barely-tolerated implementation of the vernacular as a medium for religious texts designed to serve the marginalized, including women, leans toward the transgressive. As long as the church owned devotional literature and scripture, the clergy were positioned to be the final authorities on God and the constitution of church laws. What takes Middle English second-wave hagiography to the edge of transgression is the emphasis on performative self-abjection present in the writings about female saints of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. These subversive texts promulgate the subversive acts that inform them.

Rather than revisiting the passive martyr trope exemplified by women such as St. Margaret<sup>11</sup> and St. Lucy<sup>12</sup> in first wave hagiography, the late thirteenth century saw the

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<sup>10</sup> In terms of subversive religious literary texts, there is a tendency to view all material from a binary perspective: as a rule, men write literature keeping with the church’s sanctions, while women explore more controversial texts (Meister Eckhardt et al.), and the men who contributed to the corpus of female hagiography regularly “coloured outside the lines.” The compiler of the MS Douce 114 can arguably be understood to be a pro-feminine translator/copyist who created this manuscript about women for a reading woman.

<sup>11</sup> St. Margaret, refusing to perform a sacrifice to pagan deities, is stripped naked, burned with torches, and finally beheaded (Jacobus 400-3).

<sup>12</sup> St. Lucy, accused of being a Christian and refusing to become an apostate, is drenched in boiling oil, (unsuccessfully) burnt at the stake, and finally has a dagger thrust through her throat (Jacobus 29-32).

rise of second-wave hagiography exemplified in MS Douce 114. A new type of woman saint in literature arose out of the crisis (real or imagined) of the *frauenfrage*. Like her predecessors, she is abject in order to provide dramatic and visceral religious impact, but unlike those who came before, she is autonomous, independent, and wholly outside of the church's jurisdiction. Her abjection is self-inflicted rather than imposed externally; these performances are for the benefit of both the saint and her observers. The self-perpetuated violence is the "fulfillment of religion as sacred horror" (Kristeva, *Powers* 210), a role previously satisfied by the torture, abuse, and murder of female early church saints who had refused to give up their relationships with the Christian God and/or wed pagan men.<sup>13</sup> Instead, second wave *vitae* featured graphic violence, enacted through individual, personal, female agency. I term this performative self-abjection, articulated through acts of self-mortification, extreme asceticism, and self-inflicted bodily indignities. Abjection of the self signals purpose, intentionality, autonomy, and authority. Self-abjection perpetuates freedom; as Kristeva argues, abjection of self is "the first approach to a self that would otherwise be walled in" (*Powers* 47).

Abjection "accompanies all religious structurings," functioning within Christianity as a "threatening otherness" that continually invokes a need for purification—it is an uneasy relationship that is made manifest in Christ's passion, later replicated by numerous saints, some of whom were canonized, others who were not (*Powers* 17). Feminist scholars have readily applied Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection to saints' lives, although there is a dramatic distinction to be made between abjection and performative self-abjection. Susannah Chewning has used Kristevan abjection in her

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<sup>13</sup> See: Osbern of Bokenham, *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, Saint Faith, the Eleven Thousand Virgins, Saint Agnes, Saint Agatha, etc.

analysis of medieval religious women's *vitae*, noting that in the case of hagiography featuring abjective women, "few were written specifically for a female audience" ("Mysticism and the Anchoritic Community" 116). She notes that mystical, abjective literature, in the Kristevan tradition, is centred on the *chora*, the place where "one exists but has not yet developed a sense of self," which allows the mystic to lose herself in the divine (118). Her argument states that in abjective mysticism, there is a "feminization of the mystic," in which the mystic becomes

silent, wordless, de-humanized, completely obliterated in the presence of God in much the same way that women have often been culturally or socially obliterated by patriarchal power . . . . Before her abjection can take place, however, a woman must first construct or appropriate a subjectivity, which she can then surrender. ("Mysticism and the Anchoritic Community" 129)

Chewning's observations contribute to an appropriate application of Kristevan abjection; however, they do not apply to works about women who practice performative *self*-abjection. Self-abjective women in the examples I will explore here have a well-developed sense of self, are vocal, even loquacious, and refuse to surrender their subjectivity, even to God.

Medieval women utilizing abjection as a self-imposed otherness took control of what it meant to suffer; the outcomes were determined by she who voluntarily performed self-abjection. This is the thread of subversion: when suffering is intentionally inflicted on the self, it is a declaration of authority *per se*. The act of self-imposed physical pain was religiously correlated to Christ's suffering, and as a result, self-abjection was

grudgingly accepted by the church with the caveat *admiranda sed non imitanda* [admire, but do not imitate] (Bernardin 147; Bynum, *Metamorphosis* 51). Accordingly, the Middle English translation of Jacques de Vitry's *life* of Mary of Oignies declares, "Folowe wee hir vertues; withouten specyal priuelege, folowe maye wee not [the workes of hir vertues]" (88). The Kristevan notion of abjection explains the experience of simultaneous repulsion and fascination in the face of an external stimulus that is shocking, taking the reader beyond prescribed norms. This concept is predominantly sourced in the female body and associated with the improper or unclean. Feminist theorists have found numerous examples of this phenomenon in literature whenever a woman "disturbs identity, system, order" or evokes repugnance by way of exhibiting or replicating physical suffering, which may include the display of bodily fluids (Kristeva, *Powers* 4-5).

While scholars have made great use of the concept of abjection, there is little written about *the deject*, one who engages in abjection of the self, or as Kristeva phrases it, the one "through whom the abject exists" (*Powers* 6). In self-abjection, the catalyst is not repulsion/fascination sourced in the observer, but rather it is based in the motivations of the actor. Instead of an experience of fear by one who encounters the abject through another, the deject's impetus is one of fearlessness and agency, created when the actor (or deject) forfeits her "most precious non-objects" (*Powers* 5), the body and ego. The observer, who sees "that which is opposed to I" in the abject, stands in contrast to the deject, who dissolves the I/Other division through an outpouring of self, recalling Christ's gift of kenosis. The deject, self-directed, self-abjective, is driven by *jouissance*, experiencing a passion of violence and pain through a surrendered ego (*Powers* 9).



Kristeva charges that Christian mysticism adopted self-abjection as irrefutable evidence of “humility before God” (*Powers* 5).

Performative self-abjection is an agential, intentional activity that requires an audience; it is a dramatic and striking expression or representation that demands observers contemplate the Other. Performative self-abjection is frequently (but not necessarily) a tool of those who are otherwise disempowered, using the human body to create a discourse—a strategy employed by some medieval women in defiance of their societal marginalization (Chance 1). This discourse is enacted through the behaviour of some women saints who appear during that first wave of female spirituality in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries; it is further explored and shared as a transgressive sign of pro-feminine spirituality in the fifteenth century through second wave hagiographical accounts that appear to reach out to other women who might “identify with the marginalized culture of the feminine” (Chance 2). Self-inflicted abject defilement as mystical practice draws attention to the “boundary between the maternal semiotic authority and the paternal symbolic law” (Creed 257). Directly related to the acquisition and demonstration of power, performative self-abjectives of the second wave of hagiography pitted “the world of the mother (a universe without shame)” against “the world of the father (a universe of shame)” (Creed 255). Their efforts were sometimes successful and other times less so; nonetheless, as de Certeau notes, “there was not one postulate of this medieval world that was not touched or undermined by the radicalism of these mystics” (*Mystic* 7).

Performative self-abjection is *not* simply acting or simulation, but rather a physical, concrete, corporeal action or set of actions that evoke both the fascination and

revulsion of abjection. Judith Butler defines performativity as “the power of discourse to materialize its effects,” and it is the power of performative self-abjection that can make immediate and tangible the suffering of others, including Christ's suffering on the cross (Butler, *Bodies* 187). It also provides women with a space within which they may conduct their lives without repression. In performative self-abjection, the body is the primary tool of expression. The element of performance is pivotal; the saint's body serves as a conduit to express human and divine concepts. Take, for example, the resurrection of Christina the Astonishing; she is mortal, yet through God's power, she returns to the earthly realm to perform the suffering of sinners in Purgatory. Her actions and her being articulate the fragility of humanity and the omnipotent power of the divine simultaneously. Performative self-abjection is an exceptional, radical, and transgressive exercise in drawing the attention of others to the unmitigated power and strength of the performer/non-object, leaving a lasting impression on the observer. In the acting out of self-abjection, the woman saint disrupts the Lacanian symbolic order of meaning<sup>14</sup> in which the feminine constitutes the weak as the figure acted *upon* rather than acting *for* herself. Performative self-abjection embraces what Barbara Creed calls “the monstrous-feminine,”<sup>15</sup> positioning Kristeva's religious and historical conception of abjection in relation to the “abominations” of the feminine body, in particular, bodily wastes and corporeal alteration (252). Abjection points to a time when “a fusion between mother and nature existed; when bodily wastes . . . were not seen as objects of embarrassment and

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<sup>14</sup> The Lacanian symbolic order of meaning encompasses a social world of patriarchal ideological constructs established through language and law. The symbolic order is “the pact which links . . . subjects together in one action. The human action *par excellence* is originally founded on the existence of the world of the symbol, namely on laws and contracts” (Lacan 230). In opposition, the feminine abject “draws attention to the fragility of the law” (*Powers* 4). Creed describes female abjection as signifying “a split between two orders: the maternal authority and the law of the father” (256).

<sup>15</sup> The Monstrous-Feminine: “what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject” (Creed 251).

shame” (Creed 256). In performative self-abjection, there is a reclamation of power and a refutation of shame: “what was previously an object of disgust is no longer rejected: the women take it upon themselves” (de Certeau 38).

In the popular English translation of *Powers of Horror*, Leon S. Roudiez translates self-abjection’s motivator as “want” based on loss.<sup>16</sup> Kristeva’s French text uses the word “*manque*”<sup>17</sup> rather than *vouloir*, *désirs*, or *demander*. *Manque* translates as a want, but also a lack or a gap. The notion of lack or gap is better attuned to the notion of performative self-abjection and abjection as a whole. In the case of this translation, the use of the word “want” indicates a desire, which is certainly present in performative self-abjection and may be applied to self-abject performers: s/he *wants* to create this performance and *wants* to make a statement. However, the term *manque*, referencing both want and lack, an absence, or a gap, clarifies the motivation for abjection: women who practice performative self-abjection identify a *lack* of accessibility to the divine, to their own lives, their own bodies, and their own agency. In short, the lack or gap encompasses everything medieval women are challenging in their lives and in their society: performative self-abjection is a catalyst that facilitates authenticity, authority, influence, and personal power through incontestable and dramatic acts of affective piety. In relation to the women whose *vitae* appear in MS Douce 114, I would argue that they are not caught up in desire, but instead assertively engaged in bridging the gap of inaccessibility to power, freedom, and autonomy.

## FOUCAULDIAN DISCONTINUITY AND GENRE

<sup>16</sup> Roudiez translates: “There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded.” (5)

<sup>17</sup> Kristeva writes: “Rien de tel que l’abjection de soi pour démontrer que toute abjection est en fait reconnaissance du *manque* fondateur de tout être, sens, langage, désir” (*Pouvoir* 6).

Because second-wave hagiography does not fit the traditional hagiographical format, the accounts are often dismissed as anomalies. For example, in discussing the *vita* of Christina the Astonishing, whose history was deemed important enough to be included in the *Acta Sanctorum*, Jesuit scholar Herbert Thurston stated that her account was “utterly untrustworthy” (147). The stories of saints’ lives are full of events that are, frankly, incredible, but astounding occurrences are the essence of saints’ stories. Delahaye affirms that the fantastic was frequently employed by hagiographers in order to make a greater impression on the reader (67); Mary Carruthers states that instances of the unusual or shocking were understood in the medieval context to ensure both memory and thought by affecting emotion in the reader (201). For Thurston to dismiss one particular life, especially one written by Thomas of Cantimpré, a highly reputable member of the clergy, seems to be prejudicial. I suspect that the main problem with the account and others like it is that it does not serve the church’s agenda in the same way first-wave hagiography did. While her actions led to proselytization and conversion, Christina was too independent, too powerful, and too uncontrollable—the antithesis of the obedient, subservient pious woman.

The seemingly arbitrary dismissal of some saints’ lives over the accounts of others can be attributed to sexism. But more importantly, the fact that scholars read “anomalous” second-wave hagiography in the same manner as the “normative” first wave material may have more to do with scholars’ neglect of the jarring concept of Foucauldian “discontinuity” in a history of ideas surrounding women saints’ lives. Foucault explains how critics and historians often manipulate anomalous texts to fit pre-conceived notions of truth:

For the history of ideas, the appearance of difference indicates an error, or a trap; instead of examining it, the clever historian must try to reduce it: to find beneath it a smaller difference, and beneath that an even smaller one, and so on until he reaches the ideal limit, the non-difference of perfect continuity. (Foucault, *Archeology* 171)

Reading second-wave saints' lives in the same fashion as those of first-wave saints is an effort to uphold what Foucault calls the "perfect continuity" of a discourse regarding women's hagiography. However, history and literature do not unfold in a smooth, lateral continuity that neatly falls into historical and generic categories. Rather, it is the "phenomena of rupture, or discontinuity," frequently ignored, that reveals a great deal more about historical periods, literatures, and lives. A linear and conforming history of knowledge is antithetical to effective research. Foucault points to Gaston Bachelard's rubric of "epistemological acts and thresholds,"<sup>18</sup> explaining the damage they do to history, research, and knowledge:

they suspend the continuous accumulation of knowledge, interrupt its slow development, and force it to enter a new time, cut it off from its empirical origin and its original motivations, cleanse it of its imaginary complicities.

(*Archeology* 4)

For example, many scholars take reductionist approaches to second-wave hagiographies; rather than face the complicities and complexities of the story of Christina the Astonishing, we find instead the totalizing comment that "much of her behaviour seems

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<sup>18</sup> When both Foucault and Bachelard discuss "epistemology," they are specifically referring to "following the French practice, for reflecting on the historical conditions *under* which, things are made into objects of knowledge. It focuses thus on generating . . . knowledge and the ways in which it is initiated and maintained" (Rheinberger 2-3).

not so much saintly or idealized as just plain weird” (Newman, *Thomas* 30). In contrast, this text is a prime opportunity to examine a Foucauldian discontinuity (threshold, rupture, break, mutation) in medieval hagiography, rather than dismiss it as a freakish, non-conforming work. The text is one of translation, travel, and transformation that no longer neatly fits within the rubric of traditional hagiography, demanding further investigation. Foucault challenges readers of historical texts to refrain from reducing or ignoring unusual differences in texts; to avoid structuralist readings, one must recognize and identify unusual changes in history and literature, and move on to “the analysis of transformations” (*Archeology* 172). This requires that the reader look to the many different elements of a system and how it is altered, something which I address in explicating the changes in medieval religious life brought about by the *frauenfrage*, the *vita apostolica*, the growth in literacy, and the resultant “new” sub-genre of paradoxology/second-wave hagiography.

#### THE BLOSSOMING OF MYSTICISM AND THE MEDIEVAL *FRAUENFRAGE*

In order to fully understand the transformation of women’s hagiography after the thirteenth century, a brief overview of historical events is in order. The shift to second-wave women’s hagiography was the result of a confluence of events that contributed to dramatic changes in medieval women’s spiritual and domestic lives in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries as European women broke new ground in the expression of Christian religious piety. Thomas Aquinas inspired a movement toward religious scholasticism (*intellectus fidei*) in the late thirteenth century (McGinn 2), which would later allow male religious thinkers such as Richard Rolle and Walter Hilton to largely retreat to an interior world of spiritual reflection. This intellectual pursuit of God was inaccessible to most

women (save nobility) because education, literacy, and any kind of church authorization was generally denied them. In the face of unattainable scholasticism, medieval women began to find their own expressions of faith through extreme asceticism, performed as demonstrative, affective piety. Some found this feminine form of expression acceptable and even useful: Philip of Clairvaux, in his Latin *vita* of Elizabeth of Spalbeek, signals his approval of women communicating the gospel through visual rather than literary or oral expression (Simons and Ziegler, “Phenomenal” 124).

Men and women began to pursue religious expression in diverse ways. With the desire to embrace and imitate the suffering of Christ, a contemplative *Imitatio Christi* was being explored by male theologians and thinkers, which echoed Christ’s suffering and self-doubt in the desert. In contrast, women were beginning to manifest a direct, literal *imitatio* using their bodies as an expression of Christ’s physical suffering on the cross. Saint Francis of Assisi (ca. 1181-1226) was an exception to this gendered division of expressed spirituality; a mendicant ascetic who was visited by the stigmata, he is often hailed as the inspiration for the new piety of the thirteenth century. On the contrary, history and hagiography reveal that Francis’s asceticism was not antecedent to the demonstrative piety movement.<sup>19</sup> He was in fact operating as a contemporary mystic during the same period that saw the vibrant Beguines in Brabant/Liège creating their communities and celebrating their independent spirituality (Deanseley 151). Records of women’s exceptional acts of mystical asceticism became part of the “new” hagiography, creating a distance from the oft-retold and frequently unreliable *vitae* extant from the early church. Then, in 1215, Pope Innocent III inadvertently opened the doors to a wave of even greater female asceticism and spiritual agency through the pronouncements of the

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<sup>19</sup> Christina the Astonishing died in 1224, the year in which Francis manifested the stigmata (McGinn 50).

Fourth Lateran Council, which concerned itself with a renewed pastoral mandate and, more importantly in relation to women's spirituality, a call for the faithful to adopt the apostolic life (*vita apostolica*) (McGinn 5). This call to live as Christ and the apostles had lived was likely to have been imagined as the activity of men, not women, based on the argument that Christ and the apostles were male. In an effort to curb any outlandish religious behaviour that might be inspired by the apostolic call, the Pope also decreed that the creation of any new religious orders was forbidden.

During this time, women had very few options regarding life choices; for the most part, women were either wives and mothers or nuns (Erler 8). But in the thirteenth century there were many women without husbands, families, or monasteries in which they might seek refuge and safety. The medieval *frauenfrage* or "woman question" of how to manage what the church may have perceived as a "surplus" of single women in Europe was the result of a conflation of historical accidents. It would appear that many women wanted to adopt the *vita apostolica*, which meant that the requisite sexual purity could only be achieved by remaining unmarried. In addition, there were a number of other contributing factors that further enhanced the vast numbers of unmarried women seeking a home and security through monastic life. Because of a high mortality rate for men coupled with the deaths of men in the Crusades and other wars, widows were left behind and marriageable men were few (McDonnell 81). The many widows seeking safety and refuge in monasteries may have had an impact on the waning importance of virginity as a prerequisite for holy service. A dearth of dowry bestowments among the poor also made marriage prohibitive for many (Bowie 10), as evidenced in *Le Cartulaire de Saint-Barthémely de Béthune*, translated by Ernest McDonnell:



these counties teemed with women who were denied suitable marriage because of their own situation or that of their friends, and the daughters of respectable men, of noble and ignoble birth, desired to live in chastity but on account of numbers or the poverty of their parents were unable to do so easily. (82)

There is a very real possibility that marriage and childbearing were not desirable for many women, if the arguments on behalf of women in the Middle English *The Owl and the Nightingale* are any indication of medieval married life:

Al pat heo dep him is unwille;

Al pat heo spekep hit is him ille;

An oft hwan heo noztne misdep,

Heo hauep pe fust in hire tep. (37)

[All that she does is an annoyance to him;

All that she says is an irritation;

And often, even when she hasn't done anything wrong,

She gets his fist in her teeth.]

What could be done with all these unmarried and widowed women? Women's monasteries associated with the Cistercians, Dominicans, and Franciscans were filled beyond capacity – they became so overcrowded that before long only wealthy families offering substantial donations could afford to place their daughters. The need for accommodation of unmarried women was so great that in 1216 Pope Honorius III allowed that they would be permitted to join unspecified “pious communities” (Grundmann 139). Clearly, the “astonishing number” of unmarried women flocking to

the religious life had to be accommodated in some fashion, even though Honorius was violating the church's sanction against new religious communities declared just one year previously (Grundman 139). Religious women found opportunity in the midst of such chaos; the result of this perfect storm was a unique first Christian women's movement, realized largely through a religious lay order known as the Beguines.

This movement spawned what Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker describes as "religious careers" for women who began to explore their spirituality; many adopted the strict asceticism documented by hagiographers of the period ("Prime of their Lives" 215). Some female saints and would-be saints participated in dramatic and debilitating acts of self-denial encompassing *anorexia mirabilis* (extreme fasting), refraining from sleep, engaging in self-flagellation and self-humiliation, subjecting their bodies to all manner of physical agonies. The heart of this movement developed in the Low Countries, in Liège and Brabant, where loosely-knit Beguine communities provided safety, shelter, and independent work opportunities for religious laywomen (McDonnell 84). As de Certeau points out, the origin of religious mysticism is forged in times of marginalization: "they were trapped there by a *radical* situation to which they responded with utmost seriousness" (*Heterologies* 86). The women of the *frauenfrage* were faced with the problem of finding safety and security; they turned it into an opportunity. Out of this movement came saints such as Beatrice of Nazareth, Catherine of Siena, Lukardis of Oberweimer, Mechthild of Magdeburg and many other women of note.

The *frauenfrage* may have been a problem for the church and the larger society, but it was an occasion for widowed and unmarried women who sought out a life of piety to live largely unencumbered by male church officials. The "chronic shortage of

institutional provision for women” resulted in a blossoming of the *mulieres religiosae*, religious women who joined lay orders usually unaffiliated with the church (Wogan-Brown, Henneau 12). In this time and place the Beguines were afforded a greater personal freedom, including the ability to express their spiritual piety with much less outside interference. Contemplative, solitary, cloistered piety was rejected by many in favour of a performative, public, and very individualistic practice in the midst of a thriving "matristic" Beguine religious community in Liège where women enjoyed greater self-sufficiency and economic opportunity (Wogan-Brown and Henneau 4).

The thirteenth-century religious renaissance saw women become extraordinarily creative (and shockingly demonstrative) regarding their expressions of religious faith. The church was dismissive and suspicious of women who engaged in this type of religiosity, and that suspicion remains to this day; even Bernard McGinn refers to the *mulieres religiosae* as “experiments in female mysticism,” as he dismissively asserts that “the reasons for the dramatic change in the place of women in the new mysticism that began in the thirteenth century continue to puzzle historians” (153). He further argues that roles of women in lay orders were “carefully circumscribed” and “did not usually include a case for women functioning as teachers of contemplative wisdom or mystical theology” (155). But the fact is that there is no “puzzle” about how these circumstances occurred, as large numbers of women simply created their own communities of support at a time when societal constraints could not accommodate them. As for McGinn’s claim that lay women had no case for serving as teachers of mystical theology, the evidence of this very thing is found in an age of iconic female mystics and religious practitioners: Hildegard of Bingen; Catherine of Siena, a Doctor of the Church; Beatrice of Nazareth,

considered the earliest female author of mystical literature (McGinn 166); Marguerite de Porete, whose *Mirror of the Soul* resulted in a charge of heresy resulting in her being burned at the stake in 1310 (Kerby-Fulton, *Books* 7); and many others who taught, preached, and discussed theology without the church's approval. Granted, some, such as Marguerite de Porete, were punished, but many were not. Like McGinn, many other scholars repeatedly cite the injunctions the church issued against women, yet the disobedience of pious women was not all that unusual for its time. The many hagiographies written by male biographers and devotional writings by women indicate that a revolution was indeed occurring as women stepped forward to actively participate in and even lead not only women, but also men, in religious observance; from Catherine of Siena to Christina the Astonishing, women were taking roles proscribed by the church. The historical narrative has repeatedly affirmed that women of this time were oppressed; yet, the extant documents reveal an active movement of women who were rarely, if ever, beholden to the church's mores.

Further, there are two factors (among many others) that rendered the church practically impotent in its efforts to control these women: first, many of these mystical women had the strong support of their communities. Because mystics placed great importance on serving their communities, close bonds developed between religious women and their neighbours (J. Ward 202); communities pursued canonisation for local saints which elevated the status of the town and its citizens (Kleinberg 27). The second factor is that these women were so charismatic, so commanding, and even intimidating, their *ex-gratia* religious authority frequently transcended the church's institutional *ex-officio* influence. That is, the church had imbued upon itself the religious authority *ex-*

*officio*, defined as “an officially sanctioned authority granted by the church,” while select women of established monasteries as well as the lay orders had acquired authority *ex-gratia* by exhibiting “a direct privileged relation with God which enabled them to exert leadership” (Mulder-Bakker, “Soft Face of Power” 153). It would seem obvious that a direct, privileged relation with God would trump any institutional award of power from mere men; this is likely why the church was uneasy with women expressing affective piety publicly, and why the *probatio* was frequently employed in order to investigate women making claims of divine knowledge of God outside the supervision of a confessor. As long as the notion of *ex-gratia* existed, the stable, familiar institutional control of spiritual power was precarious; to have this precariousness unintentionally imposed by women who were often not members of approved monasteries (Cistercian, Benedictine, etc.) must have made church officials nervous.

Opponents to these women’s religiosity were everywhere. As Herbert Grundmann notes, William St. Amour, an advocate of church hierarchy and tradition, argued vociferously against the lifestyle of the Beguines:

the entire nature and activity of these religious women was hateful to this reactionary enemy of the religious movement of his day, from the name used for this form of religious life, *beguinagium*, through their new way of talking, all the way to the arrogance of their pride in voluntary poverty and their intolerance of the possessions and wealth of others. (141)

In 1311, the Council of Vienne came together to issue a decree that called on Beguines to abandon their practice:

There are certain women, commonly called beguines who, although they promise no one obedience and neither renounce property nor live in accordance with an approved rule, and consequently can in no wise be considered regulars, nevertheless wear a so-called beguine habit . . . Some of them as if possessed with madness, dispute and preach about the Highest Trinity and divine essence and in respect to the articles of faith and sacraments of the Church spread opinions that are contradictory to the Catholic faith . . . . Therefore, after hearing frequently from these and others about their perverted principles on account of which suspicion has rightfully fallen on them, we believe that we must, with the approval of the holy council, prohibit forever their status and abolish them completely from the church of God. We must forbid these and all other women, on pain of excommunication which we wish to impose forthwith on the recalcitrant, to retain in any way in future this status which they perhaps have long assumed or to be allowed to accept it again in any form. Moreover the aforesaid regulars who are said to promote these women in the status of the beguinage or induce them to assume this status are strictly forbidden, on pain of like excommunication . . . . to admit any women who long ago adopted the status in question of perhaps wish to adopt it again . . . . Against the preceding regulations shall no privilege prevail. (qtd. in McDonnell 524)

It is this narrative which dominates most discussions of the Beguines, both historically and in the historiography. However, there is another side to this story. Research reveals

that there were many proponents of these rogue women, most notably of course, cleric Jacques de Vitry, who was invested in supporting and developing women's spirituality.

While this movement, or awakening, of women's spirituality was powerful, innovative, and exciting, it was short-lived. From 1216, when Honorius allowed that women could join unsanctioned religious communities, until 1250, when the last beguinage was forced into cloister by the church, controversy and suspicion regarding Beguines remained constant (Dillon 120). But what an age it had been – women had changed the history of female Christian spirituality. Even though the church clamped down on these independent spiritual practitioners, the genie was out of the bottle. Subversive, pro-feminine expressions of faith may have been tamped down, but out of that religious awakening grew another movement: a literary revolution, expounding on the tales of renegade female saints with immense personal agency, intimate knowledge of God, and an agential praxis that defied the church. The net effect was a cultural change spawned by women's subversive expressions of faith, disseminated through a network of pro-feminine readers interested in vernacular sacred texts for women and about women.

#### PROTEST AND AUTHORITY

De Certeau argues that religious mysticism was most certainly an act of dissent, borne of crumbling institutions and a church that forced exile, exclusion, and isolation upon medieval women (*Mystic* 24). Correspondingly, the literature of dissenting religious mysticism evolved into a body of paradoxical works, ostensibly serving the church's purposes, while simultaneously confronting and violating the church's teachings:

[mystical religious literature], therefore, has all the traits of what it both opposes and posits: it is the trial, by language, of the ambiguous passage

from presence to absence. It bears witness to the slow transformation of the religious setting into an amorous one, or of faith into eroticism. It tells how a body “touched” by desire and engraved, wounded, written by the other, replaced the revelatory, didactic word. (*Mystic 5*)

There is a tendency to think of the change in hagiography and protest as directly attributable to medieval female writers—Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, Marie de France, Marguerite de Porete—as they inverted and subverted masculine ideals, allowed the feminine to dominate the masculine, and embraced autonomy (Chance 18). But this change was also facilitated by male writers telling the stories of women saints. These women saints wrote with their bodies and their actions, attracting allies to their wholly feminine performances of spirituality. Scholars frequently point to women writing about their spiritual experiences as the only “true” pro-feminine accounts, while all other texts are presumed to reflect only the patriarchal perspective. Some may presuppose that the male voice writing the female experience simply appropriates and shapes the information to suit the needs of the author (and by extension the church); however, I would argue that many male biographers engaged in a partnership of sorts with their subjects, functioning as unwitting (or willing) servants, allies, and messengers for these women. That is, while the men may have believed they were dutifully recording stories of saints' *exempla*, they were actually preserving and transmitting acts of subversion and transgression dressed as pure, affective piety. This is especially true of the women of MS Douce 114. If we consider that these women were powerful, dynamic, charismatic figures, it is understandable that the men who were first attracted to the scenes of these women's shocking acts of performative self-abjection were likely invested in recording their stories



for posterity. It would be reasonable to think that male observers could be swept away by the intensity of their subjects' performances of piety. De Certeau describes these male allies in generalities, but it is easy to think of Thomas of Cantimpré, Jacques de Vitry, or one of the many translators who worked in Carthusian monasteries in England as wise men who sought out even wiser women from whom they might learn more about the divine:

learned clerics became exegetes of female bodies, speaking bodies, living Bibles spread here and there in the countryside or in the little shops, ephemeral outbursts of the "Word" erstwhile uttered by a whole world. A humbled theology, after having long exercised its magistracy, expected and obtained from its other the certainties that eluded it. (*Mystic* 26)

These women saints held power and authority. The literature that retold their legacies also had power, suggesting a cultural authority exercised by women through unusual religious expression; it further suggests a body of readers who experienced empathy and related to the idea of empowered, authoritative female character(s) in a text.

#### OSBERN OF BOKENHAM

The Middle English corpus of saints' lives in particular provides us with a few strong examples of these second wave narratives commemorating a new literary and spiritual women's movement. Readers of Middle English hagiography recounting the lives of women saints who gained prominence during the spiritual awakening of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries will find evidence of a direct continuity between Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 114, a prime example of pro-feminine agential hagiography, and *The Booke of Margery Kempe*, indicating a change in spiritual and literary practices

for women in the fifteenth century. During this time, literary accounts of saints were in flux, moving from the Augustinian model<sup>20</sup> to a more humanistic account of religious experience (Scanlon 84). As Bernard McGinn explains, late medieval hagiographies concerning women collapsed the hierarchical Augustinian ladder of religious revelation, folding physical, spiritual, and intellectual experiences of the divine into one single expression of divine intervention (155). In addition, vernacular literature began to challenge the previously unassailable character of the church; Chaucer led the charge with his anti-clerical descriptions of the Pardoner, the Friar, and the Summoner. The literature of religious devotion was becoming more porous.

The evolution in hagiography and the interest in subversive female saints is clearly evidenced in the work of fifteenth-century writer Osbern of Bokenham, whose *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* (ca. 1447) is a compilation of hagiographical accounts in the tradition of *Legenda Aurea* (*The Golden Legend*) and the *Early South English Legendary*. Critics and scholars praise Osbern's pro-feminine initiative in composing the text, and speak highly of the many female patrons involved in selecting the saints who are featured in the work. His *Legendys* is credited with "modeling a core set of sound moral and social values" reliant on traditional sanctity tropes (Horobin 936).

What is neglected is the bellwether nature of the text, which clearly demonstrates contemporaneous changes in hagiography about women in the fifteenth century. The collection features thirteen accounts of women saints. Of these, ten stories are first-wave vernacular translations of formulaic traditional early church "sacred fictions"; they

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<sup>20</sup> Bernard McGinn explains the Augustinian model of sainthood and hagiography relied on "special divine action," facilitating 1) "corporeal visions;" 2) "spiritual visions (i.e., images given interiorly to the soul);" 3) "intellectual visions, which constitute an immediate grasp of infallible divine truths" (*The Flowering of Mysticism* 155).

recount the frequently-violent martyrdoms of virginal women who refuse to marry heathen men or worship pagan deities. In addition, there is the *vita* of Mary Magdalen, which plays on the traditional trope of the repentant and redeemed “Holy Harlot” turned ascetic, and the story of St. Anne which is ontological, accounting for the pure birth of the Virgin Mary (Burrus, *Saving* 128). In contrast to the martyrs, Mary Magdalen and the Virgin die good deaths after lives of service to Christ. Together, these twelve stories observe hagiographical conventions, recounting age-old tales originating from a distant time in the church’s past, demonstrating a “depiction of the saints . . . almost always established within a dialectic which shows the difficulty of following the Christian virtues” (Heffernan 153). But the final *vita* in the *Legendys* is emblematic of an interest in autonomous women in the fifteenth-century contemporary sphere in the “Lyf of S. Elyzabeth”. Unlike the other saints, this Elizabeth, more commonly known as Elizabeth of Hungary, is a more contemporary figure (d. 1231), whose story typifies the original female mysticism movement of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries.<sup>21</sup> Gone is the passive female martyr/servant figure who struggles with Christian virtues contained in the other twelve stories in Osbern’s collection – instead we find a woman of agency who directs her life with “vygylyis & dyscyplyny” (Osbern 274). Born to privilege and nobility in her native Hungary, Elizabeth chooses voluntary poverty; she engages in the hallmarks of intense asceticism through food and sleep deprivation; she not only inflicts pain upon herself, but also orders her maidservants to “betyn [her body] wyth greth violence” (268). Forced to marry, she demands a chaste union, only to persuade her husband to go to the

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<sup>21</sup> There is some controversy regarding the identity of this Elizabeth; Alexandra Barratt has argued that Elizabeth of Hungary is actually Elizabeth of Töß. See Barratt, “The Revelations of St. Elizabeth.”

Holy Land to fight in the Crusades. She is seemingly untroubled by his impending death, given that he will surely go to heaven as a result of his efforts:

In pat holy iourne happe for to deye,  
 If he be clene he goth a sykyr weye  
 To heuenuarde, for he may not fayle.  
 Wherefore, husbonde, I you counsel & Preye  
 For soule hele forsake not pis trauayle. (274)

The text also reveals a larger issue found in fifteenth-century hagiographies written by men about women: in writing about agential, powerful women, the writers begin to struggle with the reconciliation of gender-based Christian ideals and the actual behaviours of the women, which are frequently in ideological conflict. We begin to see biographers and other writers attempting to “contain” the material and control the subject in order to serve the church and maintain social sanctions. But it would seem that the subject herself, even in the hands of the most capable author, still manages to wrest free of the cultural and religious intent of the account, providing another narrative just below the surface: these women live autonomously, powerfully, independently, agentially. We see this clearly in Osbern’s account of Saint Elizabeth as he attempts to paint her as an ideologically-appropriate submissive: “A mekere creatur no where pan she” (265) he declares, describing her as a model of womanly sainthood: “O uery mekenesse! O blyssyd obedience!” (267). Osbern cites the fact that Elizabeth submitted to beatings from one Master Conrad for failing to attend one of his sermons as proof of her servile nature. Yet much of her behaviour is recounted as a conspicuous contradiction of the saintly meek and obedient woman model. For example, alongside her asceticism and

personal sacrifice, she efficiently dispatches her husband (who is a threat to her virginity and religious practice) without a tear as she persuades him to join the Crusades in the Holy Land. Bidding him farewell she says:

But why y now shuld wepe in ony wyse  
 Resonable cause kan I noon se,  
 Syth I se pe goon to doon hym seruise  
 Whom I loue in most souereyn degree (275).

It is a passive mariticide that recalls David's dispatch of Bathsheba's husband Uriah (2 Sam. 11). More contemporaneously, the reader may be reminded of Margery Kempe's plea to God for relief from her husband's carnal demands, to which God promises that if she will fast on Fridays, He will "soddenly sle pin husbonde" (*The Booke of Margery Kempe* 21).

The resultant death of Elizabeth's husband the Landgrave (while engaged in the Crusades) reduces her to poverty and in her widowhood a marriage to an uncle, the Bishop of Bamberg, is arranged for her. It is abundantly clear that she does not want to be wed yet again. Traditionally, in hagiographical accounts of marriage-shy women, the subject declares she is a spouse of Christ (e.g. Osbern's accounts of Agnes and Dorothy), prays heartily to God, and is protected through some sort of divine intervention. Elizabeth, on the other hand, once again contradicts Osbern's characterization of obedience, failing to passively await persecution or alternately await a divine rescue from marriage. She is not St. Wilgefortis/Uncumber, who begs God to make her unattractive so

she may remain a virgin;<sup>22</sup> instead, Elizabeth promptly takes charge of the situation, threatening to disfigure herself if marriage is forced upon her:

And yf I noon opir wyse may me sure make,  
Kuttyn of my nose I shal in here presence;  
Þan me so dyfformyd no man shal wyl take. (277-78)

Although she is not given cause to follow through, as her desire to remain unencumbered by a spouse is accepted, her threat of performative self-abjection takes her agency to another level; using only her body as a vessel of power, she maintains her autonomy while avoiding the censure of the church. Julia Kristeva, in her *Powers of Horror*, sees Elizabeth as the epitome of self-abjection: “Mystical Christendom turned this abjection of self into the ultimate proof of humility before God, witness Elizabeth of Hungary who ‘though a great princess, delighted in nothing so much as abasing herself’” (5). And of course, this self-abjection is thoroughly performative, earning her the respect and authority to reject marriage and live her life as she so chooses.

OXFORD, BODLEIAN LIBRARY MS DOUCE 114 (SC #21688)

In the fifteenth century, a second confluence of events parallel to those that fostered the Beguine movement and its associated passion for affective piety occurred. It facilitated, in the face of crisis, yet another opportunity for women religious. A literary revolution was taking place. The Great Schism in the church (1378-1417) led to a weakening of the institution’s previously unchallengeable façade (Oakley 55-70). The aftermath of plagues and famines sparked questions of theodicy and further undermined the church’s autocratic authority (Bell 742). In England, literary dissent in a religious

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<sup>22</sup>See Friesen.

vein had appeared as a result of the 1381 Peasants' Revolt (Copeland, *Rhetoric* 111). The Wycliffites were encouraging women preachers and the Free Spirit heresy was yet another contentious battleground for the magisterium (Kerby-Fulton, *Books* 247-249). The church was clearly engaged in a struggle to control religious thought and revelatory writing. At the same time, the body of women readers was growing, as was a pro-feminine literary patronage (Jambeck 228-9). In this context, the second wave of hagiography was born as English translations of women saints' lives become an unwieldy subject for the fifteenth-century biographer. The radical ascetic practices that grew out of the mystical renaissance of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries resulted in counter-cultural *lives* that recounted women behaving in direct opposition to social and church mores. Writers were forced to struggle as they attempted to fit these women into traditional hagiographical models. Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 114 typifies second-wave hagiography and its movement away from traditional saintly signposts. Jennifer Brown, author of *The Three Women of Liège*, the critical edition of the saints' lives included in the manuscript, invites readers to seek out the gaps in which the authors drift from standard hagiographical tropes, creating Foucauldian discontinuities in the text that demand further examination (4). There are plenty of interstices in these *vitae*, evident in the instances when these women disrespect the clergy, steal from others, give absolution, preach, and act out; yet, as we have seen with Osbern's Elizabeth of Hungary, bad behaviour is continually contradicted with conflicting praise about subservience and meekness.

Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 114 was compiled in England, at the Beauvale Carthusian Library, where anonymous monks translated the texts from Latin

into Middle English and compiled the codex sometime during the second quarter of the fifteenth century (Vander Veen 38). Inscribed in the manuscript is a note which states the work belongs to the Carthusians of Beauvale Priory in Nottinghamshire. The proof of provenance is written on the final page of the manuscript, which states: “Beuwall. Iste liber est domus Belle Vallis ordinis Cartusiensis in comitatu Notyngham” (Brown, *Three Women* 15). Jennifer Brown has catalogued the physical details of the manuscript in her critical edition of the *vitae* in MS Douce 114. She states that it is plain, devoid of “illustration, illumination, or marginalia” (*Three Women* 14). Written on vellum, the manuscript has a contemporary leather binding, and is 15 centimetres by 20 centimetres with 150 folios. Brown explains the distribution of the folios as follows:

[T]he *vita* of Elizabeth of Spalbeek, fols 1<sup>r</sup> – 12<sup>r</sup>, the *vita* of Christina Mirabilis, fols 12<sup>r</sup> – 26<sup>v</sup>, and the *vita* of Marie d’Oignies, fols 26<sup>v</sup> – 76<sup>r</sup> – a letter written by Stephen of Siena (1347-1424) in support of the canonization of Catherine of Siena, fols 76<sup>r</sup> – 89<sup>v</sup>; and *The Seuene Poyntes of Trewe Loue and Euerlastyng Wisdame*, fols 89<sup>v</sup> – 148<sup>r</sup>. (*Three Women* 14-15)

The manuscript is written in a “late Anglicana formata influenced by secretary.” Laurel Braswell has determined that two scribes produced the codex, one writing the majority of the content; the other appears to be responsible for fols. 89<sup>v</sup> – 109<sup>r</sup> (43). Some scholars have dated this text somewhere in the first quarter of the fifteenth century, but Brown argues that it was likely written between 1420 and 1450, based on the Middle English translation of *The Seuene Poyntes of Trewe Wisdom*, which is dated 1419 (*Three Women* 15).



The text has inconsistencies that Brown has attributed to the mistranscription of English, rather than the mistranslating of Latin, based on her position that Douce 114 is a copy of works that were previously translated into Middle English. Each of the five parts of the text opens with a cursory translator's apology, which, according to Brown, suggests that each was translated separately and then compiled into the MS Douce 114 (*Three Women* 15). Brian Vander Veen argues that the content, meaning the three individual *vitae*, the letter, and the version of *The Seuene Poyntes*, which had all been circulating separately in a number of other Latin and vernacular manuscripts, was selected and compiled based on "thematic similarities" (4). Brown concurs, affirming that each part of the work focuses on a particular manner in which piety is expressed through mystical experiences of the divine (16). Brown provides a detailed list of Latin original manuscripts in which one or more of the three saints' lives is included, and notes that only the St. John's MS 182, written in Latin, contains the three lives in their entirety. She argues that St. John's MS 182 and MS Douce 114 are from a common source, sharing similar errors but also featuring a number of differing redactions and variations. While the two manuscripts are related, Brown asserts that the Douce manuscript could not have been copied from the St. John's because MS 182 is actually dated to the mid-fifteenth century, which means it was most likely written after MS Douce 114 (14).

The codex begins with the account of Elizabeth of Spalbeek written by cleric Philip of Clairvaux; she is the most contemporary, but also least known, living from 1246 to 1304. A *muliere religiosa*, Elizabeth literally re-enacts the Passion daily for spectators. During these exhibitions, she smashes her head on the ground, repeatedly punches and slaps herself, sings, goes into trances, and holds herself in the position of Christ on the

cross for hours in acts of “merueilous and myserabil discipline” (Philip 37). Her subversive performance of a male figure, and at that, the figure of Christ, is shocking in itself. Independent and free of a confessor, she demonstrates autonomy and religious authority *ex-ipsa*.

The *vita* of Christina the Astonishing (1150-1224), written by Thomas of Cantimpré, is even more violent, more transgressive, and features a greater shock factor. Christina’s death-defying acts warning of the suffering to be found in Purgatory combined with her uncontrollable nature make her a fearsome creature. She demonstrates her unimpeachable authority and impervious body by hanging herself, walking in frozen streams for days at a time, and immersing herself in boiling water.

The final *vita*, which tells the story of Mary of Oignies (1170-1213), changes the tone of the manuscript. As the most famous of the three, her *vita* was written by Jacques de Vitry, a high-profile cleric and friend to Thomas of Cantimpré. The lives of Elizabeth and Christina are powerful accounts of authoritative women who engage in performative self-abjection free of church interference or social sanction; the story of Mary is that of a woman who attempts to live a life of dedicated performative self-abjection, but who is stage-managed out of her intentions by her confessor, Jacques de Vitry. It is as if the construction of the manuscript suggests that women may express piety in extraordinary ways, but only a confessor can make a woman a saint.

The manuscript follows these three saints’ lives with a letter from Stephen of Siena, recommending Catherine of Siena for canonization, which oddly minimizes much of her radical ascetic practice, instead focusing on her diplomatic and intellectual skills. The letter is followed by a Middle English translation of Henry Suso’s (1300-1366)

popular *Orologium Sapientiae* or *The Seven Poyntes of Trewe Wisdom*, which serves as a type of conduct treatise in dialogic form, instructing the faithful on how to best engage in the worship of Christ.

This manuscript was compiled for a noble lady, according to Brown, indicating female readership and an effort to pair stories of women saints with devout women (17). Jocelyn Wogan-Brown and Marie-Élizabeth Henneau agree with Brown's assessment (16), based on the introductory dedication in the MS Douce 114's version of the *Orologium Sapientiae*:

My moste worschipful lady aftir zowre hyz worpynesse, derrest-loued goostly douzhter after zour virtuous meekness, y, zower trewe chapeleyne, vnworthy pe name of pe fader, considerynge powre excellente wisdame bothe to god and to pe worlde and felynge by experiens by the sparcles of gostly communicacyon. (Horstmann, *Orologium* 325)

However, Brian Vander Veen points out that this same dedication appears in a minimum of five other manuscripts that contain copies of the *Orologium*, and argues that while MS Douce 114 could very well have been prepared for a noble woman or nun, there is no proof for such a conclusion (4).

Also of note is the apology by the “compyloure” following the letter recommending Catherine of Siena for canonization. It accounts for the removal of some scriptural references in the Latin versions of the *vitae* because the readership, he suggests, might not understand the complicated biblical references and commentaries:

A shorte Apologetik of this Englisshe compyloure:

Seynt James the Apostil seith that whoso synneth not in tunge, hee is a parfite man. Wherefore the turner of this englysshe, that is not but simply vndirstandyng, as here the soth preueth, lowely and mekely (besecheth) alle men and wymmen that in happe redith or herith this englyshe, that they be not ouer-capcyous ne curious in ful many clauses and variauns of stile and alle-so vnsuyng of englyshe, as vmwhile sotheren, otherwhile northen – but the cause why, nedith not to be tolde; and specially he besecheth lettird men and clerkes, if they endeyne to see thes bokes, that they wol be fauorabil and benigne reders or herers of this englyshe and forgif hym alle defautes that he hath made in compilyng there-of, rather arettyng his lewdnesse to simple ignorauns and obedyens thanne to pryde or presumpcyone. For wite alle men that he the whiche drewe this englyshe, so as (it) is, oute of latyne, knowyng his owne sympilnesse and vnkonyng, durst not haue presumed to take sicke a labour on hand, but if his souereyn hadde bidden hum, whome he myghte no ageyne-seye.

(Horstmann, *Prosalegenden* 195-6)

While the apology is somewhat standard for Carthusian translations and similar statements can be found in the introduction for each of the three *vitae*, there is also a sense that the compiler is attempting to distance himself from the extraordinary content of the manuscript.

The order of the material suggests that readers may marvel at the amazing tales of Elizabeth and Christina, who were never canonized, followed by Mary's *life* which demonstrates that when an ascetic woman adheres to the teachings of the church and her

confessor, her behaviours may be curbed but she is more likely to be recognized officially by the church. In Mary's case, she does achieve beatification, but is never officially made a saint. The letter regarding Catherine of Siena, which recommends her ultimately successful canonization, illustrates the lesson that an ascetic who is obedient to the church will ultimately achieve full sainthood. Finally, the *Orologium Sapientiae* essentially refutes the more extravagant behaviours of the three women featured in the manuscript, affirming the text's subtle caution that readers may admire these putative saints but must refrain from imitating them. A discussion of these issues in greater detail occurs in chapter four.

There are numerous errors in the translation of the entire MS Douce 114 (Brown, *Three Women* 15), and there are also a number of substantial excisions of material found in the Latin *vitae*. Rebecca Clouse comments that "the translator, or compiler, of Douce 114 has made some astonishing editorial decisions," noting that according to the Bollandists' Latin text, the Middle English version is missing over 125 lines of material (89). She finds the Middle English translation a "troubled" manuscript:

Is Douce 114 a faulty translation or a censored one, a compilation shaped by a flawed original, by the writer's modesty, ignorance, or anticipation of an ignorant audience, limited supplies of time or materials, or an ideological bias advantageous to English medieval religious women? (90)

Given the Carthusians' fascination with mystical women and their exploits, and taking into consideration the excision of biblical references found especially in the life of Elizabeth of Spalbeek, I argue that the manuscript tells the stories of three outrageous putative saints for a pro-feminine readership seeking out accounts of exceptional women

while engaging in a small subversive rebellion against the ever-greater limitations placed on women in the fifteenth century. These women are atypical and have been grouped together for this reason: they are Salih's female "superheroes" (1).

Nonetheless, there is a tendency to simply group these unusual women with other saints of their day. For example, Elizabeth Spearing states that women saints, including Hildegard of Bingen, Christina of Markyate, Bridget of Sweden, and the Three Women of Liège, as Jennifer Brown refers to them (Elizabeth, Christina, and Mary of Oignies), are alternately prophetic, mystic, apocalyptic, meditative, or enact *imitatio Christi* with the intent of "imitating Christ and purg[ing] sin through various kinds of bodily suffering" (viii). The women of MS Douce 114 can be understood to be participating in this taxonomy of saints' purposes, but only when the manuscript is read uncritically. Distinguishing the points at which the authors cast their own interpretations on the acts of these women leads to a very different reading, which does not support these assertions.

Some academics recognize that the Three Women of Liège do not fit the mold of their spiritual counterparts, but only go so far as to admit that their *vitae* stray from the traditional formulas without closely exploring the texts for details: for example, Dyan Elliott confirms that Christina's life "does not conform to any recognized hagiographical paradigm" (*Proving Woman* 193) but does not explain why; I agree with Walter Simons' opinion that asceticism in the Beguine movement contained a performative aspect, but he does not distinguish between mystic performances and the non-mystic self-abjective performances contained in MS Douce 114 (*Reading* 10-23). Amy Hollywood rightly argues that women's somatic religious praxis is shaped to conform to male hagiographers' agendas, but she does not mention MS Douce 114's textual

counterexamples, which are prodigious (*The Soul* 25-36). As I argue, the *lives* of these women subvert the traditional hagiographical mold through a performative piety focused on the material world.

## THE CARTHUSIANS

The home of MS Douce 114 was the Carthusian house at Beauvale, Nottinghamshire, established in 1343. It was one of nine Carthusian Charterhouses in England dedicated to the production of vernacular devotional literature (Beauvale). Each priory housed approximately 29 inhabitants: a prior, 12 monks, and perhaps 16 lay-brothers (Sargent 240; Vander Veen 34). In spite of these small numbers, the output of mystical literature from these Charterhouses was prodigious, as the popularity of mystical texts rose alongside the number of financial donations and bequests from nobles and the growing literate class (Vander Veen 37). Their work was genre-specific, indicated by their receipts and extant manuscripts which demonstrate a focus on material “that helped them better understand the mystical life that they endeavoured to enter, rather than those works that elucidated for them the finer points of theology” (Vander Veen 34-6).

A contemplative order focused on compiling, copying, and binding manuscripts in monasteries, the English Carthusians were responsible for producing a staggering number of devotional materials, the cynosure being exceptional mystical texts. Their translation and manuscript production output included numerous vernacular works about women, copied specifically for women (Brown, *Three Women* 11). The Carthusians appear to have had a great enthusiasm for disseminating texts about female mystics as well as circulating treatises written by male mystics such as Henry Suso and Richard Rolle. Their extant catalogue of mystical works includes numerous seminal and popular

devotional works, including Jan van Ruysbroeck's *De Perfectione Filiorum Dei*, translated by the Carthusians as *The Treatise of Perfection of the Sons of God*, and the translation of *The Chastising of God's Children* (Sargent 229). Vander Veen cites a list of books collected by the Carthusian Witham Charterhouse during the last half of the fifteenth century, which lists Elizabeth of Schönau's *Revelations*, Mechthild of Hackeborn's *Book of Special Grace*, and other devotional works attributed to Catherine of Siena and Bridget of Sweden (8).

It would appear that the Carthusians were sometimes critical of the Latin texts they received and frequently redacted, intermixed, and generally altered the original source materials. For example, the Carthusians seem to have taken liberties with translations of Richard Rolle's texts, emending dedications and criticizing his work as theologically misleading (Sargent 231). Michael Sargent has catalogued a number of mystical works altered by Carthusian translators/compilers; these may be ascribed to translation errors, copy errors, intentional redactions, or other explanations, but it is clear that mistakes and poetic license both had an impact on their mystical literary output (234-5).

Beauvale Priory's contribution to the corpus of Middle English hagiography concerning women was not isolated; vernacular literature in this golden age included accounts of some of the most outrageous women mystics in all of Europe. As Kathryn Kerby-Fulton declares, "these English works were not, as we now know, simply translations; they were creative and editorial reshapings" (*Books* 16). To this mix of possible literary variations, we must also add the concept of *mouvance*, which recognizes that each time a manuscript is produced, changes occur in the text (Zumthor 70-5). These



changes cannot be solely attributed to the errors of copyists; many scholars assert that manuscript culture produced works that are simply “less stable” than printed literature and are characteristically “mosaic-like” in their assembly, particularly when the manuscript is a *compilatio* (Sturges 3).<sup>23</sup> These editorial reshapings and effects of *mouvance* are clearly evident in the *vitae* of MS Douce 114. Each saint’s life has been altered in comparison with previous Latin versions (some changes are subtle, others not), which may possibly be attributed to the reasons listed above, although it is difficult to ascertain what may or may not have contributed to the final version of any manuscript. In the *vitae* of MS Douce 114, redactions and omissions contribute to the altered tone of the texts, as many biblical quotations, comparisons to famous saints, and miracle accounts have been edited or removed in the Middle English vernacular version, creating texts that seem to be more secular in nature. The poetic license adopted by the Carthusian translators in relation to MS Douce 114 reflects a particular readership in England that is suggested by more secular references, a redaction of many religious comments, and a focus on the power and authority of some women saints. The manuscript emphasizes the active, rather than passive, behaviour of both Elizabeth and Christina. As religious paradoxography, MS Douce 114 simultaneously affirms and defies social and religious cultural mores relating to women.

The authors of the Latin texts write for a different purpose from the Carthusian monks who translated and edited these women’s stories. In the Latin versions of the *lives* of Elizabeth of Spalbeek and Christina the Astonishing, respective authors Philip of

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<sup>23</sup> Mouvance, “the process by which texts in a manuscript culture inevitably change with each new manuscript produced, is not merely an effect of scribal error, it is a fact of medieval text production in more important ways as well. Authors do not stake exclusive claims to their works in the Middle Ages, thus the prose Lancelot seems to have been conceived as a collaboration, while Chaucer felt free to produce Troilus and Criseyde in part simply by translating whole sections of Filostrato” (Sturges 3).

Clairvaux and Thomas of Cantimpré are writing with clerical and dogmatic intent: the women are objects used to further church teachings regarding God's interventions with women and the horrors of Purgatory. In addition, Lynn Staley points out that Jacques de Vitry and Thomas of Cantimpré "used the examples of holy women" to shame corrupt clergy (20). These authors had reputations that lent authority to their subjects, making hagiography a potentially mutually beneficial exercise (Staley 33). They wrote in the language of the church, indicating that the audience was likely male, educated clergy. In contrast, when the Carthusian translators transformed these works into their Middle English iterations, the removal of scripture and the focus on heightened physical drama on the part of the subjects made the accounts more secular and sensational. The translators had no personal connection or obligation to defend these putative saints, and their texts were aimed at the unlearned. Written in the vulgar tongue, shorn of biblical references, the Middle English *lives* are aimed at marginalized readers, women and the poor, who lacked access to Latinate literature.

Sacred fictions are consigned to the power of the church; paradoxography celebrates the power of pious women in a hostile world and remarks upon their ability to supersede magisterial constructs. To designate paradoxography as simple hagiography (although it may be both simultaneously) misses the mark. The *vitae* concerning the women of the MS Douce 114 tell two stories: one of faith and service for Christ *ex-ipsam*; another of independence, autonomy, and spectacular feats of performance signifying authority *ex-ipsa*. These are narratives of feminine resistance that go beyond the sentiment of the sacred fictions, which teach that even a lowly woman can be saved. Instead, the accounts of these saints who practice performative self-abjection teach that

women can be more than saved; they are capable of serving as religious leaders and teachers.

## Chapter 2

Elizabeth of Spalbeek's Theatre of Cruelty: A "merueilous and myserabil disciplyne"<sup>24</sup>

*"Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history—  
by her own movement . . . . Write your self. Your body must be heard."*

- Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" (875, 880)

*"What do we do when a text's evolution crosses formal boundaries  
that themselves serve as delineators of genre?"*

-Sarah Crisler, "Epic and the Problem of the Female Protagonist:  
The Case of *Florence de Rome*" (27)

Elizabeth of Spalbeek's unique religious practice is frequently aligned with traditional female ascetics by scholars. However, her activities distinguish her from the passive, obedient saint model. In order to understand the ways in which she stands apart from her fellow mystics, particularly as she is represented in her Middle English *vita*, a comparison with the largely idealized archetype of the submissive woman saint can provide insight into the agential nature of Elizabeth's life. For example, in *Revelations of Divine Love*, Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) recounts her fervent prayers for an intimate relationship with God, in which she asks for three specific gifts that will aid her in attaining unity with the divine:

I desirede thre graces by the gifte of God. The first was to have minde of Cristes passion. The seconde was bodelye sykenes. And the thrid was to have of Goddes gifte thre woundes (125).

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<sup>24</sup> Also known as Elizabeth of Herkenrode, Elizabeth of Seint Truden (1246-1304); feast day: November 19; never canonized.

At the age of 31, Julian's wish was fulfilled when "God sente me a bodyelye sykenes" (129). Near death, she "wolde that his paines ware my paines, with compassion and afterwarde langinge to God" (133). As an idealized model of a patient, passive anchorite, Julian awaited God's intervention in order to develop a deeper understanding of the Passion through physical suffering. Almost a century before, Elizabeth of Spalbeek, desiring these same gifts, neither prayed nor waited. Instead, she took initiative. She developed an intimate knowledge of the Passion, inflicted mortifications on herself, and experienced the stigmata through a groundbreaking expression of performative self-abjection "in a newe and unherde manere," as the narrator of her *life*, Philip of Clairvaux, explains (Philip 32). Elizabeth was a performance artist who enacted Christ's Passion daily, with an added weekly exhibition of the stigmata on Fridays, in displays of intense physical pain and endurance.

Exhibitions of mysticism in themselves would not be terribly unusual for a *mulier religiosa*; however, Elizabeth inverts the martyr tradition through her performances. Rather than waiting for something to be done *to* her based on her piety, as Julian does, Elizabeth initiates her own suffering. Agency, acquired through performative self-abjection, makes her the subject rather than the object of her *vita*, "a subject who is not at all neutral and indifferent . . . but who maintains a specific relationship of crisis, trial, or process with [her] God" (Kristeva, *New Maladies* 117). Unlike her saintly virgin-martyr predecessors, such as St. Walpurga, St. Agnes, or St. Dorothy, all of whom had suffering inflicted upon them for their steadfast adherence to Christianity, Elizabeth is not a victim; she is the perpetrator and master of ceremonies in her exhibitions of Christ-like torment. She publicly performs a seven-act "play" replicating Christ's Passion throughout

“matyns, pryme, tiers, sext, noone, euesonge, and complyne” (Philip 29). Elizabeth’s performances do not simply convey Christ’s suffering; in the earliest recorded instance of a monopolylogue,<sup>25</sup> her innovative method of performance delivery involves her playing the parts of *all* the participants in the Passion:

sche schewith in herselfe booth the persone of Criste suffrynge and the  
persone of the enmye turmentynge. She representith the persone of oure  
Lorde while sche suffres and the enmyes persone while sche puttis,  
drawes, smytes, or thretys. (Philip 32)

Beating her chest, banging her head on the floor, yanking herself by her clothing, striking herself in the face repeatedly, standing in the pose of crucifixion for extended periods of time, Elizabeth repeats these performances over a period of approximately ten years (Njus, “Politics” 295-6). Her self-inflicted violence is punctuated by *in extremis* “ravishments” during which Elizabeth appears to “yeeld the gost...as hit were a deed body” (Philip 33). The pantomiming of death after violence amplifies the aspect of performative self-abjection, as Elizabeth performs the uncleanliness of the abject corpse: “the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject” (Kristeva, *Powers* 4).

Unlike other saints who seek disability and sickness as a sign of the sacred, she rejects her limitations, embarking on a strict program of self-mortification through a “contynual chastisyng of Goddes yeerd and so mortifyng of here owne flesche fro the innocens of fyue yeer age vnto the age that sche is nowe of (that is twenty yeer)” (Philip 30). As a child, Elizabeth was stricken with an unspecified disability, rendering her unable to walk without assistance:

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<sup>25</sup> Monopolylogue: “A dramatic entertainment in which a single performer takes the part of all the characters involved.” This idea is first advanced in reference to performances by English comic actor Charles Mathews (1776-1835) (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

Sothely, sche was holden [seized] with so mikel febilnesse of body and lymmes whanne sche was but fyue yeer olde or there aboute, that thof the hous that sche was in hadde brente ouer hir, sche myghte not haue goon oute withouten helpe, as alle the cuntrey doutles knoweth. (Philip 30)

Primarily bedridden, her performances of the Passion are the only time she is able to move unaided. Paradoxically, although her body is apparently broken, she “ryseth merueylously stronge to suffre labour and penyne that was before in body weyke and vnmyghty” (Philip 30).

The combination of her excessive physical piety, the rejection of disability over the prescriptive adoption of a privileged ascetic sickness, and her long-running theatrics make her a most unusual saint. Through her very public exhibitions of the events of the Passion, Elizabeth enjoys autonomy, agency, and political authority not only in her community but also all over the country. Her Middle English *vita* reveals a pioneer of spiritual theatricality who crosses prescribed gender roles. Hence, this text is highly subversive: the intentional Middle English Carthusian redaction of scriptural references and doctrinal teachings emphasizes her performances, largely ignoring miracles, prophecy, and other traditional saintly signposts in favour of sensational liturgical imagery presented through performative self-abjection.<sup>26</sup>

Elizabeth of Spalbeek was born to a family of minor nobility in 1246 (Njus, “Politics” 287). As a religious ascetic living in Liège, she had political connections with powerful relatives, including William of Ryckel, who served as a chaplain and personal

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<sup>26</sup> There are two kinds of redactions in the Middle English *life* of Elizabeth: those that are “accidental,” owing to mistranslations and *mouvance*, and there are those that are presumed to be “intentional” based on comparisons with other Latin versions and the St. John’s manuscript, which Brown claims is the closest relative to the MS Douce 114 translation (*Three Women* 13).

secretary to William II of Holland. William II became Holy Roman Emperor in 1247 (Njus, “Politics” 287), while William of Ryckel became the abbot of Saint Truiden, in Liège. Philip of Clairvaux, a Cistercian abbot and the narrator of Elizabeth’s *life*, writes that William was her “fleschly cosyn” who “dwellyd nere” her (Philip 43).

Consequently, Elizabeth enjoyed the protection of both political and clerical figures in a community famous for the lives of the Beguines who lived there. Philip witnesses her performances of the Passion there in 1268.

#### THE TEXT

Elizabeth’s story can be found in two extant Latin versions: one in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 694, the other in a number of manuscripts, including Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 138; Cambridge, Jesus College, MS 24; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 240; and Oxford, St. John’s College, MS 182. MS 182 comes from a Carthusian house in Witham, and is presumed by Jennifer Brown to be a possible source text for the Middle English MS Douce 114, because it contains the life of Elizabeth as well as Latin versions of the lives of Mary of Oignies and Christina the Astonishing (“Performatio” 191). Walter Simons cites ten surviving Latin manuscripts of Elizabeth’s Latin *vita* (“Reading” 10). The provenance of the source text for the Middle English translation is unclear. Brown suggests that the Middle English manuscript was copied from an earlier English translation (*Three Women* 15), whereas Rebecca Clouse argues that Elizabeth’s life was likely translated directly from an as yet unknown Latin source (89). In my opinion, there is not enough concrete evidence for either claim. Brown’s “earlier English translation” is as elusive as Clouse’s “as yet unknown Latin source.” The Latin St. John’s MS is an abridged version of other extant Latin texts; some



omissions in the St. John's copy are similar to those found in the Middle English version, which could suggest a connection between the two texts. Although the omissions are comparable, it would appear that the Middle English redactions are even more drastic than those in the St. John's text.<sup>27</sup>

The Middle English *vita* of Elizabeth is the first of the three saints' lives in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 114. Historically, she is the least well-known of the three women whose lives are included in the manuscript, and she is also the most recent of the three: her death occurred some 80 years after the passing of Christina the Astonishing and approximately 90 years after the death of Mary of Oignies. The design of Elizabeth's narrative is unusual in that the *vita*, in keeping with the timing of Elizabeth's performances, is arranged to correspond with the canonical hours established by the Benedictine Rule (Ogden 20), lending religious authority to both her activities and her biography (Njus, "What Did It Mean to Act" 10). This organizational methodology was prescribed and made popular by Edmund of Abingdon's instructional *Speculum ecclesiae* in the thirteenth century (Bestul 42). However, Brown notes that the use of

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<sup>27</sup> For example, the Middle English chapter on Elizabeth's activities during matins provides a detailed description of her performative self-abjection, which contains this closing sentence: "sche folowith forth wakynges of the secounde nocturne, doynge efte sones the figure, maners, and tokens of the biginnyng of oure Lordes passyone, *as hit is seyde byfore*." The text then moves on to a new paragraph, which discusses Elizabeth's pause to rest: "After that whan the ende of turmente cometh. . ." (Philip 33; emphasis added). When this version is compared to the Latin "Vita Elizabeth" from the 1886 *Catalogus codicum hagiographicorum bibliothecae Regiae Bruxellensis*, there are approximately 500 redacted words between *sub forma superius annotata* (as it is said before) (365) and *Post haec autem* (After that/this) (367). The omission contains further descriptions of Elizabeth's self-abjection. The removal of the body of text is also present in the Latin St. John's MS, but it retains the contextualizing scriptural verse (Isaiah 33:14) that precedes the *Post haec autem*: "*Contriti sunt in Sion peccatores possedit tremor hypocritas, considerantes tam puram virginem . . . Deo proximam et innocentissimam creaturam septies in die tam terribiliter ellari. Quia, si in viridi haec fiunt, in arido quid fiet? Septies, idcirco dixi, quia singulas horas hujusmodi sustinet passiones?*" [The sinners are terrified in Sion, trembling hath possessed the hypocrites. Which of you can dwell with deuoting fyre? Which of you shall dwell with euerlasting heares?] (367). While these kinds of redactions do not necessarily make a case for the theories of Brown or Clouse, they do suggest that the English translator actively removed most of the scriptural references found in the Latin versions of Elizabeth's *vitae*.

canonical hours as an organizational strategy in medieval living and writing did “not become the norm until well into the fourteenth century,” which suggests that while writing Elizabeth’s life, Philip created a “new” hagiographical mode (Brown, “Performatio” 194; Bestul 54). Chapters are titled according to the hours, for example: “What sche doth for the oures of sexte, noon, and euensong” (38). The work reads as a record of acts witnessed over a single day, although Philip observes Elizabeth for many weeks (Brown, “Performatio” 193). At the end of the *vita*, an additional witness account appears in a separate chapter featuring the authoritative testimony of Elizabeth’s cousin, the Abbot of Saint Truiden, who recounts Elizabeth’s exceptional fasting and tells the story of her ethereal meetings with Mary of Insula.<sup>28</sup> According to Elizabeth, this Mary also endured the Passion “in angwysche of peynes,” and declared that “the same Marie and sche sawe ilke othere often, whanne they were rauyshed.” Affirming the mystical in this account, Philip assures the reader that the two never actually met: “neuertheles sche neuere sawe hir” (Philip 48).

#### FROM *PROBATIO*, TO *VITA*, TO *EKPHRASIS* VIA THE VERNACULAR

Elizabeth’s *life* is not only unique due to its canonical structure; the text also defies generic classification. Critics concerned with the genres of devotional texts have argued that the *life* of Elizabeth of Spalbeek is a *probatio* rather than a *vita*. A *probatio* is a proof of a truth (Elliott 18), “the *record* of a test of authenticity, a test usually performed and recorded as part of an *inquisitio* or inquisition” (Njus, “Politics” 292). Elliot, who first characterized this work as a *probatio*, describes the text as an “inquest-turned-*vita*” (*Proving* 188). But this simple generic identification is not the whole story. Elizabeth’s story began as a *probatio*, when Philip learned about Elizabeth while visiting

<sup>28</sup> This Mary has not been identified. Insula is modern-day Lille in France, near the Belgian border.

Leodys. He travelled to Liège in order to investigate, where he wrote a report of Elizabeth's activities. Consistent with *probatio* formatting, Philip does not insert himself into the events as Jacques de Vitry did in his chronicle of Mary of Oignies. Instead, Philip merely recorded Elizabeth's acts. Although initially skeptical about what he had heard about Elizabeth, Philip soon joins a body of supportive clerics who admire her:

I gaf no credens to hem that tolde me, til tyme that I come myselfe and sawe and proued that I hadde not herde the halfe . . . . bigynnyng atte thoos thinges that I perceyued vndoutably with myn eyen, and afterwarde puttyng to that I haue herde of many othere trewe men. (28-9)

Njus observes that “as a *probatio*, the primary goal of Philip's text is “to *prove* Elizabeth's sanctity by testing her” (“Politics” 298). He accomplishes this, particularly in the Latin version, and his enthusiasm for Elizabeth's performances matches that of Thomas of Cantimpré's endorsement of Christina the Astonishing.

Nonetheless, the text refuses to conform to the format of a traditional *vita*, defined as “a biography of a holy person, meant to serve as an exemplar and perhaps as evidence in a canonization procedure” (Njus, “Politics” 292). Walter Simons characterizes the genre of the *vita* as

a more or less comprehensive account of the saint's life and miracles composed *after his or her death* by the saint's confessor or another clerical admirer, on the basis of personal experience of information gathered from individuals close to the saint. (“Reading” 10; emphasis added).

Simons' definition applies to the pastiche sacred fictions of the early church, but is not applicable to Elizabeth's life, because her *vita* is not written *post-mortem*. It is “live;” that

is, there is direct witness from the biographer and other clergy. A witnessed life is less likely to follow traditional literary patterns or directly echo previous hagiographical material than lives perceived at a temporal distance.

In addition, a traditional hagiography usually contains three parts: the *vita*, detailing the life and experiences of the saint; the *passio*, recounting the suffering of the saint or the saint's death in the case of martyrdom; and the *liber miraculorum*, describing the *post mortem* miracles "believed to have been performed by God through the intercession of the saint" (Whatley et al 3-5). Instead, Elizabeth's *life* is all *passio*; shorn of a birth and death account, it stands as an unparalleled record of a series of dramatic religious performances.

This Middle English *vita* eschews traditional opening dedications and prayers, opting instead to get straight to the action: after Philip explains how he came to find Elizabeth, he launches directly into a description of her performances, telling the reader almost nothing of her life. Similarly, her death is noted as a terse *explicit* at the end of the text: "Here endith the lyfe of Seinte Elizabeth of Spalbek, the whiche passed to Cryste in the yeere of oure Lorde a thowsande two hundred sixty and sext" (Philip 50). The *liber miraculorum* is absent. It is not uncommon to find a *liber miraculorum* appended to a saint's *life* by a different author at a later date, in order, presumably, to provide further evidence of the saint's piety and suitability for canonization. For example, the Latin *vita* of Christina the Astonishing features a supplement containing *post-mortem* miracles written by an anonymous author seventeen years after Thomas of Cantimpré completed the original hagiography (Brown, *Three Women* 84). Neither the Latin nor the Middle English versions of Elizabeth's *life* contains a *liber miraculorum*. This lack is not the

only one that challenges the ostensible purpose of the text; even in the Latin versions, miracles are few, and, at best, questionable.

Elizabeth engages in self-mortification as she “knokkith hir owne breste” with “harde strokes,” which Philip attributes to divine intervention: “I trowe that hit is to be committid alle to God, to whom nothings is hard nor impossibil” (Philip 37). Beating one’s own breast is dramatic, but fails to meet the criteria of a miracle, in that it does not defy natural law. Sandra Zimdars-Swartz argues that much of what makes Elizabeth’s story a “saint’s” story has much to do with Philip’s efforts to contextualize the saint’s behaviours, and little to do with her performances (30). In keeping with the effort to emphasize Elizabeth’s status as a mystic, Philip exploits the issue of her incapacity, calling her “a febil and freel creature” (Philip 37) with a body that is “weyke and vnmyghty” presumably because she is disabled and a woman (Philip 30). The announcement of Elizabeth’s disability combined with the presumed weakness of women arguably provides the fodder for an assumption that her elaborate imitations of Christ’s Passion could not have occurred without divine intervention. Therefore, her dramatic devotional exercises could easily be interpreted by Philip and others as miracles (Zimdars-Swartz 31). It is impossible to know how Elizabeth herself understood her performances, but it is reasonable to imagine that she experienced them as devotional exercises, and therefore not inherently miraculous. I shall demonstrate in my discussion of the specifics of Elizabeth’s acts as they are described in the Middle English text that there is little literary proof of any type of divine intervention in Elizabeth’s performances.

CARTHUSIAN REDACTIONS

Elizabeth's Middle English life dramatically differs from its Latin predecessor, because Biblical quotations and doctrinal references are largely expunged from the later text in favour of graphic descriptions of theatrical religious exercises. If a hagiographical text does not refer to the Bible, and refrains from explaining the Christological significance of certain acts, then what, exactly, is the purpose of the story? Imitating the Passion may be the impetus for Elizabeth's performances, but she and her performative self-abjection become the principal subject of the Middle English text. The story is not about Christ, but about a woman who *portrays* Christ by performing "worschypful signes of the crosse...schewyd in the body and lymmes of the innocente virgyn" (Philip 40).

The Middle English *vita* breaks away from the Latin account immediately; the patristic model of translation, used primarily for scriptural and theological texts, is abandoned in favour of a record of performance. The first evidence of dramatic and intentional redaction is provided at the start of the *vita* with "the Apologe of the compilor," one of five apologies that appear at the introduction of each work in the manuscript. Only the apology in Elizabeth's *vita* openly acknowledges that a number of redactions have been made to the original text. The translator's ostensible reason for such edits is that this vernacular hagiography is aimed as a slightly less sophisticated audience:

As Seint Jerom the holy doctour seith in a bibil that he made, hit is harde to turne a language into another worde for worde, but often tymes hit byhoueth to leue and take diuerse wordes that are propur to on tunge and not to another.<sup>29</sup> Wherefore this Englysche that folowth heere is turnyd oute

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<sup>29</sup> The compiler is referring here to the notion promulgated by both Cicero and Saint Jerome regarding the efficacy of a sense-to-sense translation in order to communicate meaning over a more literal word-for-word translation. Sense-to-sense translation may result in "a rhetorical contest in which the re-creative and interpretive powers of discourse play an important role" in textual transgression (Copeland, "Lollard" 45-

of Latyn to the worschep of God and edificacyone of deuoute soules that are not leeryd in Latyn tunge. And therefore the wryter that is but symple letterd neither can ne purposis to folowe the wordes, but vnnethis and with harde the sens, neither puttynge to nor doynge awaye any clauses that schulde chaunge the substaunce of the story, but otherewhile leuyng legeauns and auctorites of holy writt that wolde be ful symme to vndirstonde if they were turnyd into Englissh withoute more declarynge of glose. (Philip 27)

Alexandra Barratt remarks on this self-authorized editing, in which the compiler “explains that he left out anything *he* judged unnecessary or unhelpfully obscure” (12-3). These editing choices do not simply shorten the *vita*; they also remove much of the contextualizing “glose,” including numerous scriptural references, resulting in an alteration of the medieval *sententia*. Clouse notes that the Latin “Vita Elizabeth” contains at least fifteen biblical citations, while the Middle English version has only three (102). The use of biblical citations contextualizes Elizabeth’s actions, keeping Christ’s suffering at the forefront of the reader’s imagination. Without the scriptural references, the focus shifts to Elizabeth and her performance. For example, after a reenactment of Christ’s arrest, Elizabeth

wrappeth hyrselfe downe to the grounde vpon her backe ful honestly and fulle manerly, as forto reste hir fro grete charge of trauelle, so that then sche hath nopowere of bodily strengthis but syghes after heuenly and goostly solas and goth in spirite vnto God (Philip 32).

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6). This is precisely what occurs with Elizabeth’s *vita*. It is edited to appeal to a more secular audience of perhaps pro-feminine readers.

That is, Elizabeth is exhausted post-performance and, lying down for a rest, seeks solace by going in spirit to God. The biblical reference found in the Latin version, which emphasizes her physical weakness and attributes her strength to God, is omitted in the Middle English version. The omission firmly asserts that God is acting through Elizabeth during her performance: “ut in libro Num. 1 dicitur, et in Isaia xv<sup>o</sup>: Dat lasso virtutem, et his qui non sunt fortitudinem roburque multiplicat.” [Isaias 40:29: “It is he that giveth strength to the weary, and increaseth force and might to them that are not.”] (“Vita Elizabeth” 365). The exclusion of this quotation, though a subtle intervention, minimizes the notion of divine intercession as the driving force behind Elizabeth’s performances. Readers’ attention might then fall back onto her physical autonomy.

Two extraordinary examples of clearly intentional redactions in the Middle English text alter the original meaning of Elizabeth’s *vita*. These two passages in the Latin sources situate the saintliness of Elizabeth and assert the purpose of the text. First, Elizabeth is likened to a female Saint Francis by Philip, with the implication that a woman stigmatic will express the Passion to a female laity more effectively than a male. Of course, Francis has a female counterpart in Saint Clare, but hers is the role of acolyte rather than equal; she does not experience the stigmata nor does she practice her spirituality independent of Francis and the church (Bynum, *Fragmentation* 176; McNamara 211).<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth can be understood as coequal to Francis in terms of her performative spirituality and her manifestation of stigmata. But the similarity ends there: Francis founds the Franciscan Order and is declared a saint (McGinn 62), while

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<sup>30</sup> McGinn remarks that Clare’s mode of life “appears to have been not very different from that observed by Mary of Oignies and the early beguines,” at least until “they came under pressure to follow the standard enclosed model of religious life for women. Clare seems to have acquiesced.” Clare, as a student of Francis who swore “obedience to him alone as the master of this form of life” has little in common with the groundbreaking, independent Beguines, which certainly includes Elizabeth of Spalbeek (McGinn 47).



Elizabeth's performances are understood as teaching tools serving as religious texts for the unlettered:

In sexu etiam virili . . . <sup>31</sup>in persona beati Francisci, dudum revelavit idipsum: ut Sic uterque sexus in solum ex testimonio Scripturarum, sed ex vivis exemplaribus conditionis immanae in cruce Christi inveniat quod honorel, veneretur, revereatur, imitetur . . . nihil excusationis praetendere possit homo, quantumcumque illitteratus aut simplex, quem intermeratae Virginis partus redemit, ut dicat: "Non possum legere aut intelligere tam profunda mysteria, quia nescio litteram" vel "quia liber clausus est" cum non in membranis aut chartis, sed in membris et corpore memoratae nostrae puellae, scilicet vivae et apertae Veronicae, suae salvationis vivam imaginem et redemptionis animatam historiam sicut litteratus ita valeat legere idiota.

[In the male sex, namely in the person of Saint Francis, God has revealed himself already. So that both sexes not only by the testimony of the Scriptures, but also by living examples of the human condition, may perceive on Christ's cross what should be honoured, venerated, adored, imitated, and loved, and so that no human, whom that Child of the Immaculate Virgin redeemed, will not be able to make any excuse, however uneducated or simple he may be, saying: "I am not able to read or to understand such profound mysteries, because I do not know my letters" or "because this book is closed to me" when it is not written on a

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<sup>31</sup> An obscured portion of text in the copy of the *Catalogus codicum hagiographicorum bibliothecae Regiae Bruxellensis (1886)* is illegible.

parchment or on paper but in the members and the body of our girl  
 [Elizabeth], as a living and manifest Veronica, so that an unlearned person  
 will be able to read the vivid and unmistakable image of salvation as well  
 as an educated person.] (“Vita Elizabeth” 387)<sup>32</sup>

Philip suggests here that God is revealed through the stigmata of Francis, but that somehow this revelation was too complex for a lay audience, and therefore pertinent only to the learned. Elizabeth, on the other hand, exists as an egalitarian revelation of God, one directed to women, the unlearned, and the culturally marginalized who may not be able to read text but are able to “read” Elizabeth’s body. At first glance, this comparison to Francis may appear to be a pro-feminine reading, positioning Elizabeth as a member of a line of stigmatic inheritance founded by him. However, the redaction of this paragraph changes the tone of the *vita* as it stresses her independence; she is no longer part of an institutionally-approved stigmatic tradition. In the Middle English translation, this passage is completely excised, as part of a larger body of text consisting of approximately 500 words. This missing section includes the Francis comparison as well as lauds for Judith and Esther, biblical holy women who preceded the Virgin (“Vita Elizabeth” 371-373; Brown, *Three Women* 42). There is no substitutional language for the missing text in the Middle English translation. Instead, the account moves from one description of her performance to an assertion that she remains modest and appropriate at all times: “booth hir handys ioyned togedir and the fyngers ilke in othere folden withouten the hands.” [The missing 500 words should be here, but instead the text continues to describe Elizabeth.] “Also this is to witte that in mouynges and berynges of body of the foreyde

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<sup>32</sup> This translation is a combination of my own work checked against the translations of Walter Simons (“Reading” 11) and Jesse Njus (“What Did It Mean to Act” 9).

virgyn there fallith nothing vnsemely nor nothings that may displese any mannes syghte” (Philip 42). As a result of this redaction,<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth is no longer painted as a feminine counterpart to Saint Francis or as a conscripted woman saint. Instead, she is presented as a sovereign preacher and teacher who uses her body as a teaching text, performing her devotions for the edification of her audience: “as for lessuns, sche makith a bigynnyng of oure Lordys Passyone, how [he] was taken and with a feerful cruelte drawn” (Philip 30-1).

In the second example of extraordinary intentional editing, the Middle English text also drastically redacts what may be the most miraculous test of Elizabeth’s sainthood: Philip attempts to affirm that she is, in fact, dead, during one of her many ravishments.

In hoc etiam raptu et in aliis inter os et nares ipsius aliquotiens vidi  
 levissimam plumam poni, ita quod, si per labis aut per nares vel levissimus  
 flatus exiret, statim plumam ejiceret: quae tamen ita stabat immota per  
 totum illius extasis intervallum, nisi forte eam aliquis antea removeret.  
 [I saw the lightest feather placed between her mouth and her nose so that if  
 the slightest breath had exhaled from her lips or nose it would immediately  
 have blown off the feather, which despite this remained completely  
 motionless for the whole of her ecstasy unless, by chance, someone  
 removed it before the end.] (“Vita Elizabeth” 366)

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<sup>33</sup> There is one redaction that Brown suggests may be due to a missing leaf (33), and one that she argues is not available in the Latin / St. John manuscript, and these may be considered “accidental” deletions (48-49). Brown claims, however, that the redaction discussed here is “intentional” omission of a miracle on the part of the Middle English translator (*Three Women* 42).

This testimony is the strongest example of possible divine intervention in the acts of Elizabeth, but it is minimized in the Middle English translation, where instead, she looks “as if” she is dead: “in alle maner lackynge of felynge, mouynge, and breth, as hit were a deed body.” Credit for her revivification is given to the Lord, who “restorith hir ageyn to lyfe,” even though it is not clear that Elizabeth actually died in the first place (Philip 33). Redaction of a tested and proven miracle seems to be at odds with the purpose of a hagiographical work, suggesting that the Carthusian translator may have envisioned an audience less concerned with the metaphysical and more concerned with the physical. These redactions create a text intensely focused on Elizabeth’s self-objectional enactment of the Passion. As Visconsi argues, the Middle English *vita* “is a record of her *physical enactments only* . . . little else than a record of her ritualized performance” (77). Consequently, the genre of the text shifts once again, from Latin *probatio* to *vita*, finally settling on ekphrastic prose that delineates a dramatic theatrical performance *cum* devotional exercise. In fact, with the exception of the questionable narrative surrounding the exhibition of stigmata, which will be discussed later, there are no clearly-defined miracles recounted in the Middle English “Vita Elizabeth.”

A brief discussion of non-miracles is necessary here. Admittedly, it is curious that miracles are minimized in Elizabeth’s Middle English *life*. Some may argue that miracles, in the Augustinian tradition, emanate from nature because creation itself is an ongoing miracle demonstrated through childbirth, rainfall, and other natural events (B. Ward 3). However, for the purposes of this paper, I will use Anselm of Canterbury’s (1033-1109) *De Conceptu Virginali* to define the term “miracle”: “ea quae nec natura creata nec voluntas creaturae sed solus deus facit, semper miranda sint” [Those things done neither

by nature nor by the will of a creature but by God alone, are miracles] (154).<sup>34</sup> Standing in opposition to this notion of miracles is Elizabeth's Middle English *life*, which is full of non-miracles, events which are clearly accomplished by "the will of a creature" rather than by God. Waugh suggests the inclusion of ersatz occurrences in hagiography that "miss the mark" of divine intervention are

events that look as if they are going to be miracles because of the apparent strategies and the rhetoric of the author; yet, these events themselves, once described, seem insufficiently supernatural to actually rank as miracles. ("Blindness" 406)

But in terms of rhetorical strategies, Philip's are so effective, even in translation, that readers of the Middle English text in the twenty-first century continue to perceive Elizabeth's actions as "miraculous" when, for the most part, they are not—and those events that *might* be deemed miracles are, at best, questionable. Why would the Carthusian translator write an account of a saint with a paucity of miracles? Benedicta Ward refers to the "recasting of miracle stories" related to the "predilections and intentions of those who wrote them down," resulting in miracles being "inserted into discourses to arouse interest and attention, and thus [becoming] entertainment" (B. Ward 210-1). The subversive evolution of Elizabeth's *life* through the redaction of miracles may have been directed at a female and pro-feminine readership wanting to read about self-empowerment; that audience would find commonality in the story of a woman who controls her own spirituality and life by mortal means. Ward claims that "the connection between miracle stories as records of serious events and as literary accounts . . . aroused

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<sup>34</sup> Or, as David Hume has defined it: "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature. . . . Nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happen in the common course of nature" (114-5).

interest in a wider audience” (B. Ward 213). This may have been true in reverse: the less miraculous the account, the more compelling the non-miracles. For women readers, Elizabeth’s *life* features many events that undoubtedly “would be exceptional compared to everyday reality,” even though they are not miraculous (Waugh, “Blindness” 406).

Elizabeth’s Middle English account is also genre-problematic because of its textual evolution, becoming a good example of paradoxography.<sup>35</sup> Her story has evolved into a narrative with a female protagonist; her character has subsequently become altered from saintly *mulier religiosa* to woman of spiritual authority without peer, featuring subtle contrarian messages regarding the church’s authority over women saints. While Mary of Oignies has Jacques de Vitry as her confessor, spiritual leader, and hagiographer, Elizabeth takes the counsel of no one. She may deign to interact with priests, but only at her whim: during mass, occasionally “she maye haue a preste to whom sche gyueth entente [attention]” (Philip 43). The text suggests that she is largely disinterested in the musings of clergy, as she “takith neuere hede to mennes spekynges” (Philip 45). Elizabeth’s disregard, and even disrespect, for men and clergy stands in direct contrast to traditional women saints’ *exempla*, such as that of Saint Agnes, lauded for her humility and obeisance.<sup>36</sup>

Elizabeth’s enactments of the Passion have been labelled by scholars as the performances of a religious mystic who is facilitated by God’s intervention in order to proselytize. Ellen Ross argues that, through Elizabeth’s performances, the saint “becomes a healer as those who watch her performance are stirred to devotion and sympathetic

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<sup>35</sup> Paradoxography: accounts of miraculous, marvelous women that carry contrarian messages about the church’s power and authority may be understood as paradoxography. See chapter one.

<sup>36</sup> “Agnes dicta est agna, quia mitis et humilis, tamquam agna fuit” [The name Agnes comes from the lamb, because she was meek and humble like a lamb] (Jacobus 113).

response” (112). But this is not the case in the Middle English version, as attention is directed to Elizabeth’s violent performance rather than being centred on Christ. The Middle English text presents a theatre of cruelty that permits Elizabeth to live a religious life unencumbered by the obligations of marriage and domesticity; agency, political power, and autonomous authority are among the fruits of her labours. Elizabeth’s performances exemplify what Michel Foucault terms a “technology of the self,” an autonomous method of attaining spiritual power and authority (“Sexuality” 368). De Certeau takes this notion further by explaining that use of the technology of the self can frequently enable disempowered persons to manipulate and evade controlling societal agencies (*Practice* 174), “even to shape them to their own ends, by seeming to conform to them” (Finke 41). This is precisely what occurs through Elizabeth’s performances. Appearing to be engaged in teaching scripture through enactment, Elizabeth achieves independent spiritual authority, demonstrated when she freely “counseyled” visitors to join a monastery as “a lewde frere,” and shared her knowledge of “hem that shalbe saued,” declaring that “yif [a young man] hadde then dyed, hee schulde soon haue comen to heuene” (Philip 46).

Elizabeth’s recurrent manipulation of the technology of the self establishes her autonomous identity. Judith Butler has argued that extended, repeated performances create identities separate from the original identity of an individual, so that “identity can become a site of contest and revision [and] take on a future set of significations that those of us who use it now may not be able to foresee” (“Imitation” 305). The unforeseen identity of Elizabeth in Latin is made manifest in the Middle English translation: the woman who previously served the church as a physical text for an audience of the poor

becomes the pioneering performer, teacher, and preacher unencumbered by church control. As Simons explains, Philip's role in Elizabeth's life was to "translate" her actions based on an "interpretive framework established in early Christianity and refined by twelfth and early thirteenth-century mysticism" ("Reading" 13), which presumably is accomplished by Philip in the Latin life. In other words, this interpretive framework exists through and for Christian doctrine. But the Middle English translation, stripped of much of the theological referencing and biblical quotations, presents a woman whose authority removes her from the power of the church.

#### PURIFICATION OF THE ABJECT: RESISTANCE

For women, the spiritual popularity of imitating the suffering of Christ in the period from the twelfth to the fourteenth century spawned numerous saints engaged in self-abjection. McGinn accounts for this increase in self-mortification based on the fact that women mystics had credibility problems with the church and had to demonstrably defend their authority and authenticity, unlike their male counterparts (154). Self-abjection established authenticity and holiness through physical suffering, exemplified by the case of Christina the Astonishing, which I explore in detail in chapter three. In traditional hagiography, the woman saint invested in the exercise of performative self-abjection usually divests herself of her material body near or at her death, freeing herself of the oppression of her female physicality. For instance, Jacques de Vitry writes of Mary of Oignies's steps to saintliness as a purifying of abject body fluids: "sche dried up from alle moisture of sensibil thinges. Purged from euery cloude of bodily ymages, withouten any fantasye or ymagynacyone, she sawe in soule sympil fourmes and dyuyne as in a clene myrror" (158). The symbol of the mirror is traditionally charged with notions of



narcissism, superficiality, and vanity, especially in relation to women. However, Ritamary Bradley argues that in most medieval texts, the mirror serves a “double function of showing the world what it is and what it should become,” based on scriptural evidence (101).<sup>37</sup> Usually, Christ is reflected in the medieval mirror, signifying the potential of the individual and what s/he can become, as Langland explains in *The Vision of Piers Plowman*:

Clerkes kenne me that Crist is in alle places;

Ac I seigh hym nevere soothly but as myself in a mirour;

*Hic in enigmatē, tunc facie ad faciem.* (182; XV,161-3)<sup>38</sup>

Jacques is writing about Mary’s purified self; her bodily fluids “dried up from alle moisture” (purged from abjection) as though she is reflected in the “clene myrrior” positioning her closer to the divine form.

A woman’s purity can only occur through a purging of the maternal abject; this purification is literary in nature and practiced by male biographers who attempt to erase the feminine from the woman saint, creating a virago figure. Christina the Astonishing

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<sup>37</sup> Saint Clare of Assisi wrote about this double meaning of the mirror, using the vanity language of admiring one’s clothing and adornment as a metaphor for a reflection of inner goodness and grace: “Hoc speculum cottidie intueri, o regina, sponsa Iesu Christi, et in eo faciem tuam iugiter speculari, ut sic totam interius et exterius te adornes amictam circumdatamque varietatibus, omnium virtutum floribus et vestimentis pariter adornata sicut decet, filia et sponsa carissima summi Regis. In hoc autem speculo refulget beata paupertas, sancta humilitas et ineffabilis caritas, sicut per totum speculum poteris cum Dei gratia contemplari.”

[Look into this mirror every day, O queen, spouse of Jesus Christ, and continually examine your face in it, so that in this way you may adorn yourself completely, inwardly and outwardly, clothed and covered in multicolored apparel, adorned in the same manner with flowers and garments made of all the virtues as is proper, dearest daughter and spouse of the most high King. Moreover, in this mirror shine blessed poverty, holy humility, and charity beyond words, as you will be able, with God’s grace, to contemplate throughout the entire mirror] (Mueller 85-86).

“For if a man be a hearer of the word, and not a doer: he shall be compared to a man beholding the countenance of his nativity in a glass. For he considered his self, and went his way, and by and forgot what an one he was” (James 1:23-4).

<sup>38</sup> “We see now by a glasse in a darke sort: but then face to face. Now I know in part: but then I shall know as also I am known” (1 Corinthians, 12:13).

resists purification in life, but the anonymous author of her supplement accomplishes this by making her a ghostly revenant after death; Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt purify their abjection by “shrivel[ing], grow[ing] old . . . burned black by the sun . . . unrecognizable as women before their realigned corporeality can signify fully as sanctified and perfect” (McAvoy 103). In keeping with this trope, Philip attempts to present Elizabeth as an object purified of her abjection, through an absence of the maternal bodily fluids that play a central role in the abject: “fro hir mouthe cometh neither spotel, ne spittyng nor no maner of moisture of mater of vnclennes from hir nese thirles [nostrils]” (Philip 49); she kisses a diptych of Christ with her “clene virgyn lippys” (Philip 34).

Although Philip declares Elizabeth’s “inwarde clenness,” Elizabeth contravenes this purifying of the abject through unexpected instances of bleeding—some that are unrelated to the Passion, as in the instance where Philip and others “sawe blode comyng oute at hir eyen and dropped doune and dyed the linnyn garment that sche was cladde with ouerest” (Philip 41). In another example, during one of her Good Friday performances which usually includes the stigmata, Elizabeth is bleeding from “her handys, feet, and syde” (Philip 29). These activities defy the abject purification model; just as Philip declares Elizabeth “clene,” she emits bodily fluids in performance, resetting her status to abject. A woman emitting blood from her body, and further, performing as a man in a saint’s *life* involves the defilement of social order and boundaries, which must be corrected through purification (Kristeva, *Powers* 66). Philip exploits Elizabeth’s defilement, using it for dramatic effect in the *vita*:

And the wollen cloth that satte next hir flesche was defuyled with the same blode, and also a party of hir syde about the wounde. And wee sawe not alloonly the vtir clothe that toucheth the maydens flesche – that is to saye handes, feet, and syde – sprenkelyd and dyed with blood, but also hir pappys<sup>39</sup> were all defuyled with blode. (Philip 42)

Defilement makes for a compelling hagiographical account, but must always be purified after the fact in order for the subject to attain sainthood, because impurity, sourced in the feminine, “*points to* but does not *signify* an autonomous force that can be threatening for divine agency” (Kristeva, *Powers* 91; emphasis added). But Elizabeth resists purification, returning over and over again to self-abjective performance, as she repeats her weekly pantomimes for over a decade. Her abjection is not a catalyst to death; instead, her performative self-abjection, her state of repeated defilement, is an agent in maintaining her life, her autonomy, her spiritual authority, and her independence. Purifying her abjection ideally involves death as a result of these performances; purification would end her story, render her performances complete, and transform her into an instrument of the church’s agenda. As Kristeva remarks, abjection is the *other side* of those religious, moral, and ideological codes that keep societies and individual norms in check. These codes comprise “abjection’s purification and repression” (*Powers* 209). Resisting purification, then, is an act of subversion. Kristeva explains that the purification rite observes Levitical law, rejecting nonconformity (which is precisely what Elizabeth and other beguines express through their self-abjection):

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<sup>39</sup> The mention of “pappys” is an error in translation. The Latin text says “*maxillam*” and “*maxillas*” which translates into “cheeks;” the translator may have read “*mamillas*” rather than “*maxillas*,” which translates into “paps” or “breasts” (*Vita Elizabeth* 370-1). Intentionality on the part of the translator cannot be determined here, but the vivid description of Elizabeth’s bloodied breasts certainly adds to the carnal appeal of this pericope.

The body must bear no trace of its debt to nature: it must be clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic . . . it should endure no gash other than that of circumcision . . . . Any other mark would be the sign of belonging to the impure, the non-separate, the non-symbolic, the non-holy . . . . any secretion or discharge, anything that leaks out of the feminine or masculine body defiles. (*Powers* 102)

Purification is the solution to the abject, a cleansing which involves “the exclusion of anything that breaks boundaries (flow, drain, discharge) . . . [f]rom food to blood” (*Kristeva, Powers* 103). Hence, Philip attempts to purify Elizabeth’s self-abjection in the text by describing her as “clene,” performing “nothing vnsemely” (Philip 42), but Elizabeth resists. As long as she remains abject, she remains in control of her life, hovering on the border of the clean and unclean in order to remain housed, fed, respected, and sovereign.<sup>40</sup>

Sanitizing the abject is performed in literature by men, for the benefit of men. Kristeva explains that the feminine abject denotes a primitive “primal repression,” an effort to separate the human from the animal, demarcating between the cultural and that which came before, or, more accurately, the masculine from the porous female body “with all its perviousness to external and internal influences” (Lochrie, “The Language” 125). Kristeva argues that the feminine has long been associated with the primitive and the unsophisticated:

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<sup>40</sup> Living as a pilgrimage site and bringing travellers to Liège made Elizabeth’s self-abjective performances a valuable commodity worthy of protection by the local clergy: “bekepyng and charge of the same virgyne was commendid longe sithen by the byschope of that dyocys to a worschepful man and religyous of holy and honest conuersacyone, of cleer and hool opinyone, and of grete auctorite, the abbot of Seinte Trudous” (Philip 43).

by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder (*Powers* 12-3).

In order to preserve the appearance of civilization and sophistication, the patriarchal institution must purge the abject from any potential woman saint before beatification. Even though performative self-abjection is frequently the engine that initiates recognition of a woman's sanctity, in the end her sex must be nullified and her authority subsumed by external forces in an act of purgation.

Where Elizabeth's Latin *life* contains elements of subversion, the Middle English translation appears to amplify these aspects and minimize the more orthodox hagiographical details. For example, the Latin text provides an elaborate, traditional miracle passage in which Elizabeth asks God to remove from the room anyone who has been excommunicated by the church; immediately, a nobleman is moved to depart from the space. In the same passage, she also tells Philip to look to the Virgin as "the greatest teacher of humanity" (Brown, *Three Women* 48; "Vita Elizabeth" 376-8). In a strong example of intentional redaction, the Middle English translation jettisons these stories, providing in their place a terse statement: "but inogh of this atte this tyme" (Philip 48). The text then returns to descriptions of Elizabeth's performative self-abjection through a public practice of *anorexia mirabilis*. Wogan-Brown notes that hagiography is pedagogical and interpretive, and through *mouvance*, usually becomes refined over time.<sup>41</sup> Further, she observes that "in transmission, miracles tend to become more

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<sup>41</sup> See page 57, footnote 24.

thematically homogenous and to cohere with the chief characteristics of the saint: their meaning is stylized as it is reworked” (*Saints’ Lives* 212). Elizabeth’s *life* is an exception to this rule, signalling Foucauldian rupture in the hagiographical tradition because there is a minimization of traditional saintly activities, instead privileging sensational presentations of extreme affective piety. The Middle English text clearly features “an *incompatibility* of concepts” regarding generic classification and the ensuing textual expectations (Foucault, *Archeology* 154; emphasis added).

#### PERFORMANCE AND PERFORMATIVE SELF-ABJECTION: STIGMATA

Showing the stigmata is the quintessential act of performative self-abjection, particularly for women, because it contains the Kristevan elements of breaking boundaries (women teaching and preaching through bodily suffering/display of body fluids), disrupting identity (a woman performing as a man and as Christ), and disturbing the system of social order (confronting *ex-officio* church influence with *ex-gratia* female authority) (*Powers* 4). It is manifestly performative because none of these Kristevan elements can occur unless the stigmata are made visible to the community that imposes rules of identity and social order. Performative self-abjection in the form of stigmata is itself a liminal border, one that symbolizes both the Word and the flesh—in the body of a woman.

Critics make much of Elizabeth’s stigmata in the Middle English text: Ross states that Elizabeth is “the figurative embodiment of Christ crucified,” citing her as an exemplar of *imitatio Christi* (110) because she “makith a crosse of hirselfe” (Philip 44). But what, precisely, does *imitatio Christi* mean here? Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, encourages others to “Be ye followers of me, as I also of Christ” (11:1). 1

Peter also calls believers to live as Christ did: “For vnto this are you called: because Christ also suffred for ‘vs’, leauing ‘you’ an example that you may folow his steppes” (2:21). But there is no mention of what following Christ entails. Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471) reveals in his *Imitatio Christi* that imitating Christ entails charity, contempt for the vanities of the world, suffering the faults of others, and reading scripture, among other intellectual and meditative religious practices. The *imitatio* has many commonalities with the *Hali Meidhad* and other conduct books written for women in the High Middle Ages. In these texts, traditional *imitatio* does not include a call to undertake the actual physical suffering of Christ. However, as McGinn notes, this understanding of *imitatio Christi* changes with the public’s recognition of Saint Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), who, through his manifestation of the stigmata, changes the meaning of the “exemplar of Christ” (50). Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), an ascetic in his own right, held the view that *imitatio* allowed the faithful to “identify with Christ by extending our compassion to his humanity through pitying the suffering humanity of our neighbours,” as Bynum paraphrases his beliefs (*Holy Feast* 255). More precisely, Bernard advocates that the followers of Christ imitate him through faithfulness rather than by emulating crucifixion:

Lord Iesus, for as much as thy way is narrow, strait and contemptible vnto the world, grant me grace to imitate thee in suffring willingly all worldly contempt. For the seruant is not greater then his Lord, nor the Disciple about his Master. Mat. 7. Let thy seruant be exercised in thy holy life, for there is the health and the true sanctitie of my soule. (Bernard 327)

All of this changed with the blossoming of mysticism, as the inward reflection on the Passion became an outward physical replication of suffering in communion with

Christ. Saints experienced visions of the crucifixion, such as Margaret of Cortona (1247-1297) (Bevegnati 105-148). Somatic empathy with Christ increased as saints such as Margaret of Ypres (1216-1237) self-flagellated relentlessly in empathy with Christ's suffering (Bynum, *Holy Feast* 256; Newman, *Thomas* 166). Physical representations of Christ on the cross were performed by saints and would-be saints after Elizabeth's pioneering performances: Dorothy of Montau (1347-1394), possibly inspired by Elizabeth, would stand for extended periods of time in the pose of Christ crucified (Smith 51); Robert of Salentino (d. 1341) installed a crucifix-shaped tree in his cell, from which he would hang while reciting the *Pater Noster* (Smith 51); in his *Blessed Life*, Henry Suso (1296-1366) details carrying a man-sized wooden cross embedded with nails as a part of his own mystical practice (Chapter XVII).

These examples—and there are many more—can be understood as physical *imitatio Christi*. None of these ascetics, however, are as thorough in their representation of the Passion as Elizabeth. She does not simply perform Christ; she performs “the representacyone of his blyssed Passyone in the persone of the same virgyne” (Philip 29). She acts as the angry mob, the Roman soldiers, “oure blessyd lady Crystes moder” and “in anothere liknesse blessyd John Euengelist” (Philip 42). Performing both genders, Elizabeth renders male and female abject. Her performance facilitates agency and resistance; subversion lies in her enactment of cultural resistance against the church's ownership of the story of the Passion and its privileging of male performers by opening up “the space inside the system to disrupt it” (HopKins 235). Some scholars try to refine Elizabeth's practice down to a particular mode of *imitatio Christi*; Jennifer Brown describes it as *performatio Christi* (“Elizabeth” 70), but this is a misnomer. Elizabeth's



performances are, instead, *imitatio passionis*. Saint Francis of Assisi is often accredited with embodying the *imitatio passionis* (McGinn 48-50). McGinn argues that Francis's identification with Christ's suffering is centred upon "his reception of the stigmata . . . . The culminating seal of his holiness" (59). The stigmata alone would logically lead one to imagine *imitatio Christi* in its most literal sense; yet Elizabeth's stigmata, occurring as a part of her complete performances of the passion, perfect both the monopolylogue and surpass Francis's *imitatio passionis*. Since her demonstrations are not solely focused on Christ and his suffering, Elizabeth's self-abjection becomes a performative devotional exercise, in equal parts liturgical and theatrical.

Even though Elizabeth's *imitatio passionis* features the ultimate demonstration of empathy with Christ via an exhibition of the stigmata, the Middle English *vita* constructively minimizes its appearance, instead using the majority of its nine chapters to expound on her performances of self-mortification and self-abuse. Her stigmata are mentioned only twice, and both times the descriptions prioritize gory details over religious iconography. Early on in Chapter two, the first mention of Elizabeth's stigmata is somewhat clinical:

Wherefore it is to witt that the forseyde mayden beerith ful openly tokens of the woundys of oure Lorde Jhesu Cryste—that is to saye in her handys, feet, and syde—withouten any dowte, similacyone, or fraude. Fresshe woundys are ful euydently shewed often, and namely bledynge on Fridayes. The woundys of handes and feet are rounde, the wounde in the syde is auelonge: as hit were of a speer, and that othere foure woundes of nayles. (Philip 29)

The text quickly moves on to focus on her Passion show, “excepte [not including] these signes of fyue woundes” (Philip 29), as if her stigmata are secondary to her performances of the Passion *in toto*. Elizabeth’s stigmata are revisited in Chapter seven, but the focus here is on blood, breasts, and sensationalism:

y and my felawes . . . . Wee sawe blood sprynge oute often atte the woundes of hir handys and of hir feet and oute of hir syde on a Fridaye atte noon. Wee sawe blode, not allynges rede but as it were mengyd with water, rennynge oute thorowe an hool of hir coot made aboute the pappe . . . . And the wollen cloth that satte next hir flesche was defuyled with the same blode . . . . rennynge fro hir eyghen. And also otherewhile blode ranne oute at hir fynger endys bytwix the nayles and the flesche.” (41-42)

This graphic description is both disturbing and titillating. Significantly, it declines to use a reference to Saint Francis, which would remind readers that stigmata are part of a masculine tradition. Both accounts of the stigmata lack any kind of “miraculous” language. Instead they emphasize the detailed shape of each wound and the abundance of blood on her clothing as part of Elizabeth’s performance. The proselytization possibilities here take a back seat to sensationalism, suggesting that the text is aimed at a perhaps prurient readership.

The Middle English *life* would stir the imaginations of a fifteenth-century English audience because Elizabeth’s self-abjective gestures recall performances in contemporaneous mystery plays emphasizing Christ’s torment before crucifixion.<sup>42</sup> For example, the N-Town Play 29, “Herod; Trial before Annas and Cayphas” provides stage

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<sup>42</sup> Corpus Christi plays were popular in England between approximately 1378 and “the latter half of the sixteenth century” (Faust 155).

directions that Christ be beaten “about the hed and the body,” while tormentors “spyttyn in his face, and pullyn hym down” (l. 181; 229). Similarly, Elizabeth “smitith herself vpon the cheke so strongly that alle hir body bowith to that party [to that side];” “smytes hirselfe in the nodel of the hede byhynde;” and “smiteth the grounde with hir heed” (Philip 31). In another instance, Elizabeth displays blood that flows from her wounds and runs on to her “whyte lynnyn garnemente” (Philip 30) before her audience: “they sawe, and schewed to othere bisyde, prickynge as of thornes alle reed with bloody dropes rounde about the hede of the virgyne in the maner of a gerlonde, figuryng the corowne of thornes of oure Lorde” (Philip 47). Similarly, fifteenth-century mystery plays feature stage directions instructing that the Christ character wear “garments the color of blood” (Davidson, *Gesture* 106), emphasizing the “bloody droppes” and the wounds made by the nails (*Chester* 20.129). Medieval readers of MS Douce 114 would have been well-acquainted with the visuals described in Elizabeth’s *life*, because performances of “the suffering Christ in plays of the Passion resulted in . . . a character who would appear to be beaten until wounded from his head to his feet” (Davidson, “Sacred Blood” 437). The performance is similar, but the actors are not: in the N-Town play and other mystery plays, all characters would be performed by men, while the movement and violence would be sourced in the masculine. In Elizabeth’s case, all movement originates in her body; she is the means and target of torture, the sole vessel of agency.

Were Elizabeth’s stigmata authentic? All stigmatics, even Saint Francis, were subject to scepticism (McGinn 60; Smith 51), although Elizabeth endures the most public challenge to her stigmatism from church officials. Guibert de Tournai (1200-1284), Master General of the Franciscan order, despised the Beguines for their independent

religious practices. Further incensed by Elizabeth's performances, he publicly criticizes her, although not by name, in his *Collectio de Scandalis Eccelsiae* (1273), for her display of the stigmata (Elliott 188-9):

Inter huiusmodi mulierculas una est et fama surrexit iam quasi publica, quod ipsa est Christi stigmatibus insignita. Quod si verum est, non foveat latebras sed apertius hoc sciatur; si vero non est, hypocrisis et simulatio confundatur. Nam gloria Dei est celare verbum, et gloria regis investigare sermonem. Etsi enim sacramentum regis abscondere bonum sit, tamen honorificum est revelare et Dei opera confiteri.

[There is one among the wretched little women of this sort,<sup>43</sup> and the public rumor already arose that she is signed with the stigmata of Christ. But if this is true, it should not be fostered in hidden places, but this should be openly known; if it is not true, the hypocrisy and pretense should be confounded.] (Guibert 62)<sup>44</sup>

The authenticity of stigmata was near impossible to determine, and its appearance could sometimes be construed as something other than divine, "hover[ing] dangerously close to heresy" (Njus, "What Did It Mean to Act" 20). However, clerics more often than not accepted the presence of stigmata as implying holiness, regardless of origin. Peter Brown explains that in the medieval world, where there is *passio*, or suffering on the part of a saint, *praesentia*, "the physical presence of the holy," occurs (*Cult* 88). *Passio* and

<sup>43</sup> Jesse Njus translates this Latin phrase as "silly women of this kind" ("Politics" 294); both translations adequately express Guibert's obvious contempt for the Beguines.

<sup>44</sup> Njus also contends that Guibert was likely invested in maintaining the solitary status of the stigmata of Saint Frances and its relation to the Franciscan order. Njus observes that Francis is "the only person whose stigmata have been formally confirmed by the church" ("Politics" 294-5). Elliott argues that if Elizabeth's inquisitor been a Franciscan, she would likely have been deemed a heretic (*Proving* 188).

*praesentia*, fully articulated by Elizabeth, whether authentically manifested or through natural means, facilitate “a recognized moment in a ritual of power” that establishes a parallel, if not rival, system of religious authority (*Cult* 82).

If there were any question regarding the supernatural origin of a manifestation of the stigmata in the Middle Ages, the spectacle was not necessarily deemed inauthentic. In spite of the church’s approval or disapproval, the medieval public frequently understood suffering to be equated to a sacred sign, regardless of origin:

even the *self-inflicted* marks of some holy men and women, such as the Cistercian nun Beatrice of Ornacieux (d. 1309), who drove a nail into her own hand, were regarded by many as miraculous, and as signs of an authentic *imitatio Christi*. (Smith 51)

Bynum concurs, citing Lukardis of Oberweimar’s stigmata which were facilitated by forcing her middle fingers through the palms of her hands. These wounds were perceived as “miraculous” “because the significance of ‘stigmata’ was the experience of pain, not its source” (*Holy Feast* 212). For Elizabeth, the spectacle of the manifestation and its accompanying suffering constitutes *praesentia*, the physical appearance of the holy, adequately signifying the presence of the sacred, regardless of the origin of her stigmatic wounds. *Praesentia* carries with it enough authority to render Elizabeth’s stigmata divinely sanctioned, simultaneously authorizing her performative practices.

#### SET THE STAGE

Every performance requires a performance space, and Elizabeth’s stage may be understood to be similar to an anchorite’s cell attached to a church. However, unlike a cell, the building attached to the church which is her home is not enclosed. The audience

is invited into her room to observe her; it is both a private and public space. Her cousin, the Abbot of Seint Truden, ordered that a chapel with an adjoining bed chamber be built specifically for her.<sup>45</sup> Philip declares the Abbot “another John Euangeliste” who

vndirtoke cure of the virgyne and made be bigged there an honest  
chaumbyr and a competent and deuoute chapylle, and ordyned  
sufficyently and semely alle that longith to do with Goddis seruyse, soo  
that the chapel is departyd fro the chaumbyr with a smalle latys closynge,  
and in the myddes of that closynge there is a dore that opens in to the  
chappelle. And fro the maydens bedde men maye see vp to the auter. (43)

That a religious performance space would be erected for a Beguine woman suggests Elizabeth’s political and spiritual authority are substantial. No other Low Country saint was honoured in this fashion: “of all the thirteenth-century beguine saints of the Low Countries, Elisabeth is the only one, to our knowledge, whose cult has resulted in such a comprehensive programme of architecture and imagery” (Simons, “Phenomenal” 122).

From her bed in her chapel space, Elizabeth can see into the church and observe the liturgy. But this vantage-point is also her stage, and hence a place of privilege. She can perform in concert with the service, particularly when the Eucharist is being administered. The text suggests that even during the mass, spectators are in her room, rather than in the chapel, and all eyes are on Elizabeth: exhibiting her eucharistic ecstasy by imitating Christ on the cross, she stands “sumwhatly streight vp towarde the auter as if sche byhelde allewey the sacramente thurgh the myddes of the dore” (Philip 44). A textual fissure appears here: her performance space is a Foucauldian heterotopia. The

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<sup>45</sup> The Church of Spalbeek, now called The Chapel of Our Lady, still stands in modern-day Belgium. For more information on the Chapel, see W. Simons and J.E. Ziegler’s “Phenomenal Religion in the Thirteenth Century and its Image: Elisabeth of Spalbeek and the Passion Cult.”

heterotopia is a real site that appears familiar, but stands as a “countersite”— “a space that is *within* the society and yet representing something that is *beyond* that society” (Davis 92; emphasis added). Violating the hierarchy of space, the room is simultaneously a religious woman’s cell and a theatrical stage; it is both sacred and profane. Elizabeth’s room subverts traditional space as an example of “real sites that can be found within the culture, [and] are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault, “Of Other Spaces” 24). In the contestation found in this counterspace, social norms are inverted and made pro-feminine: there are men in a woman’s bed chamber, but the bed chamber is also a theatre and a church, which is a conflation of the private sphere of women and the public sphere of men; the woman performs as the man Jesus, as well as playing other men including soldiers, although women are not permitted to perform, let alone perform as men;<sup>46</sup> she engages in “*vyolens as men do*” (Philip 31), even though Philip claims she represents the ideal feminine, and that there is nothing “*vnsemely*” about her behaviours (Philip 43); the mass occurs in this space, but *she* is the centre of attention, a kind of pseudo-priest.

Elizabeth creates an inversion of the notion of anchoritism through her room/cell. Although the traditional anchorhold provided an escape from marriage and other social obligations for women, it was a product of the patriarchal church order, isolating women religious and their frequently demonstrative bodies from the church and from society at large (McAvoy 100). The anchoritic cell, enclosed, redirects women’s cataphatic spirituality into masculine apophatic practice, and in the cell they are forced to “embody

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<sup>46</sup> Women were sometimes permitted to perform in liturgical plays, but only when women played women, specifically the Virgin, and then only when the play took place in a nunnery. More traditionally, “all roles in the liturgical drama were sung by male clergy, including the Marys” (Ogden 143). For more on the performance of liturgical drama, see Ogden, *The Staging of Drama in the Medieval Church*.

another idealized form of virginity which involves humility and submission to the (male) authority of the church” (McAvoy 83). Elizabeth’s “cell” places her in the public eye, permits her to eschew submission, and, rather than focusing on her “inner life” of contemplation, she has others focus on *her*, as she creates a spectacle for her audience.

#### INVERSIONS OF THE GAZE AND LITERARY AGGRESSION

Ensnared in a sacred performance space, Elizabeth capitalizes on every opportunity to maximize the dramatic impact of her work. The time of each of her presentations is elemental: performing during the canonical hours established for monastic life suggests that Elizabeth is monastic in her practice, even though she is a solitary Beguine. She is “stirid to ryse merueilously atte the oure of matyns and othere oures bi an vnfaillabil clock,” (Philip 41) imitating a book of hours and using her body as text, implying that she has a divine knowledge of sacred time. But sacred time, for Elizabeth, is monumental women’s time. In declaring the hours, Elizabeth appropriates and controls what Kristeva refers to as “monumental time” (“Women’s Time” 14). Monumental time, associated with women’s conceptions of temporality, relates to the cyclical and infinite, “particularly the mystical” (“Women’s Time” 17). Women’s time is a counter to the more masculine historical or linear time, rendering an “explicit rupture, an expectation, or an anguish which other temporalities work to conceal” (Kristeva, “Women’s Time” 17). By serving as the infallible clock, and by regularly taking her audience back through time to the crucifixion, Elizabeth “rejoins . . . the archaic (mythical) memory and . . . monumental temporality of marginal movements,” such as her own spiritual devotion (Kristeva, “Women’s Time” 20). In short, her performances



permit her to control her audience's experiences of cyclical, forward, and backward movements of time.

More conventionally, her association with the canonical hours lends legitimacy to her performances while positioning her as an innovator in the medieval movement of liturgy from ritual to liturgical drama.<sup>47</sup> The theatrical nature of the liturgy has been acknowledged by scholars as a development intended to reach a laity that was largely illiterate and unable to understand the Latin rite (Harris 23). Over time, the mass had “turned into a new form of sacred theatre, known as ‘liturgical drama’ because of its close association with the church service” (Harris 28). Elizabeth begins her liturgical drama “at mydnyghte,” during the canonical hour of matins (also the traditional “witching hour”), a vigil in which the faithful rise from their beds for nocturnal prayer. The purpose of matins is to encourage meditation in a period removed from the busyness of everyday life. Framed by sleep, matins brings “souls refreshed with heavenly dew” to worship (Benedictine 362). Beginning her show at midnight allows Elizabeth to attract a highly-suggestible audience more easily impacted by her savage dramatics. Without preamble, she launches into a violent and emotionally-charged representation of the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: “how hee was taken and drawen hyder and thyder ful cruelly with wicked mennes handys” (Philip 29). Philip spares the reader no details, painting a word-picture that is graphic and sensational. Portraying the angry mob at the Passion, Elizabeth engages in punching, slapping, and yanking herself around the room,

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<sup>47</sup> The move to theatrical representations of the liturgy was initiated in the early ninth century by Amalarius, Bishop of Metz. Under the Emperor Charlemagne, Amalarius instituted a program of theatrical liturgical presentation concerning the Passion in order to more efficiently communicate meaning to laypersons in the church. The introduction of music into the liturgy was one of the first innovations to the mass; turning the Passion into a one-woman drama fitted to the canonical hours would be in keeping with the dramatization of the liturgy for the unlettered (Harris 23, 27).

with a feerful cruelte . . . sche takith her owne clothes byfore her breste  
 with her right hande and drawith hirselle to the righte syde, and thanne  
 with her lefte hande to the lefte syde . . . . sche berith ouer hirselle euen  
 forwarde [knocks herself over] . . . . sche dasches her heed to the erthe  
 . . . . takith vyolently hir heer . . . and smitith the grounde with hir heed.

(Philip 31)

Elizabeth then begins to accelerate the violence, initiating the flow of bodily fluids as the level of abjection increases: “sche takith her owne cheekys, the whiche byfore sche hadde smyten with many strokes, now with the platte hande, now with the fiste . . . as sche wolde pulle oute her chaules [throat, gullet]” (Philip 31). She even attempts to gouge out her own eyes “as sche wolde graue hem oute or bore hem in” (Philip 32). Although the text minimizes the miraculous, the performative self-abjection here is “desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous” (Kristeva, *Powers* 54), recalling the titillating violence of “virgin” martyrdoms like those of Saint Agatha, whose breasts were cut off (Osbern 233-4), and Saint Margaret, who was burned by fire and brands after having her flesh torn from the bone (Osbern 18, 22). Unlike these accounts, however, there is no divine intervention to ameliorate her suffering. She endures and continues to perform, foreshadowing a movement in popular and religious entertainments: written stories of brutalized maiden martyrs will soon give way to “the medieval integration of torture into the mystery play” (Enders, *Medieval Theatre* 24).

Elizabeth’s performance also incorporates a strange and violent music into her pantomime. It is likely that women of Elizabeth’s time were forbidden from singing in the church (Yardley 15). However, she neatly circumvents this disapprobation by making

her body a musical instrument as she enacts Cixous's performing "body—shot through with streams of song" (882):<sup>48</sup>

in steed of salmes [psalms], this newe tymbrer settith her flesche for an harpe, and hir chekys for a tymber, and ioy for a sawtry [stringed musical instrument; psaltry] and hir handys and fyngers for a wrast (that is an instrument of organ songe) . . . . a newe maner of syngynge. (Philip 32-3)<sup>49</sup>

Making her body a musical instrument, she brutally bends back her fingers, plucks her skin and strikes her cheeks. Elizabeth's music takes back the privilege of liturgical song, previously a male domain, as she expresses the "first music from the first voice of love which is alive in every woman." She creates music for her audience—without words—bypassing "the logic of oral speech and the logic of the text" to express her ecstatic self-abjection through sound and body movement (Cixous 881). Her performances transcend language in order to express her *jouissance*, "*on en jouit* [in joy] . . . . Violently and painfully" (Kristeva *Powers* 9). Using her body as a resonating chamber, she is able to amplify her music, disseminating her message even more widely. This fierce music, described by Philip as "turmente," ends for her audience only when she is too exhausted to continue, collapsing on her bed to rest.

After recounting Elizabeth's matins performance, the text moves on to the other hours, with Philip noting that "Fro now forthe it is to procede shorter to discryue othere

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<sup>48</sup> The question of whether women were permitted to sing in the church is a thorny one; although this issue remains hotly contested by scholars, it appears that women were only permitted to sing inside the nunnery in front of other women (Yardley 22).

<sup>49</sup> Elizabeth may have taken Psalm 150 as a guide to how she might make "a joyful noise" without contravening church rules prohibiting women from singing: "Sing ye to our Lord a new song: let his prayse be in the Church of saints . . . Let them praise his name in quire: on ymbrel and psalter let them sing to him . . . . The exaltations of God in their throte."

houres, for many things that are expounyd byfore acorden to other oures” (Philip 36). The text suggests a quiet room, filled with spectators, watching a woman strike herself and throw herself to the ground, punctuated with whispers, moans, and groans of pain: “sche swappeth hirselve vpon the chekys with booth handys. And of hir strokes maye be herde acordaunte sowne and cleer” (Philip 30). Descriptions of Elizabeth’s performative self-abjection are graphic: she “wonderly crokes her body and dasches her heed to the erthe . . . . sche takith vyolently hir heer that is aboute her forhede, but short, and smitith the ground with her heed” (Philip 31). These accounts trigger “the power of fascination exerted upon us, openly or secretly, by that field of horror” (Kristeva, *Powers* 208), which in this case involves Elizabeth’s ability to keep her audience riveted by making “feerful tokens and bekenynges with eyen and handys as a body that were wrooth and angry” (Philip 31). The Middle English text is the literature of a “privileged signifier” detailing performative self-abjection as an act “taking the place of the sacred” in this translation; the literature of Elizabeth’s life does not resist or sanitize the abject as it occurs for Christina the Astonishing (see chapter three), but instead “unveils” it for the reader (*Powers* 208).

At prime she performs the meetings of Christ with Annas, Caiaphas, Pilate, and Herod, playing all the characters in the scene. She rises from her bed

with a merueilous swiftnes and anoon standith vprighte and kastith booth her handes byhynde hir backe, and so ioyneth hir armes togedyr, soo that sche puttith the fyngers of the lefte hande to the righte elbowe and the fyngers of the right hande to the lefts elbowe, (Philip 36)

as if she is tied to a pillar. Lying down, Elizabeth “knokkith hir owne breste with so harde strokes . . . [until] she is vpstreyghte anoon . . . withouten helpe of her owne handys or of any othere” (Philip 37). The performance is so extreme that Philip finds it incomprehensible that Elizabeth does not die, and he resorts to the indescribability *topos*: “how many tokens of vyolens and schewynges of iniuries as the virgyn, so bounden, figures in hirselve my mynde maye not holde nor my witte endyte” (Philip 36). But she is not performing self-abjection to the death, which would conflict with the narrative trajectory of the martyr trope. Although she “dies” in her role as Christ each Friday after her pantomimed crucifixion, she rises, like Christ, only to begin the cycle again. So, Philip is bewildered because Elizabeth is not performing as a woman saint should, that is, becoming immovable through divine intervention and eventually dying like Saint Lucy (Jacobus 29-32). She confounds the traditional sequence of submission, service, suffering, and death expected from a pious woman, by putting events into a monumental “time loop.”

Sext, nones, and evensong present the climax to Elizabeth’s performances—enacting the death of Christ on the cross—in which she resorts to extended tableau poses. Holding herself in a cruciate shape, she “puttith the to foot vndir the tothere and the to wounde vndir the tother, and soo standith vprighte and—strecchyng oute her armes and her handys in the forme of a cros . . . stille as stoon” (Philip 38). Philip acknowledges here her superhuman strength, stating “aboue mannes myghte sche susteyneth her body, hengyng with the too woundyd foot” (Philip 39). But the static tableaux of Christ on the cross soon give way to a rather confusing demonstration of non-scriptural violence unrelated to the story: falling to the ground, Elizabeth begins to “smyteth her breste . . .

sche knocked her breste a hundreth tymes otherwhile with doubil and contynually strokes of booth hands.” She then rolls herself on the ground: “sche chaungith hire steed turnynge, turnynge hirselle vpon the breste, bakke, and sydes” (Philip 39). This turbulent scenario ends as suddenly as it began: “And thanne sche ryseth vp delyuerly [swiftly] and standith vpright on the too foot,” returning to her crucified tableau (Philip 39). Philip does not provide context for the inexplicable violence inserted into the crucifixion scene in either the Latin or the Middle English accounts. His inclusion of the event, however, suggests that narrative authenticity, even in the story of Christ’s Passion, is secondary to her impulse toward dramatic violence. Philip was not alone in his enthusiasm for violence; Paul Binski observes that the medieval appetite for violence

point[s] to one important fact about late-medieval Christian devotion . . . many of its preoccupations were with the spiritual significance and representation of the body, whether divine or not. This bodily, or somatic, concern, is clearly related to the vividness and extremes of images like the fourteenth-century Röttgen *Pietà*, or Grünewald’s horrendous Crucifixion on the Isenheim altarpiece . . . . The bad death, and especially the violent death, was of course inherently more entertaining than the Christian notion of the “tame” death. (47)

Elizabeth’s tableau crucifixion scene comes to a close with “sobbynges and weymentaynges vntelabil”; simulating Christ’s death, she “bowith hir heed . . . . as sche schulde yelde the goost” (Philip 40). This is not the end; there is one more chapter left in her performance cycle.

Finally, at compline, Elizabeth brings the show to its dénouement as she “figurith the biryng of oure Lorde” (Philip 41). Philip is vague about what roles Elizabeth performs in the compline presentation. With Christ now dead, she switches to the role of the suffering Mary, showing “how oure blessyd lady Crystes moder stood besyde the crosse, puttyng hir left hande vnder hir lefte cheek, and bowynge hire heed and hir nekke to the same syde” (Philip 41). Elizabeth pantomimes Mary’s suffering at the foot of the cross, placing her hands on her face in a gesture of despair and pain in her own version of the *planctus Mariae*, also known as the Lament of Mary (Napolitano 161). Essential to this scene of lamentation is the role of the apostle John, the only disciple to stand by Christ during his Passion, serving as comforter to Mary. Elizabeth incorporates John into the performance, showing

in anothere liknesse blessyd John Euengelist, loutynge [kneeling, genuflecting] down with hir heed and laynge doune on the lifte syde, booth hir handys ioyned togedir and the fyngers ilke in other folden withouten the handes.” (Philip 42)

In her performance of John the Evangelist, Elizabeth completes the double time loop of abjection: in the past and in the present simultaneously, the audience is taken back to the crucifixion; moreover, they are shown the beloved disciple who will write Christ’s story, the story Elizabeth is currently performing. This circular temporality is gendered, abject time: with its path cyclical rather than linear, it is “monumental time,” repeatedly commemorating an event in history (Kristeva, “Women’s Time” 14). It is also the double time of abjection: “a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth” (Kristeva, *Powers* 9).

The text of Elizabeth's performances features very little in the way of traditional biography or hagiographical detail, opting instead for descriptive passages of unadulterated violence. Her performance is one of "visual aggression." Assaf Pinkus describes this phenomenon as "the monumental public art of violence *per se*, separated from its devotional context and thus experienced as a brutal act inflicted somatically on the body of the viewers" (44). Pinkus cites the portrayal of martyrdoms on The Martyrs' Cycle at Schwäbisch Gmünd on the Holy Cross Minster Church as an example of visual aggression.<sup>50</sup> The sculptures emphasize the emotional, suffering responses of saints who died violent deaths at the hands of persecutors, uncharacteristically featuring horrifying facial expressions of saints in agony.<sup>51</sup> More traditional accounts of saints and of Christ depict executions in which the victim is dignified, usually unharmed by torture, welcoming death as the moment when s/he will be united with God in heaven:

the grisly accounts and depictions of martyrdom from the high Middle Ages show curiously affectless victims. The saints do not appear to feel their torture . . . medieval theory was clear: the saints were blessed in death by the anesthesia of glory. (Bynum, "Violent Imagery" 15)

The Middle English "Vita Elizabeth" translates this visual aggression to text; stripped of most biblical imagery, it becomes a work of violence in literary form, in which there is no "anaesthesia of glory" for Christ/Elizabeth. Instead, the text fully exploits the element of suffering, expressed through "angwisshes, akynges, and sorowes" (Philip 37). Further,

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<sup>50</sup> The Martyr's Cycle is a series of *bas-relief* sculptures on the north choir portal of the Holy Cross Minster Church in Germany, created between 1351 and some time in the 1370s. Portraying "the moment of immediate violent action" perpetrated against martyrs in their persecutions, the representations of the saints are unique in that they are depicted in "effeminate, submissive postures, screaming and weeping, in contrast to their usual impassibility" (Pinkus 43).

<sup>51</sup> This change in the representation of persecuted saints and martyrs, registering suffering in their facial expressions, can also be understood as the subtle infiltration of humanism into medieval art. No longer portrayed as impervious to physical pain, they are more human and less divine in their agonies.



this inclusion changes the tenor of the story as well as the effect of the account on an audience, because the visceral nature of the description as a literary aggression “[p]ostpones the moment of devotional immersion,” which means that the drama of the violence itself overwhelms the message of salvation for the viewer and moves the text further away from its ostensible hagiographical purpose (Pinkus 43).

Elizabeth’s *vita* is traditionally read as an *exemplum* of a saint’s self-sacrifice in identification with Christ’s suffering. However, her portrayal of the Passion, replete with multiple episodes of self-inflicted violence, instead creates an *exemplum* outlining how a religious woman might control her own destiny through performative self-abjection. Performances of self-torture establish autonomy and religious authority. Jody Enders posits that the actor engaged in the spectacle of torture has “discovered a means by which to legitimize [herself] and [her] enterprise and to acquire greater social agency” (*Medieval Theatre* 60). Elizabeth, using performative self-abjection, creates “a verisimilar representation of a narrative already known to be strictly true: The Passion of Christ” (Enders, *Medieval Theatre* 59). By performing this “true illusion” of torture, Elizabeth is legitimized, both in her life and in her *vita*, increasing her social agency through *imitatio passionis*. Her body is “self-inscribed with ideologies that [run] wholly contrary to those of the dominant power” (B. Shaw 311). Portraying Christ was a risky gambit for Elizabeth; acting as Christ crucified before the late fourteenth century was considered by clerics to be “in the worst possible taste,” according to David Klausner (“Staging” 65). Citing a disciplinary letter written in 1320 by the Bishop of Hereford to the monks of Abergavenny priory who were acting out the crucifixion, Klausner presents

an insight into church disapproval relating to the physical imitation of Christ during the fourteenth century:

Quosdam ipsorum spectaculum / suorum corporum facientes &  
 aliquociens quod non sine cordis amaritudine referimus nudi extensis  
 brachiis cum baculis & ligatis ad modum crucifixi stramine vel alio aliquo  
 ad modum crucifixi stramine vel alio aliquo ad modum corone / capitibus  
 eorum superposito de ipsorum dormitorio nocturno tempore descendentes  
 & sic incedentes. Ac ludentes coram sociis suis / & aliis inibi morantibus  
 & alia enormia facientes que ad presens / propter ipsorum enormitatem  
 nimiam subticemus.

[Some of them make a spectacle of their bodies and sometimes – which we did not learn without bitterness of heart – they come down naked from their dormitory at night, with arms stretched out with rods and tied in the manner of someone crucified, with straw or something else in the manner of a crown put upon their heads, and walk in that way and play before their fellows and others staying there and do other outrageous things, about which we are silent at present because of their excessive outrageousness.] (qtd. in Klausner, *Records* 216)<sup>52</sup>

Although liturgical plays were presented in churches particularly during Holy Week, the bare cross usually served as a symbol representing the crucifixion. Actors at this time did not perform Christ crucified. Sticca notes that “the crucifixion and the events that led up to it are non-existent in the liturgical drama, for it focuses on the resurrection and its

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<sup>52</sup> Kathryn Smith also expounds on the dangers of imitating Christ’s crucifixion during the fourteenth century in “The Monk Who Crucified Himself.”

characteristic emotion is joy” (41). Again, Elizabeth confounds the societal expectations and social mores of her day through theatrical innovation.

Representations of Christ crucified may have been shocking in the early fourteenth century, but by the early fifteenth century, “this [medieval] culture with its eyes permanently fixed on the ideal unities of the divine gives way to the noisy, contradictory, and capacious realities of the human” (Scanlon 53). Portrayals of martyrdom and crucifixion had become far more graphic; Klausner directly attributes the growing number of representations of Christ crucified to the Beguines’ affective piety in the twelfth and thirteenth century, as well as to popular devotional texts such as Nicholas Love’s *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* (ca. 1400), which invites readers to “recreate for him or herself [Christ’s] physical sufferings” (“Staging” 65). Many citizens of fifteenth-century England therefore became preoccupied with the violent and morbid. Bynum writes: “the horrors of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries—plague, economic collapse, famine, war” are reflected in contemporary art of the period, revealing the “‘violent tenor of life’—persecutions, pogroms, public torture and executions” (“Violent Imagery” 3). Consequently, the idea of the *Corpus Christi* performance *per se* is no longer shocking to the fifteenth-century audience which has perhaps been somewhat desensitized to violence; what is exceptional about the *vita* of Elizabeth is that a woman is the actor, playing Christ, in her own theatre.

## RAVISHMENT

Performance theory posits that actors in ritual and religious presentations sometimes engage in “restored behaviour,” in which the performer attains a state which is “‘me behaving as if I am someone else,’ or ‘as if I *am beside myself*, or *not myself*, as

when in trance” (Schechner, *Between* 37). Elizabeth experiences numerous trance states described by Philip as “ravishments” which punctuate her performances. During these episodes, she appears to be “not herself” as she “goth in spirite vnto God” (Philip 32). Elizabeth’s ravishment state, construed as a spiritual ecstatic trance by Philip and many critics, may instead express restored behaviour: “the special kind of behaviour ‘expected’ of someone participating in a traditional ritual” (Schechner, *Between* 37). On the other hand, these ravishments may simply be moments when Elizabeth chooses to rest before engaging in the next set of pantomimes. Elizabeth often exhibits signs of ravishment throughout her day: immediately preceding her performances, “this oure and othere oures she is rauesched or [before] sche ryse fro hir bedde” (Philip 29); after performances, “and a litil after . . . sche is rauesched and waxes alle starke” (Philip 34); and when she receives the Eucharist: “in the selfe momente that sche openith her mouthe and takith the oste, she is rauyshed euen forthwith...and standith stoon stille” (Philip 44). These spells are brief, “after the whiche raueschyng as turnyd agayne to hirselfe” (Philip 29). Her ravishments seem to be moments of rest and rallying in preparation for her next performance; after each violent episode of the Passion, she is exhausted and must take a break in order to

restith hir froo that vnsuffrabil trauelle euen as she were all ouercomen and anentized [reduced to nothing; ruined]. And a litil while after, now and now, sche makith sobbyngs and sighes as a body schulde dye. Then . . . . sche is rauesched and restith all her body froo tourmente and laboure. (Philip 33)

According to Bynum, eucharistic ecstasy signals a “‘prophetic’ or ‘charismatic’” substitute for the priesthood. That is, the moment of ecstasy, particularly eucharistic ecstasy, was a performative claim to clerical authority, which also

bypassed the power of males, or criticized male abuse of priestly authority. . . . ecstasy was [also] a means of endowing women’s nonclerical status – their status as lay recipients – with special spiritual significance . . . . Sometimes acquir[ing] metaphorical priesthood.

*(Fragmentation 135)*

What is unusual about Elizabeth’s ravishments or ecstasies is that they are not necessarily tied to the Eucharist. Once again, she advances a new approach to a traditional saintly *topos*, performing her clerical authority via ravishment both inside and outside of the eucharistic event. She asserts her spiritual power numerous times during each canonical hour through alternating performances and ravishments. Ravishments maintain her religious authority in between shows while she rests up for the next scene in her Passion Play. Given that Elizabeth “was certainly aware of the spiritual legacy to which she aspired,” protecting her status in between acts was integral to her autonomy (Njus, “Politics” 286).

#### THE *PLEY’S* THE THING

The foregoing discussion raises the question of why this text focuses so intently on Elizabeth’s performances of the Passion, while playing down the mystical aspects of her stigmata and largely ignoring or minimizing scriptural references and traditional miracles. The answer to this question lies in the text’s anticipated readership: by the early fifteenth century, when the work was translated, English audiences would have been well

acquainted with liturgical theatre and performances of mystery plays, and would have also developed a much better understanding of dramatic representations of biblical stories in general (Brown, *Three Women* 201). Such developments explain why the Carthusian translator turns the *vita* into a record of performance. Certainly, Elizabeth would have been less of an oddity to an English society familiar with religious performances memorialized in the mystery play cycles, and more of an oddity to people of her own time as a pioneer of a cultural event not yet known in Elizabeth's contemporaneous society.<sup>53</sup> Njus confirms that Elizabeth's performances "contained many elements of religious acting more than a century before the first performances of vernacular plays" ("What Did It Mean to Act" 3). By the time MS Douce 114 was created in the early-to-mid fifteenth century, the word "miracle" had evolved to become associated not only with acts of divine intervention, but also with "pleys" or *ludi* portraying these events (Hamblin 29). As Lawrence Clopper explains, the term "*miracula*" refers directly to actual miracles, but was also applied to plays that frequently had, but were not restricted to, liturgical content ("*Miracula*" 880). Manuscripts such as Sloane MS 2478 contain plays that are described as "*spectacula celebrare quae nos miracula appellare consuevimus*" [*spectacula* which we are accustomed to calling *miracula*] (Clopper, "*Miracula*" 881).<sup>54</sup> Contemporaneous with MS Douce 114 in the early-to-mid 1400s are a number of English texts that discuss the propriety of religious *miracula* or *spectacula* performances, such as *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* (ca.1400), a tract associated with

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<sup>53</sup> Although the liturgy is dramatized in the church by male players in Elizabeth's lifetime, the popular religious drama, in the vernacular, is not fully developed until the late fourteenth/early fifteenth century (Williams 38). The notion of the feast of Corpus Christi and its Passion Plays was not instituted by the church until 1311, eight years after Elizabeth's death (Harris 76).

<sup>54</sup> Clopper cites the Sloane MS 2478 as an example of the use of the word "miraculum" in reference to a secular play observed by two monks in a public market ("*Miracula*" 881).

the Lollard movement which argues against the “pleying” of miracles: “no man shulde usen in bourde and pleye the miraclis and werkis that Crist so ernystfully wroughte to oure helthe” (23-25). The existence of such texts is evidence of contemporaneous discussion regarding the apposite content of theatrical “miraculum”.

This alternate interpretation of “miraculum” combined with the prominence of liturgical plays in early fifteenth-century England may account for a distinct and heretofore unrecognized reading of the Middle English text of Elizabeth’s *life*. The Carthusian translator may have understood, or simply chose to direct attention to, Elizabeth’s devotional exercises as “miraclis pleying” and altered the narrative in order to reflect that aspect of her story. This scenario explains why these changes were made in the process of translation: Elizabeth’s stigmata are described in detail, but these events are never referred to as miracles; the Middle English text does not specifically point to any one event as “miraculous”. Elizabeth’s performances are frequently referred to as marvelous,<sup>55</sup> but this in itself does not necessarily connote miraculous in typical hagiographical meaning. The context of marvelous in the text may be understood as either “miraculous” or “amazing”: “how o persone maye booth smyte and soffre so many, soo swifte and heuy strokes, of these I schalle calle moor merueilos”; she performs a “merueilous and myserabil disciPLYne” (Philip 37). She “stirid to ryse merueilously” (Philip 41). Wonder and amazement surround her, but the notion of miraculous intervention can only be supposed by the reader who presumes this to be a hagiographical

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<sup>55</sup> The Middle English word identified in a variety of spellings as meruaile, marveiles, or merveillous is as ambiguous in meaning as *miracula*. In addition to referring to miracles, it also describes qualities of persons: “to be filled with wonder, surprise, admiration, or puzzlement” (Brown, *Three Women* 313); other definitions also include “worthy of admiration,” “strange,” “unnatural,” and “terrifying” (“merveillous,” *Middle English Dictionary*).

account. The story has evolved into a description of a play, rather than yet another hagiographical record of a woman saint.

When the *vita* is read as an ekphrastic description of a devotional exercise performance, the Carthusian compiler can be understood to be addressing an English readership familiar with liturgical theatre and *miracula/spectacula*—concepts that, according to Clopper, were not in common use before the early thirteenth century in England (“*Miracula*” 886). Therefore, earlier readers of the Latin text would not have been familiar with the broadened meaning of *miracula* and would not have presumed the text to explicate anything other than a saintly woman’s activities. In the end, then, Philip reveals that Elizabeth’s existence *as a performer* is the overwhelming miracle of her story:

Wherfore this virgyne, whos lyfe is alle mirakil—ye, moorouer, alle  
hirselve is but mirakil! As hit schewith by the abouen writynge figures and  
expounes, not allonly Cryste, but Cryste crucified in hir body. (Philip 50)

Her acts of suffering are metaphorical representations rather than a defiance of natural law facilitated by God. She is identified as an actor engaged in a devotional exercise, representing

the figuratif body of Cryste, that is holy Chirche. Loo in the distinxione of  
oures she representys the custome of holy Chirche ordeynid by God as  
Dauyd seith, seuen tymes on the daye, Lorde, I seyde louvyng to the.  
(Philip 50)

The language employed in both the Latin and the Middle English versions of the *life* of Elizabeth point to demonstrative acts, and both utilize, to some extent, the



language of theatre rather than religious language to describe her performances. But there is a subtle difference between the two narratives. In the Latin text, Elizabeth is primarily described as “representing,” “standing in the shape of,” and “repeating” her imitations, as the reader will see. These phrases privilege the observer as the authoritative figure in the performance, providing the perspective based on his descriptions, while she is presented as a mere vehicle through which the performance occurs. In the Middle English text, there is a greater emphasis on theatrical language, underscoring the acts of “showing” and “betokening.” When Elizabeth is “showing” something, she controls the performance and the narrative as the authoritarian figure, while the observers passively “receive” the drama. The following examples of translation and interpretation from Latin to Middle English illustrate this textual shift in authority. The Middle English narrative of Elizabeth’s performances begins with a phrase directly translated from the Latin: Philip establishes that he is an audience member and the privileged observer who watches as he “perceyued vndoubtedly with *myn eyen*” (29).<sup>56</sup> But there are many instances in which the Middle English language does not rely on a word-for-word translation to describe what Elizabeth does. When this happens, the narrative transforms as the tone shifts from the privileged observer’s stance to that of the passive observer who receives the performance. That is, the empowered Elizabeth controls what the audience sees based on what she “shows”: Elizabeth presents pantomimes as “sche *rehercys*”<sup>57</sup> often and abundantly” (Philip 32);<sup>58</sup> “sche *schewith* . . . swetnesse of goostly woordes” (Philip 35).<sup>59</sup> Verbs

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<sup>56</sup> “incipiens quae oculata et sic indubitata fide percepit” (“Vita Elizabeth” 363).

<sup>57</sup> The term “rehercys” in Middle English does not suggest “rehearsal” as practising for a presentation; instead, it connotes narration, description, teaching, to repeat, recall, or reveal. See: *Middle English Dictionary*.

<sup>58</sup> “Haec autem supredicta frequenter repetit et morose” (“Vita Elizabeth” 365).

<sup>59</sup> There is no Latin equivalent of Elizabeth “showing” her good cheer and sweet ghostly words (“Vita Elizabeth” 367).

relating to showing continue; Philip writes: “she signifyeth and shewith how oure Lorde was bounden to a pyller” (38);<sup>60</sup> “sche hath bytokenyd . . . the liknesse of a cross” (40);<sup>61</sup> “she figurith the biringe of oure Lorde” (41);<sup>62</sup> “sche shewith in anothere liknesse . . .” (42).<sup>63</sup> “Showing” expresses an implicit acknowledgement of Elizabeth as a performer controlling the narrative; use of this term also suggests autonomy rather than the acts of an intervening God.<sup>64</sup> As Kristeva remarks, the writing of abjection frequently uses displaced language—in this case, theatrical language rather than religious language—that prioritizes the *rheme* (a contextualization, providing new information about the subject) over the *theme* of Elizabeth’s actions (*Powers* 193). This displaced language of the theatre thematizes the subject, further clarifying the dynamic between actor and audience during any performance.

The text further emphasizes the performative nature of Elizabeth’s devotional practice by interspersing her active pantomimes with descriptions of tableaux in which she freezes in a pose representing the biblical trope of the suffering Mary at the foot of the cross (John 19:25-27). The pose correlates to illuminations from Books of Hours and thirteenth-century psalters (Ross 44):<sup>65</sup>

sche figured vnto vs how oure blessyd lady Crystes moder stood besyde  
the crosse, puttynge hir left hande vndir hir lefte cheek, and bowynge hire  
heed and hir nekke to the same syde. (Philip 42)

<sup>60</sup> “signat et figurat ualiter Dominus noster extitit ad columnam ligatus” (“Vita Elizabeth” 369).

<sup>61</sup> “qua scilicet stans in figura crucis” (“Vita Elizabeth” 370).

<sup>62</sup> “In hora vero completorii in sui corporis gestu seu positione figurat Dominicam sepulturam” (“Vita Elizabeth” 370).

<sup>63</sup> “sub alia figura monstravit” (“Vita Elizabeth” 371).

<sup>64</sup> It could be suggested that the term “showing” might represent a mystical vision as the term does for Julian of Norwich (Julian 61). However, in her Middle English *vita*, Elizabeth does not experience any visions.

<sup>65</sup> A contemporaneous example can be found in the illustration of The Map Psalter, ca. 1265, showing Christ crucified as the Virgin and John the Evangelist look on.

[Item quomodo stabat juxta crucem Domini dulcissima Mater ejus nobis in dicta feria figuravit, ponens manum sinistram subtus maxillam, ad illam partem caput et collum inclinans, et tenens subtus maxillam dextram dextram manum.] (“Vita Elizabeth” 371)

There is no allusion to the power of God in these descriptors; instead, the text identifies clearly that this is a representation staged for the benefit of an audience.

During the mass, Elizabeth engages in a different kind of performance. At the sight of the host, she is ravished; her eucharistic ecstasy involves “sighynge, and coueitynge with hye desyres the sighte of oure Lordes body,” a desire that remakes itself in reverse when she imitates Christ crucified:

with a merueilous mouynge all hir body ouerthwarte the bedde,  
 strecchyng forthe hir armes on booth sydes hir, and makith a crosse of  
 hirselfe . . . . she hengith in the eyre withouten sterynge as longe as the  
 Masse is in doynge. (Philip 43-4)

Elizabeth effectively “steals the show,” drawing attention away from the Eucharist and the actions of the priest. Once she “openith her mouthe and takith the oste” (Philip 44), the rehearsed and contrived elements of her show are revealed: with the help of her family, she executes a magic trick when “hir sistres and hir moder lifte vp and vndirsette hir with clothes or with two piloues” so that she is “neither liggyng ne sittynge but as bytwix booth, haldynge hire handys togedir” (Philip 44). Upon receiving the Eucharist, this disabled woman who otherwise cannot walk “standith stoon stille,” holding the host in her mouth. Immediately, the sisters and mother sweep into the scene, taking away the supports helping Elizabeth stand: “she abidith vnmouid in the same manere of body and

membrys as she was when sche receyued the sacramente” (Philip 45). She holds the pose in a state of eucharistic ecstasy until “sche commith agayne to hirselve and lenys hir heed to that place as hit is wonte to ligge” (Philip 45). The staged removal of the accoutrements of the domestic household (pillows, blankets) further contributes to the heterotopian nature of Elizabeth’s space; symbols of householdry give way to a self-supporting Elizabeth who defines herself outside of the private sphere in a very public display. Philip’s observation that the supports may be either clothing or pillows suggests that this particular performance at the Mass was repeated often, and that the supporting props varied.

According to the performance theory of Richard Schechner, Elizabeth’s plays and tableaux are pure theatre. Schechner defines theatrical performance as ceremonial, occurring in “special times” (in this case, during the liturgical hours) in “special places” (a special room attached to the chapel), within a theatrical frame. The actions of the performer are “differently real,” an “incomplete presence, as a *here-and-now performance of there-and-then events.*” (169). Schechner’s theory frames Elizabeth’s performative self-abjection in that it is “real action” in an “aesthetic drama”:

small real actions are substituted for big fictional semblances. A female has her body scarred or a male is circumcised. These “real actions” are themselves emblems or symbols. But when the theatrical frame is imposed strongly it permits the enactment of “aesthetic dramas,” shows whose actions, like Oedipus poking out his own eyes, are extreme but recognized by everyone, including the performers, as a “playing with” rather than a

“real doing of.” This “playing with” is not weak or false, it causes changes to both performers and spectators. (*Performance* 169-70)

In Elizabeth’s re-enactments, the violence is real, but the crucifixion is not. The crucifix, the nails, and the angry mob are mimed. The reality of crucifixion is absent from Elizabeth’s play; the audience does not experience the sensory assault of witnessing an actual crucifixion, which involves “flayed skin, tortured breathing, the smells of dried blood, sweat and urine, insects landing on open sores, gored open flesh, and groans of agony from a broken body” (Dutt 8). Elizabeth does not die as Christ did; she instead signals his death as she “leyeth downe her heed vpon hir righte schuldir,” in imitation of medieval artistic representations of Christ’s death on the cross (Philip 40). “Then a litle space after, as hir custum is,” the scene ends and she slips out of character, abandoning the crucifixion pose to “leythe hir downe, stirith and bowith” (Philip 40).

One may presume that Elizabeth is imitating contemporaneous artistic representations of the crucifixion in which Christ drops his head to his shoulder at the moment of his death, “dead on the cross, eyes closed, head lowered . . . exploiting and conveying the deep emotion which Christ’s sacrifice, at this time, aroused” (Sticca 46). Based on the medieval reciprocity between art and drama (Davidson, “Gesture” 69), “presumably Elisabeth could rely on her spectators to recognize the imagery [in her performances] from their familiarity with sacred art” (Njus, “What Did It Mean to Act” 7). Thus, Elizabeth’s performance of Christ’s death is art imitating art, a representation of abjection in death, “true theatre, without makeup or masks” (Kristeva, *Powers* 2). It is the singular occasion when Elizabeth moves from performative self-abjection to performing

Christ's non-Kristevan abjection.<sup>66</sup> Briefly, in death, Christ becomes the subject of the performance as saviour, forcing the audience to contemplate salvation, "at the border of [his/her] condition as a living being" (Kristeva, *Powers* 2).

This is not simply religious ritual in performance; it is also political. Elizabeth's performance is abject because it "disturbs identity, system and order, refusing to respect borders and rules" (Kristeva, *Powers* 4). Challenging the discourse of power through her theatre, she creates a space where the social order is, at the very least, temporarily diverted. How this diversion of the social order occurs is best explained through Victor Turner's analysis of the ways in which theatre and ritual can affect societal change. Turner theorizes that this process occurs in four distinct steps: 1) A breach of social mores occurs in a dramatic event; 2) the breach triggers a crisis that essentially dares authorities to struggle with its meaning; 3) there is a redressive action to resolve this breach; 4) a reintegration of the subverting behaviour occurs, distracting from any possible social schisms created by the performance (Turner 37-41; Schechner, *Performance* 167). In Elizabeth's case, 1) the breach of mores that upsets the social order is her autonomous representation of women's spirituality when she performs as an actor, and further when she plays Christ himself during the Passion;<sup>67</sup> 2) her uninhibited

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<sup>66</sup> I would argue that in spite of his feminized incarnations in the medieval world, Christ is not abject in the Kristevan sense of the word. His bodily fluids are not repulsive (although they may be construed as maternal, for example, as he births the *ecclesia* from his wound; see *Christ giving birth to the Ecclesia*, Vienna Codex 2554, ca. 1220s). In addition, his wounds are admired and replicated by the faithful. The Kristevan abjective food taboo is invalid in Christ, because the *ecclesia* consumes his body and blood through the Eucharist: "And whiles they were at supper, Iesvs tooke bread, and blessed, and brake: and he gaue to his Disciples, and said, Take ye, and eate: This is my body. And taking the chalice, he gaue thanks: and gaue to them, saying: Drinke ye al of this. For this is my bluvd of the New Testament, which shal be shed for many vnto remission of sinnes" (Matt. 26:26-28). By the same token, Christ's dead body denies abjection because it is resurrected. However, Christ is abject in the traditional sense of the word, and God-forsaken at his death: "And at the ninthe houre Iesvs cried out vvith a mightie voice, saying, *Eloi, Eloi, lamma sabacthani?* Which is being interpreted, *My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?*" (Mark 15:34).

<sup>67</sup> She "schewed merueilous miracles of his blisshed Passyone" (Philip 28).

performances and her refusal to be subservient to a spiritual advisor create a crisis, daring church authorities to struggle for religious dominion against a Beguine who claims *ex-gratia* religious sovereignty and spiritual autonomy;<sup>68</sup> 3) the redressive action begins when Philip initiates a *probatio* to investigate the legitimacy and authority of Elizabeth's performances;<sup>69</sup> 4) reintegration of subverting behaviour occurs when Philip's scepticism turns to wholehearted endorsement, bringing about a redress legitimizing Elizabeth's performances.<sup>70</sup> The Latin *vita* characterizes her work as miraculous, reintegrating her into the church. In the Middle English *life*, however, the breach of social mores followed by crisis and redressive action are still present, but they become prefatory material to the main narrative of dramatic reenactment. With the excision of proofs of miracles, Elizabeth's subversive behaviour is reintegrated into fifteenth-century societal mores as an aesthetic drama rather than proof of *ex-gratia* divine intervention. Divorced from the miraculous, Elizabeth's reintegration in the Middle English *vita* recognizes her work as explicitly pro-feminine theatrics: she is presented as a figure of immense physical and mental power.

#### BEGUINE INJUNCTIONS INVERTED

Elizabeth's *vita* paints a picture of a woman who is frequently assertive to the point of aggression and confrontation, a characterization that stands in opposition to the ideals of Beguine behavior. Women are expected to exhibit "that greatest of saintly virtues, humility . . . by walking with heads and eyes cast down, by being neither vain nor

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<sup>68</sup> "The shilke merueilous werkes of oure Lorde, whan I, Dan Philippe of Clareualle, herde what tyme that I visityd howses of myn ordre in that cuntrey. I gave no credence to hem that tolde me" (Philip 28).

<sup>69</sup> "Til tyme that I come myselfe and sawe" (Philip 28).

<sup>70</sup> "Proued that I hadde not herde the halfe. There I schalle discryue a few merveiles of many . . . that are more notabil and moor merveyulous as my conscyens gyueth me, begynnyne atte thoos thinges that I perceyued vndoutably with myn eyen" (Philip 28).

showy, and by speaking with a soft voice” (Rodgers and Ziegler, “Elizabeth” 119). For all her contortions and violence, there is “nothinge . . . that may displese any mannes syghte,” as “she is alwey couerde and bycladde with hir own clothes, nor nothinge apperith vnsemely nor vnhonest” (Philip 42-3). However, the other qualities of humility (eyes cast down, avoidance of vanity, and a soft speaking voice) clash with Elizabeth’s performance art, particularly because of her self-assured and sometimes confrontational use of listening and seeing which are both “performance-oriented and sacred” (Suydam 143).

Scholars have paid a great deal of attention to Elizabeth’s performances of the Passion, but they ignore the fact that she presents two distinct *personae* in her *vita*: one who engages in sensational devotional exercises portraying the humility and passive suffering of Christ, and one who is a thoughtful, articulate, and assertive teacher and confessor. The two sides of her character provide insight into varying facets of Elizabeth’s personality and her life. Although she performs almost entirely in silence, when she speaks *as a performer*, she does so softly. Philip clarifies that her silences are proof of her modesty and appropriate Beguine behaviour: “she is but of fewe woordys, the whiche woordes are [not] ful spoken oute”—which he deems a sign of “maydenly schamefastnes” (Philip 35). Her language is restricted during her performances to mostly whispers and sighs: “Among thees she makith from hire priue herte rotys large, depe, iocunde, and lufsum sighes with a clere stirynge of breste and throot and with a swete sounynge whysperynge of her lippes” (Philip 34). While kissing a diptych of Christ, she murmurs: “often and thikke [repeatedly] sche seith these woodys: ‘zouche here, zouche heere’. That is to sey in Englysche, ‘Swete Loord, swete Lord’” (Philip 33-4). This near-



silence of Elizabeth is valorized in medieval women, particularly saints. The *Ancrene Riwe*, for example, associates silence in women with nearness to God: “for hwa-se is muche stille, ant halt silence longe, ha mei hopien sikerliche thet hwen ha speketh toward Godd thet he hire i-here” [for if anyone is often silent, and keeps long silences, she may surely hope that when she speaks to God He will hear her.] (ll. 368-370).

Until now, the interpretations of Elizabeth’s silences during performance have been understood as compliance with the church’s directives. Religious scholars have often perceived her self-imposed silences as an exhibition of appropriate behaviour for women. Conversely, to many second-wave feminist scholars, silence is linked to gender as a sign of “passivity and powerlessness: those who are denied speech cannot make their experience known and thus cannot influence the course of their lives or of history” (Gal 175). De Lauretis states that silence is “the negation of women as subjects of the discourse” (*Figures* 243). Contrary to conventional thinking, Elizabeth’s silence is not submissive; although she “spekith to nobody” (Philip 35), this is a strategic and subversive protest against the clergy, who do not figure in her devotional exercise because they are inferior to her *ex-ipsa* religious authority. Her silence is not *imposed* upon her; instead, she *chooses* to be silent, speaking only to God. In effect, she circumnavigates “the repressive devaluation of women’s speech imposed by a history of cultural domination,” turning her silence into power (De Lauretis, *Figures* 243). She speaks instead with her body, which requires no explanation, no verbiage, no apology. As Brent Shaw notes, having control over a saint’s own tortured body permits silence as the actor speaks through her body; she does not need words (278). Elizabeth wields

silence as an instrument which enhances her somatic performance, controlling the discourse at every turn.

However, Elizabeth is not always silent, speaking freely to others when she is not performing. For example, her loquaciousness is evident when she counsels men and prays for them: “Certeynly, for that wee haue made mencyon of confessyon, wee wole thei witte that liketh to heer that oure seruantes . . . stood onys besyde hir to aske helpe of hir prayers” (Philip 45). Her language and behaviour outside of her performances reveal her to be an assertive counsellor and a commanding figure, a contrasting character with the Elizabeth who performs the Passion. She demands obeisance in matters of preaching and teaching, going so far as to shout at the disobedient. Her much-vaunted “maidenly shamefastness” is nowhere to be found when she provides a young Brabantine with counsel that is ignored:

‘Yif yee wil do after my counseyle I wille bisely praye yow.’ And they behight that they wolde. Than forthwith sche sayde, ‘Goo shryue [repent] yow of youre synnes and doth penauns and I schalle praye yow with good wille or elles I wolde not entermete me thereof, for I schulde trauel in veyne.’ (Philip 46).

Three days later, he returns without having repented. Elizabeth

brest oute in to siche woordys, “Yit arte thou not schreue [not made confession]. Thou has don folily for thou abidith to schryue thee. Why taryes thou? Why feynes thou? The deuyl is ful slye and thou knowith not the poynte of thy deth.” And hee was alle aschamed and wente aweye. (Philip 46)

Elizabeth has no compunction about reprimanding him stridently for his failure to follow her instructions. While this may not be conduct becoming for an anchoress, saint, or Beguine, it can certainly be understood as the behaviour of a religious authority.

Like her empowering use of silence, Elizabeth also inverts the male gaze during her performances. Rather than keeping her eyes down in a gesture of submission, she refuses to look at men; the text suggests that she may hold some contempt for her all-male audience, consisting of “both abbotes and monkes” (Philip 41). This hagiographical account is all about looking, but Elizabeth’s gaze is not shyly hidden. Instead, it is completely denied to her admirers: “as it semith she loothes bodily byholdynges . . . and as mykel as she maye for shame, she refusith to be seen and to see” (Philip 45). Her ownership of looking suggests once again that the men of the clergy are beneath her, not worthy of her attention, as “she byholdith nobody nor noon othere thinge . . . ne gyues noon answere to hem that speke to hir, but hir thought holly vpon oure Lorde” (Philip 35).

There is a subversive element of “visceral seeing” present in Elizabeth’s *vita*: in this case, it subjugates the authority of the abbot, while elevating her status as a religious authority. Art historian James Elkins describes visceral seeing as “a particular kind of response to depicted bodies that puts in question the traditional distinction between viewer and viewed” (viii), referring specifically to portrayals of pain and suffering in visual art. Visceral seeing, in the case of Elizabeth, can also be understood as the theatrical effect of transformance,<sup>71</sup> in which the roles of the audience and performer are reversed (Schechner, *Performance* 170). Because of her performances, the powerful

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<sup>71</sup> In transformance, ritual performance facilitates an exchange of roles between audience and actor(s) (Schechner 117). In Elizabeth’s case, her performance affirms her religious authority, while the clergymen become her disciples (students), unable to attain her level of spiritual knowledge.

agents of the church come to Elizabeth, offering supplication and adoration: “wee abbotis and monkes,” Philip writes, “yede [travelled; desired] to see the same virgyn and taryed with hire so many oures: longe sithen by the byschope of that dyocys” (Philip 43). The reversal of power via transformance is in evidence as Philip himself lowers himself to spoonfeed Elizabeth in her bed: “hir moder brought hir a litil mylke in a litil dyshe, and thenoure felawe the abbot of Clareuall putte a spoonful thereof to hir mouthe” (Philip 49). Here, milk, associated with the feminine breast, is not provided by Elizabeth, but rather is proffered by the male clerical authority. The roles of the submissive lay sister and the powerful clergyman have been inverted; the cleric feeds the spiritual authority, like a servant.

Patricia Cox Miller takes this concept of visceral seeing and transformance one step further, applying it to literary descriptions of violence and suffering centred on the stories of ascetics and martyrs. For Miller, visceral seeing “refers to corporeal responses to word pictures of the body, responses that implicate the reader in such a way that the boundary between text and reader begins to weaken” (396). Miller refers here to accounts of saints in which “miracle succeeds miracle in rapid-fire, almost incantatory fashion” (398). The reader experiences an intimate, emotional response to the text, reacting to descriptive passages of suffering and miraculous acts. Elizabeth’s Middle English *life*, mostly purged of traditional miracles, instead evokes affective response through the rapid-fire details of violent performative self-abjection; the voyeuristic nature of the descriptions of these scenes draw the reader and the text together, appealing to “the sensory imagination of the reader . . . their visual and emotional intensity aid in naturalizing the fictive—because textual—world of which they are a part” (Miller 402-3).

For instance, Philip provides direction to his reading audience in regard to Elizabeth's performative self-abjection: "how merveyulous this doynge is, ho so redith this, noot it wele" (Philip 39). He employs descriptive language that will excite the reader's imagination: in imitating Christ's arrest, Elizabeth yanks herself back and forth "as sche were drawn with vyolens as men do with thefes and mensleers that are pullyd and luggyd ful vyolently with othere mennes handes" (Philip 31). His use of the imagery of "vyolens/vyolently" is figuratively "real" for readers through his engagement with "narrative pictorial strategies that seduce the reader into forgetting that these are images in texts" (Miller 403). Philip uses the narrative pictorial strategy when he describes Elizabeth's acts in meticulous detail:

abidyng a good space stille as stoon—neither seeth ne feelith. And if otherwhile the litil fynger of the righte hande bee touchyd, the fyngers of the tothere hande are moued with alle the bulke of the body in the same manere of mouynge. (Philip 38)

Descriptions such as these force the reader to envision precise details about Elizabeth's performances, transforming this *vita* into a series of word pictures rather than simply words on a page.

#### HUMANISM, SIGN, AND SYMBOL

There are two major "removes" that dramatically affect the story of Elizabeth's life: Philip writes at a remove from what he is seeing because he does not speak Dutch, the language Elizabeth uses; the Carthusian translator places the story at a further remove by implementing radical redactions. There is also a third remove, less obvious than the others, having to do with the reading audience. Philip's hagiographical account was

written circa 1268; the Middle English version appeared circa 1420 to 1450. The Latin text was intended primarily for clerics and nobles. The Middle English text, in the vernacular, was intended for a broader audience including women readers, as the final apology at the close of MS Douce 114 makes clear: the texts of “thes bokes” are intended for “alle men and wymmen that is happe redith or herith this englyshe” (Horstmann, *Prosalegenden* 195). This is a text that evidences the powerful influence of *mouvance*, and the fluid nature of manuscript culture. Vernacularity used in the manuscript, aimed at the “vulgar” reading audience, signals a cultural shift in medieval thought (Pedersen, “Can God” 188).

During Elizabeth’s lifetime, European cultural thought was beginning to change as the medieval religious monolith was permeated by greater ideas sourced in humanism. Scanlon sees this “medieval/humanist dichotomy as underlaid by the more historically and politically specific opposition between the clerical and the lay” (219). While the Latin *vita* more closely affirmed the cultural authority of the church, attributing Elizabeth’s performances to divine intervention, the Middle English translation that appears a century and a half later appears to parallel “the transition from the medieval to the humanist . . . more fruitfully understood as one from clerical to lay” (Scanlon 54). In particular, there is something groundbreakingly humanist about Elizabeth’s performance of Christ. In her lifetime, actors did not take on the role of Christ, using instead an empty cross as a signifier—humanity was not deemed capable of representing the divine (Sticca 41). Elizabeth reverses this, avoiding the prop of the cross altogether while performing the heretofore unperformable Christ on an invisible cross. The divine symbol becomes

represented by the “real” and “concrete” in a human (and female) actor (Kristeva, *Desire* 39).

Cultural understanding had also changed in this time. Kristeva points out that medieval European thought relied heavily on the symbol—referring back to “universal transcendences”—an irreducible concept. In symbolic thinking, the symbol and the symbolizer “are separate and do not communicate” (*Desire* 38). Therefore, reading about Elizabeth in the thirteenth-century Latin text would conjure ideas about the symbolized universal of Christ’s suffering for the sins of man. An example of this can be found in the description of Elizabeth holding herself in a cruciate position during the Mass in anticipation of the Eucharist. The Latin text emphasizes the relationship between the host and Christ:

De se ipsa illud apostoli representans: Quotiens manducaveritis panem istum et biberitis hunc sanguinem, mortem Domini annuntiabitis, etc. Sic enim in se crucem exhibens et plages ostendens, mortem Domini videtur. (“Vita Elizabeth” 374)

[As Saint Paul the apostle reminds us: For as often as you shall eat this bread, and drink the chalice, you shall shew the death of the Lord, until he come.] (1 Corinthians 11:26)

The Middle English translation discards this biblical reference, changing the context. Elizabeth is making “a crosse of hirselfe” (Philip 44). The Corinthians verse should appear after the above quotation, but instead the text jumps ahead in order to continue the narrative focused on Elizabeth: “And so sche abidith alle starke as a stok in a swogh, and raulschynge soo that the armes, heed, and nekke, with a party of the shuldres, er

withouten hire bedde” (Philip 44). The symbol of Christ is no longer the focus of the text, usurped by the actions of a very human actor in Elizabeth.

Between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, the sign began to replace the symbol in medieval culture as the otherworldliness of universal transcendences began to be replaced by the “real” and the “concrete”:

In thirteenth-century art, for example, the prophets were contrasted with the apostles; whereas in the fifteenth century, the four great evangelists were no longer set against the four prophets, but against the four fathers of the Latin church (Saint Augustine, Saint Jerome, Saint Ambrose, and Gregory the Great). (Kristeva, *Desire* 39)

In the fifteenth century, “the serenity of the symbol,” Kristeva argues, “was replaced by the strained ambivalence of the *sign*’s connection . . . to the elements it holds together.” (*Desire* 39). Thus, Elizabeth’s relationship to the divine is no longer the immediate assumption; instead, readers may see her performing the story of the Passion without miracles, without supernatural intervention. While the sign has a vertical progression in which it retains the characteristics of the symbol, assimilating “the metaphysics of the symbol and project[ing] it,” understood through Elizabeth’s *vita* projecting the story of Christ, Kristeva posits an alternative and simultaneous horizontal progression within the movement from symbol to sign. In the horizontal progression, the sign (Elizabeth) no longer simply connotes the Passion story; this sign also represents the possibility of spiritual women breaking away from strict religious principles, expressed by a woman breaking away from gender norms by portraying the male Christ, and living without the overarching control of men and the church. Kristeva terms this “*a metonymical*



*concatenation of deviations from the norm* signifying a *progressive creation of metaphors . . . . deviation from the norm specific to every practice of the sign*” (*Desire* 40). Elizabeth’s *life* presents a deviation from the hagiographical norm of saints’ lives as well as from the norm of medieval women’s lives.

The Middle English “Vita Elizabeth” is a record of ritual devotional exercises set in a theatrical frame. As the sign, Elizabeth signifies differently in disparate times. The Latin *vita*, rich in biblical references and scriptural quotations, directs the thirteenth-century audience to recall the Passion through the divinely-directed enactments of a woman saint. In contrast, the Middle English *life*, stripped of most miracles and doctrinal teachings, evokes for the fifteenth-century reader popular liturgical dramas and mystery plays. In her Middle English incarnation, Elizabeth is marvelous, but not miraculous.

## Chapter 3

“Neuer harde heer before:” The Lives and Deaths of Christina the Astonishing<sup>72</sup>

“*A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive.*”

-Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa* (888)

“*the abject is the equivalent of death. And writing, which allows one to recover, is equal to a resurrection.*”

-Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror* (26)

“*Soothly God is meruelous in alle his seintes, but in Cristyn, if I hit seye, meruelous passynge alle merueilles.*”

- Thomas of Cantimpré, *The Middle English Life of Christina Mirabilis* (80)

The prologue of the Middle English *vita* of Christina the Astonishing contains a curious disclaimer:

Wee knowleche withouten doute – and sooth hit is – that oure tellynge passith alle mannes vndirstondynge and witte, as siche thinges tha maye not be done by comun cours of nature or kynde. Neitheles, they be possibil to hym that alle maad of noghte. (Thomas 53)

Author Thomas of Cantimpré may be preparing the reader for a story of a woman’s religious expression “neuere herde” before (Thomas 58). Christina, Thomas explains, “walowed in fire, sumtyme in wynter she abode longe in frosen water and yce, also, otherewhile she lete as she wolde goo into deed mens graues” (52). Miracles involving saints are typically understood as “demonstrations that the intervention of God continues in the present as in the past” (Wilson 28). Such miracles are usually manifested for one of

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<sup>72</sup> Christina the Astonishing (1150-1224); feast day: July 24; never canonized

two reasons: God intervenes to protect a persecuted saint such as Saint Agnes, who is saved from being burned alive (Osbern 227-43); or the saint intervenes with the help of God to alleviate the suffering of others, exemplified by Mary Magdalene, who revivifies a dead soldier in order to allow him to confess and do penance before dying again (Jacobus 407-17). However, Christina's miracles are unusual in that God endows her with an unbridled physical power, rendering her immortal. With this power, she performs the tortures of Purgatory in order to save souls; moreover, she dies, not once, but three times. Death and resurrection allow her an authority and freedom from persecution arguably unheard of in the lives of other saints. Luce Irigaray has argued that women need their own female representations of divinity, rather than the feminized, wounded body of Christ (Irigaray 89-102; Hollywood, *Sensible* 192); Christina may well be that figure.

Christina's life is unparalleled; the details of her many acts of performative self-abjection firmly establish her autonomy and religious authority. In "a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego)," she experiences "an alchemy," an extremely apt term for the way she combines traditional and revolutionary activity in the boiling cauldron that is her persona, "that transforms death drive into a start of life, of a new significance" (Kristeva, *Powers* 15). With her aggressive personality and her flair for the dramatic, she could not simply *tell* others about Purgatory, she had to *perform* it. Christina's life is such because it entails penitential teaching through performance; she also "ledde soules of the deed vnto Purgatorye and thurgh Purgatory to heuene, withouten any sore of hirsself" (Thomas 52). Although such a mission seems admirable in Christina's case, it is not a selfless undertaking. Her *vita* differs from those of most other

women saints in that the penitential message is not the centre of the story. Like Elizabeth of Spalbeek, because of her performative self-abjection, *the saint herself* is the story. Everything Christina does is about her: her pain, her hunger, her needs and wants, her performances that do not exist without an audience. She exhibits the abject as

a precondition of narcissism. It is coexistent with it and causes it to be permanently brittle. The more or less beautiful image in which I behold or recognize myself rests upon an abjection that sunders it as soon as repression, the constant watchman, is relaxed. (Kristeva, *Powers* 13)

Christina faces and conquers repression, surpassing the somatic religious practices of her peers, such as those of contemporary Mary of Oignies: rather than practicing relatively passive forms of self-mortification encompassing *anorexia mirabilis*, going without sleep, and denying herself in other ways, Christina actively engages in visceral self-torture, aggressively punishing herself, as I shall detail later. These performances can be read as a tribute to the history of saints and martyrs, for instance, those in Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea*, such as the *Miraculum de sancta Katherina* (914-5), *De sancta Agnete virgine* (113-7), and *De Sancta Caecilia* (771-7). Each of these saints endures unimaginable torments, all of which are imitated by Christina. However, the text shows that Christina takes each torment further, creating a new sign of suffering; she performs the trials of the martyrs "in maner of hem that were turmentyd" (Thomas 60), voluntarily enduring the wheel and casting herself "into houghe fyres" (Thomas 59). The difference between Christina and her fellow saints is that she *survives* each bodily indignity, effectively "out-sainting" all other saints.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Waugh explains that there is a competitive quality to suffering in lives of saints, evidenced in hagiography that frequently uses the language of heroic literature, employing "athletic, military, and

Christina lived in the town of Liège from 1150 to 1224. As an ascetic lay *mulier religiosa*, she is traditionally presumed to be a Beguine; Bolton argues that she was “not attached to any religious order nor to a beguine group” (260). Thomas of Cantimpré, the author of her *vita*, did not see Christina in action, although many others in the town did. He writes, “[Christina’s acts] were not done in corners and hynes, but openly amonge the pepil. Nor it is not so longe goon that they are forgotten, for hit is no moor but eight yere sythen sche dyed whan I wrote hir lyfe” (Thomas 52). There are twelve extant Latin manuscripts containing Christina’s *life*, as well as a rhymed Middle Dutch translation and a prose Middle Dutch version of Cantimpré’s account (Newman, *Thomas* 8). The sole extant Middle English translation of this story is known as “Þhe Lyfe of Seinte Cristyne pe Mervelous” found in MS Douce 114, and is the subject of this chapter (Horstmann 119-34).

Subverting theological ideology and inverting hagiographical tropes, Christina’s *life* has traditionally been read by critics as yet another representation of a typical female saint. I argue that these are misreadings, and that the pro-feminine, revolutionary voice of the text has been largely ignored. Further, I argue that the Middle English *vita* of Christina the Astonishing has traditionally been read from an essentialist and formalist perspective, to the detriment of the text. That is, Christina’s critics tacitly apply the traditional attributes of female saints to her story, suggesting that the contents of this text are commonplace in the genre of medieval hagiography concerning women. Many of the

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competitive terminology” as descriptors (*The Genre* 13-4). While Christina’s competitiveness with other saints is not explicit in the text, Christina’s actions suggest that she is in competition with her predecessors for the title of “saint above all saints.” In her *vita*, Christina does not receive the accolades awarded to the early martyrs, even though she out-performs them.

presumptions and stereotypes surrounding female medieval saints are applied to the text erroneously by a number of critics, in spite of evidence to the contrary.

Scholars claim that Christina's bodily suffering is an exercise in *imitatio Christi* (King, "Sacramental" 158);<sup>74</sup> that her behaviours are explicable in the context of penitential remorse, as Thomas claims (84);<sup>75</sup> and that she tames her flesh and resists temptation (Cazelles 10). But these assertions are nowhere to be found in the *vita*. Christina does not engage in *imitatio Christi*; rather, the text explains that she demonstrates the suffering of *mortals*: "sche hadde graunte of God that sche, liuyng in body, shulde suffre Purgatorye in this worlde" (Thomas 52). The errant attribution of *imitatio Christi* to Christina is in evidence in the *Acta Sanctorum (Julii)*, which acknowledges this misunderstanding, and clearly disputes it: "vulnera Christi inepte ipsi imputata" [Christ's wounds were improperly imputed to her] (654). It is a wonder, then, that scholars continue to propagate this myth.

Also absent in Christina's *vita* are the typical signs incorporated into a woman's sainthood: there is no appeal to the Virgin or acts of Marian devotion, both of which are features of women saints' stories such as the *De sancta Maria Aegyptiaca*, in which Mary appeals to the Virgin for forgiveness of her sins (Jacobus 247-251); there is a paucity of bride of Christ imagery, unlike the life of contemporary Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179) (Ridder 1); and finally, there is no temptation that must be overcome, as occurs in the stories of many saints, for instance, as in the *De sancta Justina virgine* (Jacobus 632-6).

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<sup>74</sup> Margot King argues that "[what] Thomas taught through his remarkably subtle *vita* [about Christina the Astonishing] is that the greatness and glory of God can best be shown to human beings by example, by an *imitatio Christi*" (158).

<sup>75</sup> "what ellis cryed Cristyn in alle hir lyfe but do penauns and men to be redy ilkan oure" (Thomas 83-4)?

The result is a story focused on Christina's unbounded bodily exploits rather than on the teachings of the church.

Another way scholars attempt to force Christina's *vita* to fit the hagiographical genre is by focusing on the influence and power of Thomas rather than examining the meaning of the unsettling activities of the subject herself. For example, Margot King describes Christina's *vita* as "a hagiographical and sacramental expression of thirteenth-century mysticism," using this murky descriptor to suggest that Christina's *life* fits into the hagiographical genre typical of mystics who engage in asceticism while seeking union with God ("Sacramental" 147). Christina does neither of these things. The thesis of King's article avoids any critical discussion of these kinds of fissures in the text. Instead, she uses this account of a miraculous woman who subverts church authority to prove that Thomas was not "gullible," but rather "a highly accomplished and subtle biographer" ("Sacramental" 147-8). In fact, Thomas's account of Christina's life is indeed shaped to fit a specific hagiographical purpose, but it frequently fails, as Christina commits numerous violations of church and social laws, which will be explored in detail later on.

Other accepted generalizations about women saints, particularly from the thirteenth century, are often applied uncritically, even when there is little support for such claims. For instance, Brigitte Cazelles argues that

the extraordinary power of women saints reflected in the hagiographic texts was legitimized by their assimilation to the bride of Christ figure; a woman's redemption was achieved not by her transcendence of earthly desire but through her transference of physical desire to Christ. (10)

This assertion may be true for many women saints, but Christina defies any assimilation, and is emphatically no one's bride. She does not battle earthly desire, nor does she demonstrate physical desire for Christ, as Saint Dorothy does.<sup>76</sup> Christina's wants and needs, or to be more precise, the *lack* of things she feels she must supply for herself are: 1) freedom in expressing her piety in her own fashion; 2) communicating directly with the divine while she lives as she wishes; and 3) fulfilling her calling as she sees fit. Extreme self-mortification and brash public displays of suffering permit Christina to transcend these fissures in her life and achieve autonomy.

Many critics simply admit their confusion and inability to "make sense" of Christina's *vita*. Newman concedes that understanding Christina's story in the modern world is contentious: "What in previous centuries had been accepted as a straightforward historical account of an other-worldly vision, simply another example of God's intervention in human affairs, is today either ridiculed or, more charitably, classified as a literary genre" (*Thomas of Cantimpré* 7). Scholars frequently attempt to rationalize or explain away Christina's story, characterizing it as an imitative throwback to the sacred fictions of late antiquity, or, more commonly, as some kind of inexplicable anomaly within the genre (Delahaye 170). Of the inclusion of Christina's Latin *vita* in the *Acta Sanctorum*, Herbert Thurston writes that it is a "conspicuous instance" of a lapse of judgment and that the details of the account are "utterly untrustworthy" (Thurston 147),<sup>77</sup> while Simone Roisin dismisses Christina's *vita* as "a tissue of extravagances" (553).

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<sup>76</sup> "she confessyd euene opynly / That crystys spouse she was trewly" (Osborne 131).

<sup>77</sup> Thurston's critique goes on to state that "it is in every way probable that the marvels which swarm in Chantimpré's [sic] brief history are all enormously exaggerated. On the other hand, they do bear a curious relation to certain phenomena of mysticism which come to us upon much better evidence in the case of many later mystics; and for that reason I am not at all disposed to regard them as pure inventions" (149). His comments reflect a skepticism expressed by numerous scholars regarding the life of Christina the Astonishing.



Bernard McGinn considers Christina's life “the most bizarre” work of Thomas's *oeuvre* (160). King assents to this characterization, describing the *vita* as “undeniably odd” (“Sacramental Witness” 146). Of course, any attack against the veracity of Christina’s *life* is a useless argument in literary study, because saints’ lives traditionally contain accounts of impossible feats and amazing miracles. Skepticism regarding her legitimacy as a saint is also irrelevant. Regardless of what one might think of her story, Christina left behind a controversial yet popular cult, and she has been historically “claimed by Benedictines, Cistercians and Premonstratensians” (Bolton 260; Newman, *Thomas of Cantimpré* 31).

There is, however, one critic who is more circumspect about women in hagiography than others. Karma Lochrie claims that a majority of hagiographical critical readings concerning women are reductive. She argues that “[t]he identification of the feminine with the body in medieval mystical writings . . . must either be embraced in a feminist essentialism or rejected as untranscendent and even masochistic.” She asks “whether the place from which female mystics spoke was one of subversion or conscription,” regarding the patriarchal exclusion of women as subjective, agential subjects of hagiography (“Language” 116). Undoubtedly, Christina’s life was one of subversion and not conscription. She has no regular or established confessor (evidenced by the fact that she must randomly find a priest to administer Communion to her), and lives her life with complete agency. Christina is a dissident whose mysticism embodies protest against the church, providing an *exemplum* for alternative methods of expressing women’s spirituality. Amy Hollywood understands medieval women’s mysticism as a protest, and identifies the cause for the push against conventional mores on the part of some medieval mystics:

The association of women with certain styles of mysticism is the result, then, not of some universal feminine traits but of the specific set of social and cultural constraints that women faced in the late medieval and early modern periods, (*Sensible* 12)

such as the denial of female authority in matters religious. I contend that the church was ill-equipped to deal with the somatic religious activities of Beguines and other female mystics who continually challenged the patriarchal institution's orthodoxy. Some women were ignored, some were punished (such as Marguerite de Porete), and others were drawn into the patriarchal fold and given official status. Not all female mystics were subversive, nor were all conscripted. For example, Catherine of Siena, who was frequently ravished by the Holy Spirit as part of her mystical expression, was conscripted by the church, which provided her with *ex-officio* religious authority (Stephen, 84-95).<sup>78</sup> Conversely, Christina's performances claim *ex-gratia* authority, as opposed to the *ex-officio* standing of hierarchical church order, establishing for the reader that she is anything but a conscripted follower.

Critics often suggest that the Christina story belongs among the corpus of hagiographical texts that exist ultimately to serve the patriarchal magisterium by recounting *exempla* useful for sermons and proselytization (Sanok 13, 14; McGinn 161). More specifically, scholars who have completed a formalist reading of Christina's life—and that of her fellow beguine Mary of Oignies, also found in MS Douce 114—claim that the penitential nature of the text has the express purpose of refuting the denial of Purgatory propagated by the Cathars and Albigensians (Barnes 22). Hence, the text is ostensibly an instrument of proselytization, detailing the torments of Hell and Purgatory

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<sup>78</sup> See chapter 4.

as useful catalysts for the dedicated conversion of non-believers (Carruthers 245; Newman, *Thomas of Cantimpré* 36). In a similar fashion, Rex Barnes proposes that Thomas of Cantimpré and Jacques de Vitry intentionally used the Beguines' self-abasing spiritual expression to combat "heretics" (22). This may be true in the case of Jacques's chronicle of Mary of Oignies, who is carefully stage-managed throughout her life (see chapter four), but Christina's activities are recorded post-mortem; she did not have a confessor or priest to oversee, moderate, or control her (Thomas 53). The text of Christina's life certainly affirms the existence of Purgatory, but I would argue that Purgatory is her chosen backdrop, one that was religiously popular in her day, and a common cause for women saints (LeGoff 133-4; McGinn 132). It is likely that Thomas, in learning of her performances, seized upon the opportunity to employ her story in the church's struggle against heretical movements. Although Thomas may have attempted to bend the narrative to support his religious and political views, Christina's character manages to transcend his pedagogical intent, and he ends up telling a story of an unimpeachable, uncontrollable woman saint.

Thomas's effort to distance himself from the text suggests some understanding of the many potential controversies implicit in Christina's story. He carefully asserts the reliability of the witnesses who attested to Christina's life and death, and also places the onus for the composition of this life onto his friend and colleague Jacques de Vitry. "Certayne and syker of that at was me told," Thomas remarks on the vast number of corroborating reports: "I haue so many witnessys and mykel that I haue writen as were than in the towne of Seint Trudous that hadde witte and resone" (Thomas 52). Thomas

keeps his distance from the *vita* by opening the work with a quotation from his mentor and friend, Jacques de Vitry, who witnessed first-hand Christina's remarkable behaviours:

“I sawe another womman” seith hee, that is to sey, this Cristyn Meruelous,  
 “aboute whan oure Lorde wroughte so merueilously that whan sche hadde  
 liggen longe deed, she lyued ageyne or [before] she were beryed; and sche  
 hadde graunte of God that sche, liuyng in body, shulde suffre Purgatorye  
 in this worlde.” (Thomas 51-2)

Jacques's testimony lends authenticity to Thomas's text while simultaneously reducing Thomas's responsibility for writing this peculiar *vita*, as he explains in his rationale for recording Christina's life: “Nor I wolde no weyes haue taken vpon me to write, but if worschepful James byshope hadde boren witnessse byfore of this same virgynes lyfe” (Thomas 53).

#### RESURRECTION, DOCTRINAL ERROR, AND IMMORTALITY

Christina's story begins at her death, and is much more complex than current critical commentary would suggest. Christina's *life* is more than a series of enactments explicating the horrors of Purgatory. Although the *vita* begins with the “woman saint as pious child” trope, also found (briefly) in the account of Elizabeth of Spalbeek (Philip 30) and Mary of Oignies (Jacques 86-7), it is clear that Christina is atypical, even for a saint. At a very young age, she develops an intimate relationship with God and attains some measure of gnostic knowledge. Orphaned early in life along with her two sisters, young Christina is already dedicated to Christ, “Coueitynge to dispose hir state after religyous manere of lyfe.” She takes on the role of a shepherd, and while in the fields, receives secrets from God, as “oure Lorde gaf hir grace of inwarde swetnes and visityd hir ful

often with priuētis of heuene” (Thomas 54). The reader is lulled into what appears to be a pastoral hagiographical narrative, only to be shocked two sentences later, as the *Capitulum secundum* opens with “And after this, of inwarde exercise of contemplacyone she wex seek in bodily myghte and dyed” (Thomas 54). Death is the beginning of Christina’s *vita* rather than the end.

Her death establishes her character, as well as the effect she will have on others for the rest of her (second) life. At her funeral mass, “sodey[n]ly the body sterid [stirred] and roos vp in the bere [coffin] and anoon lifte vp as a briddem, steigh [straight] into the beemes of the kyrke” (Thomas 54-5). Attendees promptly flee the church, screaming in horror, while Christina’s eldest sister “bode stille with drede” until Christina was finally “conioured of the preste of the chirche and constreyned to come down” (Thomas 55).<sup>79</sup> Skeptical readers may doubt that she actually died in the first place, but there is no accounting for the fact that she flys to the rafters of the church. The scene establishes her return from death in an improved body with supranatural abilities. In this moment, the *vita* departs dramatically from traditional hagiographical formulae and gender-based mores. She is now a woman of inestimable power, able to inspire fear in others. But she does not immediately begin to labour for the salvation of souls. Instead, in one of the earliest comedic episodes of her story, once Christina descends to the earth, she carries on

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<sup>79</sup> Newman has argued that the term “conioured,” as it is used in Christina’s *vita*, refers to a priest who believes Christina is possessed, attempting to exorcize the demons “he believes are at work within [her].” Brown notes the ambiguity of the word, writing that *The Middle English Dictionary* contains two definitions: 1) “to beseech or beg, or implore,” and 2) “to exorcize (an evil spirit)” (Brown 223). I disagree with the definitions associated with exorcism, and choose the “beseech, beg, or implore” definition. I do not believe Christina was possessed; I will address this argument in greater detail later on in this chapter.

as if nothing has happened: “Thenne she wente anoon hoom ageyne with her sistres and eet hir meet” (Thomas 55).<sup>80</sup>

With this beginning, familiar models of hagiography concerning women are already being subverted. In discussing the deaths of women saints, Virginia Burrus writes, “Holy women only really become representable in the moment of their dying” (*Sex Lives* 59). Further, the traditional *vita* of a male saint turns on a narrative climax that details his conversion, while the *life* of a female saint is typically less climactic and more processual; her dedication to God begins in early childhood and grows throughout her lifetime (Bynum, *Fragmentation* 32; Weinstein and Bell 34).<sup>81</sup> Yet, there is nothing processual about Christina’s story; in this case, death is not the apex of her *life*, it is instead part of the exposition. It helps to facilitate the rising action of her tale. Unlike the virginal-heroic body of female martyrs, she becomes representable as her story begins rather than as it ends.

Upon Christina’s return to her earthly body, she tells the story of the death that sets the pattern for her marvelous life. Escorted by angels first to Purgatory, she is

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<sup>80</sup> Christina’s hunger after resurrection recalls Christ’s appearance to his disciples after his crucifixion and death. “And whiles they speake these things, Iesvs stode in the middes of them, and he saith to them, Peace be to you: it is I, feare not. But they being troubled and frighted, imagined that they saw a spirit. And he said to them, Why are you troubled, and cogitations arise into your harts? See my handes, and feete, that it is i my self, handle, and fee: for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as you see me to haue. And when he had said this, he shewed them his handes and feete. But they yet not beleeuing and marueiling for ioy, he said, Haue you here anything to be eaten” (Luke 24:36-41)? Christina, too, is hungry after her resurrection. By eating, she demonstrates to witnesses that she is flesh, and not a ghost. In that Christina dies and is resurrected, some may argue that in this instance, she is Christ-like. However, I posit that this is not *imitatio Christi*, but rather the fulfillment of the promise that the dead shall be resurrected in Luke (20:35-6): “But they that shal be counted worthy of that world and the resurrection from the dead. . . neither can they die any more, for they are equal to Angels: and they are the sonnes of God, seeing they are the sonnes of the resurrection.” For more on this, see the section in this chapter on resurrection.

<sup>81</sup> In 2010, Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell quantitatively studied the hagiographical accounts of 864 saints from the period between 1000 and 1700. Their research revealed that male saints most often experienced a dramatic event that spurred an abrupt conversion and a renunciation of previous excesses. Women, on the other hand, regularly expressed saintly attributes even as very young children, and a majority of those had made a commitment to God before the age of seven (34).

stricken with “compassyone and grete pite of thoos wrecched soules” by the suffering she sees. Then she is “broghte to the trone of Goddes mageste” (Thomas 56). She meets God, and assumes she will “abyde there fro that tyme forthe euermore” (Thomas 56). But God has a deal to offer her: she may remain in heaven at His side, or return to her body, “there to suffre peynes of an vndeedly soule by a deedly body *withouten harme of hitselfe* and to delyuere with they peynes alle those soules of the which thou haddest pite in the place of Purgatorye” (Thomas 56; emphasis added). Thus, her work will aid in penance for the dead and help turn the living to repentance with her suffering. If she accepts this mission, she will be given a prize of “great profit” (Newman, *Thomas of Cantimpré* 131), eventually returning to God “with many medys [rewards]” (Thomas 56). The fact that Christina is given a choice to accept the mission is significant, because the prevailing concept of God is that he allows no mediation of his will, particularly when he chooses agents. It is also significant that this choice involves no prospect of penalty. Christina is assured a place in heaven regardless of her decision, and God declares *no harm will come to her*.<sup>82</sup> Without hesitation, Christina accepts:

And I answeyrd—withouten doutynge—that I wolde turne ageyne to body vndir that condicyone that was put vnto me. Forthwith oure Lorde was wele payed [satisfied] with myne answeare and commaundid my soule to be resteryd to my body. (Thomas 56)

Christina specifies that she will return to earth “under that condition that was put on” to her, meaning that she understands God’s obligation to her, and she intends to hold him to

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<sup>82</sup> Moreover, Christina, in speaking with God, is elevated above Moses: she *sees* God and speaks with him. The entire exchange violates one of God’s earliest pronouncements: “Thou canst not see my face: for man shall not see me, & live” (Exodus 33:20). This is one of many scriptural violations in the text that appears to be willingly overlooked in service of the salvation message.

it. This is a *quid pro quo* covenant that establishes her autonomy early in the story; she is engaging in a contractual agreement with God *with conditions*. The only literary precedent for such an agreement is found between God and Satan in the Book of Job;<sup>83</sup> for Job and Christina, the guarantee of *no harm* connotes protection, immunity, and privileged status. In Christina's case, the promise of *no harm* also elevates her to a ranking as a saint above other saints, as her ability to bargain with God places her on parity with an angel, although a fallen one.

So far, the *vita* has supposedly told the story of a woman who is resuscitated in order to serve God. But this is not a typical "vision" story; the subversive elements of the text become apparent the moment the reader realizes Christina is not merely revived or resuscitated, but is *resurrected*. Newman concurs with this assertion, but she seems to treat resurrection and revivification as mere synonyms, which they are not. She does not explore what a resurrected woman might represent in medieval hagiography, nor does she comment on the gravity of such profound doctrinal difficulties raised by the event of a woman returning from death, endowed with a body capable of defying nature (*Thomas of Cantimpré* 33). Thomas also omits to explain why Christina, of all the saints and innocents, is chosen for resurrection. But he does make it clear that she is the sole decision-maker regarding this resurrection.

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<sup>83</sup> "But on a certain day when the sonnes of God were come to assist before our Lord, Satan also was present amongst them. To whom our Lord sayd: From whence comest thou? Who answering, sayd: I haue gone round about the earth, & walked through it. And our Lord sayd to him: Hast thou considered my seruant Iob, that there is not the like to him in the earth, a man simple, and right, and fearing God, and departing from euil? To whom Satan answering, said: Why, doth Iob feare God in vayne? Hast not thou fensed him, and his house, and al his substance round about, blessed the works of his hands, and his possession hath increased on the earth? But stretch forth thy hand a litle, and touch al things that he possesseth, vnlesse he blesse thee in the face. Our Lord therefore sayd to Satan: behold, al things that he hath, are in thy hand, *onlie vpon him extend not thy hand*" (Job 1:6-11).



It is easy to understand how critics might associate Christina's resurrection with the revivification of Lazarus as Newman does ("Possessed" 766). Lazarus, like others who are revivified in the Bible, finds his soul returned to his old body; he resumes living in it, otherwise unchanged. Readers would have been familiar with other examples of revivification, for instance, the account of the prefect's son who is brought back to life by Saint Agnes (Jacobus 113-117), the revivification of Saint Sebastian (Jacobus 108-113), and the girl brought back to life by Christ in the Bible (Mark 5:21-43). At first glance, Christina's return to life appears to be similar to these examples: "she was ledde oute of body . . . and broghte to the body ageyne" (Thomas 55). But in order to understand the profound doctrinal error in the text, a clear explanation of resurrection vs. resuscitation or revivification is required. Revivification is a return to a "normal form of life," a resumption of the subject's existing body after death has occurred (H. Brown "Re: Resuscitation vs. Resurrection"). Christina is resurrected rather than revivified. According to Catholic theologians, resurrection involves a transformation and simultaneous retention of corporeality (Kasper 124-29; 144-51), which is precisely what occurs here. Her body is no longer mortal; instead it is an improved, purdurable female body that is impervious to injury or death. Upon her soul's return, her body has become a "site of possibility . . . dispersed into something larger, something mutable and dynamic, a structure of alliance and becoming" (Cohen, *Medieval* xiii). Post-resurrection, Christina can fly and endure suffering that would kill any other mortal, from standing in icy water for days (Thomas 60), to immersing herself in boiling cauldrons (Thomas 59). This change in the body—she is the same, yet somehow different from before—is the sign of

resurrection as opposed to revivification (H. Brown “Re: Resuscitation vs. Resurrection”).

Many apologists for Christianity have implied that, for believers familiar with Christian doctrine, a situation such as Christina’s resurrected body should not be treated as strange and terrifying. Paul describes this process in his first letter to the Corinthians:

Behold I tel you a mysterie. We shal al in deede rise again: but we shal not al be changed. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eie, at the last trompet (for the trompet shal sound) and the dead shal rise againe incorruptible: and we shal be changed. For this corruptible must doe on incorruption: & this mortal doe on immortalitie, then shal come to passe the saying that is written, Death is swallowed vp in victorie. Death where is thy victorie? Death where is thy sting? (15:51-55)

Christina’s resurrection is, therefore, biblical: she conquers death, transcends judgment, and fulfills the promise of eternal life (Moltmann 211). These are properties of deity, and a remarkably potent sign of Christina’s status as a saint above all others.<sup>84</sup>

From a secular viewpoint, Bynum understands resurrection as a type of metamorphosis, “in which the final shape, bearing traces of all that has unfolded before, is both radically changed *and* human” (*Metamorphosis* 186). This describes Christina perfectly. She apparently looks the same as before, but her body is now impermeable, sustaining no pain or scarring after each act of performative self-abjection, evidenced

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<sup>84</sup> The only hagiography that is similar to Christina’s is that of a Welsh saint, Winifred (died ca. 650), who is decapitated by a rejected suitor. The text says her uncle, Saint Beuno, “resurrects” her body. Winifred’s body is made whole again, and she resumes life as she was before (Gregory 3-4). I would argue that the term “resurrection” is a misnomer here; Winifred is revivified, not resurrected, as she returns to her body as it was before the attack. Winifred’s body is healed but unchanged, marking an admittedly exceptional revivification. Without the sign of corporeal transformation after she returns from death, her miracle cannot be deemed a resurrection. She is not immortal, and will eventually die a very human death.

when she holds her hands in fire without injury; as Thomas asserts, “wif hit hadde [not] be myrakelle of God they myghte be brente to askes” (59). From a theological standpoint, it is positively bizarre that Christina returns to the world in a changed body, especially in light of the fact that Judgement Day has not yet occurred. While medieval theologians may have indulged this profound doctrinal breach by making it serve the penitential message of the *vita*, the resurrection question has been completely overlooked or ignored by scholars of theology, most likely because of its embarrassing implications for the church. With the proto-feminist bent of the account married to a further doctrinal error in the form of Christina’s resurrection, it is doubly subversive.

Any beneficence ascribed to Christina based upon her willingness to return to earth is attenuated by the fact that there is no risk of death for her, yet God promises a vague greater reward for her should she return to perform the suffering found in Purgatory. I can find no saintly precedent for Christina's deal-making with God, relative to an option to stay in heaven or resume life on earth, let alone her corporeal resurrection from the dead. Certainly, there are accounts of others who see Purgatory, including Drythelm’s story in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of England*, the vision of monk Wetti, and the account of Charles the Fat (LeGoff 112-122). But these stories and others like them are “vision stories” removed from physical experience. None are resurrected. None are offered the opportunity to remain in heaven; instead the purgatorial vision is cautionary. None are told that their own salvation is already assured.

In the course of her saintly career, Christina’s body, as a “site of possibility,” separates her from most other mystics and ascetics. In her case only, her body acts as a clear sign that she has conquered death, having risen in a “*corpus incorruptibile*”

[incorruptible body] (Augustine Book XXII, Chapter XXVI) understood theologically as “*immortalitati*” [an immortal state] (Augustine Book XXII, Chapter XXV).<sup>85</sup> Granted, Christina feels pain at the moment she enacts physical torments: for example, when she enters a burning oven she “cryed hidously for angwysche” (Thomas 59). But the pain does not endure, and her body immediately reverts to an uninjured and painless state: “whan she come oute, there was no soor nor hurt seen outwarde in hire body” (Thomas 59). She exists in what Augustine describes as a resurrected state in *The City of God*:

Sicut enim spiritus carni seruiens non incongrue carnalis, ita caro spiritui seruiens recte appellabitur spiritalis, non quia in spiritum conuertetur, sicut nonnulli putant ex eo quod scriptum est: Seminatur corpus animale, surget corpus spiritale, sed quia spiritui summa et mirabili obtemperandi facilitate subdetur usque ad implendam immortalitatis indissolubilis securissimam uoluntatem, omni molestiae sensu, omni corruptibilitate et tarditate detracta.

[This is not because flesh will be converted into spirit, which is what some have inferred from what is written: It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. But it is because it will be subject to the spirit with a supreme and marvellous readiness to obey, and will fulfil its will in the most assured knowledge of indestructible immortality, with all distress, all corruptibility and all reluctance gone.] (Augustine Book XIII, Chapter XXI)

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<sup>85</sup> “Non ergo, ut beatae sint animae, corpus est omne fugiendum, sed corpus incorruptibile recipiendum” [What is required to ensure the soul’s blessedness, then, is not an escape from any kind of body whatsoever but the acquisition of an incorruptible body] (Augustine Book XXII, Chapter XXVI).

More than the Latin *life*, the Middle English translation focuses on Christina's ability to conquer death. She will die two more times near the end of her life, once when she is ready to leave this mortal world, only to be called back by her friend, and again shortly after she has fulfilled her friend's request for a formal goodbye (Thomas 81, 82). Her three deaths constitute a Foucauldian disruption of the story. They disturb the coherence of a presumed "total history" of the lives of women saints, upending the "organization of a world-view" stemming from hagiographical criticism. In addition, the three deaths transgress "a system of values" by being an unprecedented series of events improbable in Christian doctrine (Foucault, *Archeology* 13). The "total history" of female saints has broken away from the sacred fiction model here, because a woman possesses the divine power of controlling death. Christina has shattered the Christian world-view that understands death as God's divine right, and the view that until the Final Judgement, only Christ may be resurrected. In essence, much of the medieval system of values has been shattered.

A comparison of the English and Latin texts reveals that the authority behind Christina's second and third deaths differ in the two accounts; in Latin, God determines her end, while in the English, Christina is the sole decision-maker regarding her life and death. In the Latin text, Christina's death is explained as the inevitable outcome of living in an aging body (Newman, *Thomas* 152).<sup>86</sup> However, in the Middle English, Christina "prayed benignely on Beatrys, nunne of Seint Kateryns, that she wolde ordeyne hir a bedde priuely in a chaumbyr for bycause *hit semyd to hir at she shulde be seke*" (Thomas 80; emphasis added). Death here is not a happenstance, but a decision Christina will

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<sup>86</sup> Newman translates the Latin as "the time approached for her to be gripped by the sickness of death" (Newman, *Thomas* 152).

make when it “seems to her” appropriate. In terms of literary continuity and a recognition of Christina’s unbounded body, her ability to determine her own death is more logical to the integrity of the story than the version in the Latin text; it also confirms her earthly and metaphysical autonomy. It is worth reflecting on whether there has *ever* been another mortal woman or man with greater independence in the extant saints’ lives.

Prepared to die again, Christina prays for “the commun deth of men” (Thomas 81). But there is nothing “common” about this death, as it suggests, in a dramatic example of Christian dualism, that her body is merely a vessel from which she may depart and to which she may return at will, leaving open the possibility of more resurrections in future. Fellow nun Beatrice discovers Christina has died: “the deed bod on the grounde for the streight in manere of deed bodyes and, I leue verrelly, with seruys of aungellis” (Thomas 81). Fully cognizant of Christina’s exceptional gifts, she beseeches Christina to return to bid farewell to her sisters in God:

Obey to me also now, for thou arte myghty and mayste doo what thou wolte thurgh hym to whome thou arte now ioyned. Therefore, turne now ageyne to lyfe and telle me that I haue asked with grete desire to be openyd of the in thy lyfe. (Thomas 82)

The incredible has become the prosaic for those who know Christina. Beatrice has no doubt that Christina is fully capable of returning from death; it is only Thomas who is surprised: “A meruelous thinge!” he writes, as Christina

turnyd to lyfe and maad an heuy sighyng and, with a sory chere, betyng Beatrys that reuoked hir ageyne, seyde, “O Beatrys, why has thou dissesid me? Why haste thou called me ageyn? Now I was ledde to the sighte of

Chryste! But now, sustir myne, what thou wolte, faste aske; and I besoeke the, late me go ageyne to that at I haue coueytid so long. (Thomas 82)<sup>87</sup>

Christina is clearly annoyed with Beatrice for demanding she return, but after saying farewell to the sisters of the abbey, “the thridde tyme was experte of dethe and the thridde tyme dyed” at the age of 42 (Thomas 82). The Middle English translation ends Christina’s story after her third death, which is rather anti-climactic, stating simply, “Cristyne yolde the gost” (Thomas 81). However, the supplement from Cantimpré’s Latin account, which is excluded from the Middle English manuscript, contains a few post-mortem miracles, and one of them pertains to Christina’s resurrections.<sup>88</sup> She is spotted roaming the streets (Newman, *Thomas* 156), recalling Christ’s return to the apostles three days after his death. Both Christ and Christina are at first unrecognized, and then issue instructions to their followers: Christ instructs the apostles “going therfore teach ye al nations: Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Sonne and of the Holy Ghost” (Matthew 28:19). Christina, true to character, returns to the world only to take care of matters pertaining to her own body; she does not take this opportunity to leave any lasting ideological or religious messages for posterity. In her ghostly *post-mortem* appearance, she attends a priest whom she directs to move her body from a neglected location to another convent. In typical Christina fashion, she makes demands

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<sup>87</sup> This reference may be construed as the sole “bride of Christ” trope in the *vita*, although it can also be read as Christina’s desire to simply return to heaven, as God promised her when they last met. More cynically, given her egocentrism, it may be that she wants to see Christ and collect her “many medys” [great rewards].

<sup>88</sup> The supplement consists of three additional paragraphs/chapters, creating the post-mortem *liber miraculorum* section of Christina’s *vita*. It was composed later than the original account in approximately 1249, and is in a different hand from the rest of Thomas’s Latin account (Newman, *Thomas of Cantimpré* 156). The supplement feels as though it is a kind of “correction,” or an effort to put Christina’s *life* back into the context of a more traditional hagiographical story that contains the *vita* (life), *passio* (suffering), and *liber miraculorum*. But the return of Christina dominates the supplement, mentioning only one miracle of a woman healed while attending Christina’s re-burial. The greatest miracle here is her return, taking up two chapters; the healing is explained in one chapter, and seems to be almost an afterthought. Once again, Christina’s character is so large that she remains the centre of the narrative.

backed up by threats of the incursion of God's anger should her body be left behind (Newman, *Thomas of Cantimpré* 156).<sup>89</sup> The significance of this third appearance after dying leaves open the possibility of yet another return in future, and may have been a motivating factor in the persistence of her cult.

## CRACKS AND FISSURES

Christina's *life* regularly presents typical hagiographical tropes throughout the text, which direct the reader to believe that the work fits into its generic classification, as the examples of Communion and Baptism demonstrate. But these signposts of devotional writing are skewed; they are transgressive twists on familiar motifs which hide Christina's life, existence, and even her body in plain sight. For example, taking the Eucharist is a common exercise in religious life and serves as a sign of piety in hagiography. But, as Bynum and other feminist theorists argue, it can also be interpreted as submission to the patriarchal church structure:

the context of the eucharist ultimately only integrates the woman more fully into clerically controlled structures. In order to have visions, she must attend the liturgy, controlled by exactly that clergy which her visions might seem to bypass or criticize. (Bynum, *Fragmentation* 46)

Bynum's perspective can be understood to grow out of second-wave feminist theory; I would counter that her reading could be construed as too essentialist, because it disavows Christina's subversive use of the Eucharist. Third-wave feminism instead challenges the patriarchal power of the Eucharist, heralding "the end of grand narratives" such as the

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<sup>89</sup> Newman translates the threat as "if you are negligent, you will incur the displeasure of the divine power" (Newman, *Thomas of Cantimpré* 156).



obligatory integration of women into the patriarchal church (Snyder 183).<sup>90</sup> This is demonstrated in Christina's response to church authority: she intentionally "fledde worshepes" (Thomas 66), avoiding the liturgy and clerically controlled structures whenever possible. She only enters a church when she wants something. On one occasion, she runs into a nearby church and demands communion: "whan the preste byhighte that hee wolde [give her communion] but excused hym that hee myghte not for occupacyone atte that tyme." Undeterred, "she wolde no lengir abyde but wente to another chirche and asked of the preste the body of oure Lord Jhesu Criste. And hee anoon comunyd hir after hir askynge" (Thomas 58). Christina's demand for holy Communion was likely invalid; Lateran IV saw Innocent III declare that confession was required before holy communion could be administered, which emphasizes the importance of penitence (Jansen 120). Nonetheless, without liturgy or confession, her exercise of taking holy communion is self-authorized and serves as a sign of her *ex-ipsa* authority.

The reader might reasonably expect that the taking of communion, in the case of a saint such as Christina, would yield a mystical response. In the hagiographical tradition, eucharistic miracles are "almost exclusively female" with the recipients experiencing very specific outcomes:

miracles in which the recipient becomes a crystal filled with light . . .  
distinguishes consecrated and unconsecrated hosts . . . worthy and  
unworthy recipients and celebrants are distinguished, and . . . the eucharist  
has a special effect on the senses (smelling sweet, filling the mouth with

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<sup>90</sup> For more on third wave feminism and the end of grand narratives, see Dicker and Piepmeier.

honey, announcing its presence when hidden, etc.). (Bynum, *Fragmentation* 123)

None of these effects on the senses are mentioned in Christina's reception of the Eucharist. Where other saints, such as Elizabeth of Spalbeek, are traditionally overwhelmed by a eucharistic ecstasy after taking the sacrament, Christina's response is a non-sequitur; both priests watched as "she stired with a feersnes and bier [shout] and fledde out of the cite" (Thomas 58). Then she "ranne so faste awaye" as they "folowed hir booth vnto the flode [river]" thinking that the water would stop her from running further. The two priests were "alle astonyed, [and] sawe the womman byfore hem—in verrey body as hit were a fantum—goo into the depe streemes of the watir and come vp harmles oute by that othere banke" (Thomas 59). Many critics read Christina's underwater walking as an unusual but divinely-inspired reaction to communion; I would argue that the Eucharist produces no effect on her, as her unbounded body of possibility has already performed several miraculous feats.<sup>91</sup> The text employs the familiar signpost of Holy Communion in a passage that erases the authority of the church, and closes with an unpredictable and inexplicable response by a saint. Yet, most literary critics are content to note Christina's engagement with the host, disregarding the anti-clerical sentiment present in the text.

Alongside taking the Eucharist, baptism is another traditional activity in the life of a saint. Formalist readers typically see Christina's baptism as a fulfillment of her saintly role. However, true to form, Christina's baptism is unusual: "so it fel vpon a daye that she, stirid of sprite ful hougely, ranne to a chirche in a towne that is callid Wellen and,

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<sup>91</sup> Christina does not receive the Eucharist until *after* she has been resurrected (Thomas 54-5), demonstrated that she can fly (Thomas 58), and has lactated to feed herself (Thomas 59). These events will be explored in greater detail later in this chapter.

fyndynghe the fonte stoon open, she plonger hirsselfe alle therein” (Thomas 65). She secures baptism without a priest, without the appropriate liturgy, and without ensuring that she is cleansed beforehand via confession. This baptism is mainly different from others in hagiography in that Christina aggressively *baptizes herself*.<sup>92</sup> Her actions affirm her *ex-ipse* authority once again. Performative and self-directed, she alone controls the administration of one of the sacraments. Even Christ was baptised by another (Mat. 13-17; Mark 9-11; Luke 21-22; John 1), which provides the precedent concerning the church’s doctrinal teachings regarding baptism. Medieval canon law generally prohibited lay men and women from performing the baptismal rite for others, “[e]xcept where the person baptized was close to death, only a priest could lawfully administer the rite of baptism . . . . Laymen who baptized outside those circumstances were required to do penance.” Church law held that in an emergency,

even laymen, women, hermaphrodites, Jews, pagans, or heretics could validly baptize as long as they used the correct baptismal formula . . . .

The only exception that might occasionally have mattered was that *no person could validly baptize himself* [emphasis mine]. (Helmholz 21)

Christina’s baptism is a non-emergency; she had already met with God and had been assured that her ascent to heaven at death was guaranteed. This baptism must rank then as a sharp rebuke to the church’s *ex-officio* authority, because the gatekeepers of salvation are made irrelevant by Christina’s actions. That the baptism appears to be efficacious

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<sup>92</sup> Alternately, Christina may be re-baptizing herself, if we presume an infant baptism, even though there is no evidence in the text of a prior baptism. Nonetheless, the medieval attitude to re-baptizement was based on Augustine’s opinion that “there can be no question of re-baptism, since baptism is irreversible, and, in its divine origin, complete” (Cramer 127). Whether baptizing herself for the first time or re-baptizing herself, she is anticipating the Anabaptist conflict of the sixteenth century; her behaviour in this instance is doctrinally in error.

further confirms her *ex-gratia* authority as a religious self-intercessor, and, significantly, this baptism appears to resolve her dislike of people: “fro then for the manere of hire lyfe was more tempyrde to men and hadde hirselle afterwarde more esely and better myghte suffre the taste of men and dwelle amonge hem (Thomas 65). In sum, the inclusion of a baptismal account in the *vita* appears to be a logical step in the life of a saint, but the self-baptism of Christina is doctrinally invalid and the hagiographical significance of the sacrament is subverted. Furthermore, these odd versions of traditional sacramental rites are just the beginning of a major pattern in the *life*, where Christina continues to exercise her power in a forthright fashion by performing self-abjection as a cautionary tale for apostates.

#### THE SUBVERSIVE BODY I: ACTS OF PERFORMATIVE SELF-ABJECTION

After her resurrection, Christina “then bygan to do that for the whiche our Lorde sende hir ageyne.” Her earliest forays into performative self-abjection involve heat and fire, and would *seem* to be an appropriate simulation of the tortures of the martyrs and of Purgatory and Hell.

She wente into hoot brennyng ouenes . . . . keste hirselle into houge fyres . . . or allonly putte in hir feet and handys and helde hem there so longe vnto, but if hit hadde [not] be myrakelle of God they myghte be brente to askes. [She also] . . . wente into cauderons fulle of hoot, boylynge watir . . . . And she poured scalde hoot watir on those membrys that were harmles withouten and cryed as a womman that trauelles with childe; yit, netheles, whan sche come oute sche hadde no harme. (Thomas 59)

Since she receives no harm, the purpose of her crying out comes over as performative. There is no doubt that fire “was not only an essential, required accessory of Purgatory but also, in many cases, its very embodiment” (Le Goff 244).

Immediately after her fire experiences, Christina moves on to self-inflicted torments involving water, as

She abood often tyme and longe vndir the water of the flode of Moyse  
[Meuse River] . . . in so mykel that she dwelled stille in the watir sex  
dayes or more. But the preste that hadde cure of hire come and stood vpon  
the watir banke and adiurid hire, by the name of Cryste, and then she was  
constreyned to come home. (Thomas 60)

Once again Christina is “adjoured” and “constreyned” as she was while flying to the rafters of the church at her funeral. Early in her resurrected life, the clergy and her family attempt to curtail her activities, until they realize that she is imbued with supernatural gifts. Christina’s water torments occur in winter as well:

Also in wynter tyme, she wente streight vprighte on the watir-mylne whele  
forto stande so she shulde haue slyden down headlynge and alle hire body  
after . . . . nethles, there was no hurtyng seen in her body. (Thomas 60)

Critics lump these performances in with Christina’s other demonstrations of purgatorial suffering. But references to purgatorial suffering associated with water in medieval Christian literature is largely absent, save mentions of the river Styx in Dante’s *Inferno* (Canto 7, 67-75). I argue that these tortures of fire and water are not for the purposes of illustrating penitential punishments. Instead, they are examples of performative self-abjection employed in order to establish Christina’s unimpeachable authority to an

audience of suspicious clergy and uncertain laity. She performs her authenticity publicly before she begins her primary mission of warning of the horrors of Purgatory. I also contend that either Thomas, in his literary arrangement of these formative acts, or Christina, in her presentation of her first performances as a divine advocate of salvation, is addressing the medieval practice of trial by ordeal. Lateran IV, which had encouraged the *vita apostolica* in 1215, had declared that the ordeal was thereafter forbidden (Elliot, *Proving* 16).

Use of ordeals to determine truth was sometimes controversial, and the ecclesia at times found the process discomforting, but “clerics accepted them as part of the normative legal procedure throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries . . . [and the ordeal] continued to be applied to church affairs well into the thirteenth century” (Elliot, *Proving* 16). The ordeal had two primary forms: the first, by hot water or hot iron:

The defendant had . . . to pick an object from a cauldron of boiling water,  
And . . . carry a piece of heated iron for a distance of nine feet . . . [After  
three days], if healing had set in, the defendant was proclaimed innocent;  
festering was a sign of guilt. (Ho 261)

The emphasis on Christina pouring scalding water on her extremities or putting her hands and feet in flames conforms to the medieval fire ordeal. Unharmed, Christina’s healing is immediate, and her incorruptible body is thus a sign of not only her innocence, but also her sanctity. Furthermore, the understanding of fire as a sign was changing during the Middle Ages as it became more frequently associated with earthly punishment over divine retribution. LeGoff writes:

the fire of Purgatory, while remaining a symbol imbued with meaning and signifying salvation through purification, became an instrument to be wielded by a complex system of justice associated with a society quite different from those that believed in the regenerative power of fire. (11)

The divine fire that cleanses is fast becoming the earthly fire that is used to extract “truth” in the thirteenth century; through her “fire” performances, Christina is confronting and challenging the mortal, patriarchal power structure that could potentially burn her as a witch or a heretic.

Cold water was also employed in the medieval ordeal in order to discover “truth” in matters of justice: “the defendant was innocent if he sank when thrown into the depths, and guilty if he floated” (Ho 261). God’s intervention, or lack thereof, would help ascertain the truth in ordeals of water. Christina, in staying underwater for more than six days has “sunk down” and proven her innocence and veracity, while her survival adds to the unbounded credentials for her body. In another form of ordeal by water, she “cam swymmyng with the watir and felle with the water aboue the whele” (Thomas 60). Again she emerges unhurt, confirming Christina’s purity and innocence.<sup>93</sup> Readers may also recall that Christina has already strolled across the bottom of the river after receiving the Eucharist as yet another performance of the ordeal by water.

The text’s focus on torture is relevant, not only in terms of purgatorial retribution, but also in relation to the threat of inquisitional torture used against suspect mystical

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<sup>93</sup> I disagree with Newman’s contention that Christina *may* have been possessed by demons until her baptism, based on Christina’s survival of two self-administered trials by ordeal. I have already proved that Christina’s self-baptism was invalid. Newman’s suggestion that Christina attempted self-exorcism twice, once by receiving communion, and once through baptism, compromises Christina’s autonomy and denies the efficacy of the proofs provided by the ordeals. Finally, Newman herself admits that even after communion and baptism, “her grotesque behaviour continued,” which seems to invalidate any possibility of demon possession (Newman, “Devout” 49-50).

women in this period. By the mid-thirteenth century, heretics and saints “became uncomfortably proximate,” and the church relied on the inquisitional process to distinguish between the two (Elliot, *Proving* 119). Christina is facing down torture as an instrument used to assert power on behalf of the church. Elizabeth Scarry remarks that torture confers authority on the one who inflicts it:

In the very processes it uses to produce pain within the body of the prisoner, it bestows visibility on the structure and enormity of what is usually private and incommunicable, contained within the boundaries of the sufferer’s body. It then goes on to deny, to falsify, the reality of the very thing it has itself objectified by a perceptual shift which converts the vision of suffering into the wholly illusory but, to the torturers and the regime they represent, wholly convincing spectacle of power. (1)

By performing self-inflicted tortures, Christina also challenges the concept of the woman saint’s objectified body. That is, rather than being an *object through which* the divine is made visible, supporting the patriarchal dominance of the church, she creates a spectacle of subjective, autonomous power beyond the reach of church authority. There is nothing the church can do to discipline or control her that she does not already do to herself.

When Christina enacts ordeals by jumping into hot ovens and standing in freezing water for days at a time, she is challenging the church’s attempts to control *ex-gratia* mystics:

What assists the conversion of absolute pain into the fiction of absolute power is an obsessive, self-conscious display of agency . . . the objectified pain is denied as pain [and] read as power, a translation made possible by the obsessive mediation of agency. (Scarry 1)



Therefore, by performing self-inflicted torture, Christina has again subverted institutions of power, demonstrating that whomever inflicts torture creates an impression of authority. There is a bitter irony in the fact that these tortures, originally perpetrated by pagans upon Christians (especially in the sacred fictions), have been co-opted by the church and turned against unorthodox Christians. Christina's engagement with what would be recognized by the people of her time as torture<sup>94</sup> would have been a "convincing spectacle," a performance of pain as power facilitated through her own agency, for instance, when she willingly submits herself to the wheel, "in the manner of hem that were turmentyd" (Thomas 60). Her self-torture highlights the lack of stability and influence in the church, while affirming her own authenticity and impunity.

Voluntarily performing ordeals of fire and water in front of the community strips the church of much of the authority it may have had in overseeing Beguines. These acts are performative self-abjection in the quest for self-authorization. Since she has enacted the church's most extreme means of probing for the truth, and successfully survived both types of ordeal, the church lacks recourse against Christina's public performances. Her body shows the signs—due to its lack of injury or scar—that she cannot be limited or disciplined: fire will not burn her and water will not drown her.

Tests of both fire and water evoke the stories of numerous other saints, particularly the stories of the martyrs, though Christina's life remains distinct from them.

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<sup>94</sup> There is an immediate political awareness regarding torture during Christina's lifetime. Thomas's life of Christina was written in a period which saw authorities, both secular and religious, make use of pain as a method of determining truth. Dyan Elliott writes, "The penal and the penitential can accurately be described as merging" (*Proving* 83). Meanwhile, Lateran IV (1215) abolished the participation of clerics in trials of ordeal, something in which the church had previously participated (Groot 1). At the same time, the council "further introduced the inquisitional procedure for the persecution of criminous clerics" (*Proving* 120). The procedure would soon be used against both saints and heretics, as the "growing emphasis on inquisitional procedure corresponded to a gradual decline in the fortunes of holy women" (*Proving* 121). Torture by ordeal had been in place before Lateran IV, only to be replaced by inquisition. "Inquisitorial systems" Groot writes, "can be traced to a past reliance on confessions and torture" (24).

The fiery torments recall the story of Saint Agnes, who was mistaken by the men of Rome as a witch and thrown into a roaring fire. She does not burn, however. The flames do not touch her, burning the crowd instead. She is stabbed in the throat, bringing about her death (Jacobus 113-117). Christina's fiery sufferings are instead self-directed: Thomas clarifies always that "*she wente* into hoot brennyng ouenes," "*she keste hirselfe* into houge fyres," and "*she poured* scalde hoot watir on thos membrys" (60; emphasis added). Saint Lawrence, another popular saint in the Middle Ages, suffers the punishment of fire. After being beaten and burnt on a gridiron, he mocks his tormentors:

“Þov wrechche,” he seide, “þou hast i-rosted: pulke one side i-nouz  
Torne hire opward and et hire noupe: for zare heo is pare-to;  
And wiend and roste pat opur side: pat heo beo i-novꝛ al-so.”

(*South English Legendary* 345)

Though Lawrence speaks, Christina howls and cries out “as a womman that trauelles with childe” (Thomas 60). Her pain is immediate but there is no lasting consequence after her suffering. Lawrence, conversely, seems to feel no pain during his torture, but dies as a result. Christina's experiences with hot water also recall the *life* of Saint Cecilia, who is placed in a boiling bath for a day. God's intervention makes the water feel cool to her. Since she does not die in the boiling water, a headsman then unsuccessfully attempts to chop off her head, and she ultimately bleeds to death (Jacobus 771-7). Cecilia's trials, then, do not come over as performative actions in the way Christina's do. As for deaths by water, readers of hagiography would likely know of Pope Saint Clement, who is bound to an anchor and cast into the sea by the Emperor Trajan (Jacobus 777-788). Clement sinks to the bottom and drowns. While each of these saints is preserved from

much of the suffering of torture through God's intervention, death is inevitable.

Conversely, Christina suffers physical pain in the moment of her performance, where her body is always central, but death is never the end result.

Having successfully navigated both types of ordeals in front of numerous witnesses, Christina is ready to begin her larger task: to "suffre Purgatorye in this worlde" for the benefit of others (Thomas 52). She may have continued to perform the torments of fire and water, although this is not clear in the *vita*. She does, however, engage in other acts of performative self-abjection in order to demonstrate the suffering of Purgatory, simultaneously recalling the stories of fellow saints and martyrs. There is a profound difference between Christina and the saints whose lives are evoked by her performances, however. The earlier saints endure grisly inflictions of pain, awaiting the mediation of God, who usually intervenes. For instance, He might destroy the means of torture, as in the stories of both Catherine and Euphemia. Alternately, God effects religious conversions upon soldiers or henchmen of evil persecutors, who will then refuse to carry out the leader's demands for beheading or other methods of murder in order to (temporarily) save the saint, as in the stories of Saint Agnes (Osbern 227-43) and Saint Katherine (Jacobus 914-5). In each case, the saint prays and waits for God's assistance, but death is inevitable. These saints are passive objects awaiting rescue, the *objects* of Coon's "sacred fictions," who serve as exemplars "meant to inspire audiences to emulate [a] saint's behaviour" (Gregory 5). Christina, on the other hand, is the *subject* of hagiographical account; she is Judith Butler's "social agent," "the subject of constitutive acts" ("Performative" 519). Imbued with superlative powers, she takes the initiative assertively, submits herself to tortures over and over again, and does not await rescue.

Incapable of demonstrating the helpless passivity of the saints whose lives she recalls, she constitutes a new female authority and a new type of hagiography. This is a subversion of the tradition of martyrs and saints, because Christina is permitted to suffer exquisite pain, but is exempt from death, except on her own terms.

One of Christina's most recognizable performances involves the wheel, as she "bowed hir leggys and armes in whelis, in the whiche theues were wonte to haue her iewess [judgement; acting as her own torturer]; and yit, whan she come downe, there semyd no brekyng in hir lymmes" (Thomas 60).<sup>95</sup> Like Saint Katherine of Alexandria, Christina survives. Katherine prays to God that the wheel be destroyed:

Et ecce angelus domini molam illam cum tanto impetu divellendo  
concussit, quod quatuor millia gentilium interemit.

[and an angel of the Lord struck that engine such a blow that it was  
shattered and four thousand pagans were killed.]" (Jacobus 793)

Katherine is later beheaded, which has no commonality with Christina's *life*, but Christina shares another similarity with her: milk flowed from Katherine's neck instead of blood, and her bones exuded a holy oil that healed others, recalling Christina's miraculous lactations of milk and oil, which are discussed below. The episode on the wheel also invokes the *life* of Saint Euphemia, who endures many of the same tortures as Christina. I use Euphemia because she is in many ways the most comprehensive analogue to Christina's life. Euphemia is also like Christina in that she avoids a number of near-death experiences. Placed on a wheel with hot coals in the spokes, Euphemia is meant to burn as the wheel tears her body apart. God intervenes, and the wheel crushes the

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<sup>95</sup> Inquisitional methods had been in use in the twelfth century and were becoming more popular in the thirteenth century (Elliott, *Proving* 121); the text is pointing out a disturbing fact: the wheel is available in the small community of Liège to potentially torture any accused individuals.

operator, leaving Euphemia unharmed. Men then light the wheel on fire in order to burn her, but an angel releases her. After a number of other attempts to kill Euphemia, including being hung up by her hair and thrown into a pit of wild beasts, a headsman finally stabs her in the side and kills her (Jacobus 620-22). While this list seems to be a random collection of tortures collected from the lives of other early saints, Christina's physical trials are actually a unified whole, because, through her performances, she encapsulates the entire history of the suffering of saints.

In another set of performances, Christina also "wente to the galous and hengyd hirsself vp with a gnare [noose] amonge honged theues and there she henge a day or too" (60). Imagery of Christ crucified alongside two thieves springs to mind; his empathy for criminals condemned to death reflects Christina's willingness to suffer for those condemned to Purgatory (Wake 81). The hanging also recalls Saint Gorgonius and Saint Dorotheus, both of whom were persecuted for their Christianity. Stretched on the rack, whipped with iron hooks, and roasted on grates, they felt no pain throughout these tortures, the *Legenda Aurea* account explains. Finally, they are both executed by hanging (601-2). Christina has been subject to the wheel and fire, and suspends her body "for a day or two," but none of these actions cause her to lose her life. Meanwhile, her body reverts back to its uninjured state after every indignity. In sum, Christina's trials can only be described as examples of performative self-abjection, because she submits willingly to public suffering in order to prove her authenticity and authority over that of the church. A clear sign foreshadowing the agonies that await unrepentant sinners in Purgatory, Christina's acts also signify an unimpeachable female expression of faith.

## THE SUBVERSIVE BODY II: CHRISTINA'S ASTONISHING BREASTS

Based on the concept of the improper or unclean, Kristeva argues that food loathing is “perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection” (*Powers* 2). Christina’s *vita* contains two accounts of a discomfiting food taboo associated with the female body. She nurses herself from her breasts when she is hungry, creating a new set of signs for paradoxographical literature, which inverts the traditional image of lactation as a symbol of outpouring of self. Thomas declares these acts of performative self-abjection “a merueylous thinge” (58).

Christina flees into the wilderness to escape the “sauour of men” (Thomas 97), something that drives her away from the company of other human beings. In hiding, she “nedid mete and was pyned with a ful grete hungyr,” praying to God “that he wolde mercyfully see to hir angwyshe” (Thomas 58). In a highly unusual divine resolution to the problem of hunger, Christina “loked upon the drye pappys of hir virgyne brest and sawe hit drepe swete milke agaynes alle righte of kynde and nature” with which she feeds herself, “and so the virgyne Cristyn was norysched nyne wokes with the mylke of hir owne pappe” (Thomas 58). The familiar trope of the nursing mother, evoking images of the Virgin, is subverted into a new, pro-feminine account of female power and secret knowledge. The miracle of lactation is traditionally associated with healing or feeding others in an act of kenosis (Bynum, *Fragmentation* 184); the unusual aspect of Christina’s breastfeeding is that this lactation serves only her. The text attempts to correct course by interpreting this self-feeding as a miracle that sets up a comparison between Christina and the Virgin Mary: “This is a merueylous thinge, and neuere herde after to

imcomparabil and singler virgyne, Cristes moder” (58). The evocation of the Virgin redirects the action, overlooking the fact that Christina feeds herself, and does not share her milk with anyone. Critics follow suit, remarking on the accounts only in passing. The only similarity between Christina and the Virgin is that they both lactate; the Virgin’s lactation is associated with the love a mother feels for her child. Christina’s lactation appears to be associated solely with self-sustenance.

This is not the only time Christina lactates for herself; her family, “soppusyngre hir wode and ful of fendes [fiends/demons]” captures and imprisons her (Thomas 57). Yoking her to a tree with chains, they “fedde hir as a dogge with a litil breed and watir alone” (64). Christina is treated like an animal, confirming her status as Other, outside of normal human existence (Kristeva, *Powers* 12). As a result of her captivity, her buttocks and shoulders are rubbed raw against the tree and she becomes too weak to eat. God once again “hadde mercy on hire merueilosly and wroghte in hir that nobil miracle atte was neuer harde heer byfore.” But this is no ordinary lactation. “Her maydenly pappes bigan to sprynge licoure of ful swete oyle, and that toke she and sauerd hir brede with alle and hadde hit for potage and oynemente” (Thomas 64). The oil both heals and nourishes her, and, significantly, would leave signs of healing on the surface of her body, once again in a kind of performative display. Christina’s lactation finally convinces her family that she is a saint. They

began to wepe and fro then forth they sturglid nor enforced nothinge ageyne Goddes wille in Cristyns miracles, but lowsed hire of bondys and knelyd doun, preiyngre forgifnes of the wronge that they hadde done to hire, and so leet hire go. (Thomas 64)

Christina firmly establishes her religious authority and authenticity with the second lactation miracle.

The *vita* seems to revel in the unsettling notion of a woman breastfeeding herself: it evokes a “discomfort, unease, dizziness stemming from an ambiguity that, through the violence of a revolt against, demarcates a space out of which signs and objects arise” (Kristeva, *Powers* 10). Lactation is wholly abject, but in Christina’s case, self-consumption of her own breast milk inverts the selflessness traditionally associated with breastfeeding. A new sign is created here as the lactation miracles designate Christina’s complete independence from the rest of the world, including the church. She is singular, set apart from humans and saints, truly Other. Rather than embracing her hunger and weakness in identification with the suffering of Christ as Elizabeth of Spalbeek or Mary of Oignies do, she *expects* succor, receives it, and displays the results of it on her body. In this, I posit, she is an anti-ascetic, at complete odds with fellow nuns and saints who welcome self-deprivation.

There is a disconnect between the image of a woman lactating on bread or using the milk for potage or soup and the nurturing images of the breastfeeding Virgin. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Christina’s diet is subversive, perverting the concept of nurturance and motherhood in sacrifice to an act of self-sustenance. Christina’s ability to feed herself, using what has traditionally been designated as an act of kenosis, or outpouring of self, in fact creates a new set of signs and objects concerning hagiographical depictions of women. Understanding this new sign requires an examination of what lactation meant in the Middle Ages. Giselle de Nie and Robin Waugh identify saints’ lactation as a symbol of the sharing of knowledge and religious



community. Addressing the *vita* of Saint Perpetua, who nurses her child and also has a vision of being fed cheese (a milk product) in paradise, Waugh explains it as “an image of the passage of knowledge, speech, and language from mother to child” (*The Genre* 45). De Nie associates the passage of knowledge through lactation with the examples of Christ as nursing mother, “feeding” religious knowledge and spiritual succour to the laity (112-155). She includes the words of Clement of Alexandria (150-c.215), who writes:

The Word is everything to the Child, both father and mother, teacher and Nurse . . . . the word alone supplies us children with the milk of love, and only those who suck at his breast are truly happy . . . . nourishment is Christ himself: we drink the heavenly Word. (qtd. in de Nie 113-4; Waugh, *The Genre* 45)

Julian of Norwich, writing contemporaneously with the MS Douce 114, subscribes to the notion of Christ the mother tenderly nursing the faithful:

The moder may geve her childe sucke her milke. But oure precious moder Jhesu, he may fede us with himselfe, and doth full curtesly and full tenderly with the blessed sacrament that is precious fode of very life . . . .  
The moder may ley her childe tenderly to her brest. But oure tender mother Jhesu, he may homely lede us into his blessed brest by his swet, open side, and shewe us therein perty of the godhed and the joyes of heven, with gostely sekernesse of endlesse blisse. (313)

The *Madonna Lactans* image perpetuates the idea of lactation as an act of pure compassion, humility, and self-effacement. These early church concepts of lactation

emphasize the holy mother/father image which conflicts profoundly with the image of Christina living on her own breast milk.

By the High Middle Ages, however, miraculous lactation had also become a symbol of power and authority for the church and the patriarchy. As the medieval church struggled with authority over women mystics, even the concept of the lactating breast had been appropriated to the male, public sphere. Lactation began to be associated with male saints, such as Saint Mammant, who, while fleeing the Romans, fed himself from the milk of wild animals (Chignola 7), or Saint Giles, who sought out the metaphorical desert, subsisting on the milk of a doe (Jacobus 582-585). Most famously, the erroneously-titled miracle “The Lactation of Saint Bernard” (1090-1153) became one of the most popular lactation stories of its day. Encountering a statue of the Virgin, Bernard demanded that she prove she was the Mother of Christ. Suddenly, milk emerged from the statue’s breast, hitting Bernard of Clairvaux in the eye and curing a minor affliction there. In his book, *Medieval Images of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux*, James France provides a comprehensive collection of medieval art representing this popular miracle (217, 221, 226). Hagiographical stories of lactation that focused on the needs of men facilitated the notion of the church as the *ecclesia lactans*, claiming for itself the power of nurture and sustenance (Bynum, *Fragmentation* 95). Lactation, sanitized of its abjective nature in women, was appropriated by men of the church as a (presumably) mostly genderless method of elevating the status of male saints like Saint Bernard. In addition, women’s breasts, in service of Christian proselytization, are identified as objects to be chopped off, as in the *life* of Saint Agatha<sup>96</sup> (Jacobus 170-174), a tradition that alters the

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<sup>96</sup> Agatha, a great Christian beauty, refused to sacrifice to the pagan gods. As a result, her breast was cut off, only to be restored miraculously to her body. She was later rolled over broken pottery and hot coals,

potentially abjective breast feeding tropes of the Virgin. With men commandeering the function of lactation and breastfeeding in the Middle Ages, abjection is stripped away from a maternal image of bodily fluids. Even Francis of Assisi lactates, in an explicit example of sex role-reversal:

Lady Clare also related how once, in a vision . . . . When she reached Saint Francis, the saint bared his breast and said to the Lady Clare: “Come, take, and drink.” After she has sucked from it, the saint admonished her to imbibe once again. After she did so what she had tasted was so sweet and delightful she in no way could describe it. (qtd. in Freeman 225)

What does this mean for Christina the Astonishing and her act of performative self-abjection by taking her own breast milk? She has created a new sign: demonstrating neither kenosis nor the power of the church, she affirms her status as a saint above all saints. She is a mother to herself just as God was a father to himself in Christ, just as he (and now she) are the sign of the word made flesh (John 1:1-18). Further, she rejects the image of lactation and nursing as a communal sharing of knowledge and religious comfort, instead feeding only herself. One may see her as simply selfish; alternatively, her self-sustenance can be understood as a commentary on a mystical and religious experience so profound, so extraordinary, that it cannot be shared with or disseminated to anyone else. Her self-sustenance is proof that she does not need the church, the *ecclesia lactans*, to sustain her. It also suggests that women, those naturally imbued with the power of lactation, also have the potential to self-sustain and worship independently, *ex-ipsa*. Therefore, Christina is a living testament to the irrelevancy of the church’s *ex-*

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and “*Haec cum orasset, cum ingenti voce spiritum tradidit*” [When she had thus prayed, and, with a great voice, yielded up her spirit] (Jacobus 173).

*officio* authority. She demonstrates an “abject knowledge,” which, according to Kristeva, is a sign of preparation “to go through the first great demystification of Power (religious, moral, political, and verbal) . . . taking place within that fulfillment of religion as sacred horror, which is Judeo-Christian monotheism” (*Powers* 210). Christina’s self-feeding is part of her systematic demystification of the power of the church through performative self-abjection, which she demonstrates repeatedly.

Another new sign emerges out of Christina’s second lactation. Her breasts exude a sweet oil that serves as both a salve for wounds and a foodstuff that is sweet on bread. Not only is she self-sustaining, she is also self-healing, indicating a new type of “sealed body.” Typically, the medieval woman represents “the frailty of the flesh,” pervious to external influence and control (Lochrie, “Language” 124-5). The only remedy for feminine frailty is to present the sealed female body as idealized and articulated in texts such as *Hali Meiðhad* (ca. 1182–1198) and the *Ancrene Riwle* (ca. 1225-1240), conduct-books advocating virginity, silence, and obedience. *Hali Meiðhad*, a paeon to virginity, extolls its version of the female body:

Ant tu penne, eadi meiden, pet art iloten to him wip mei[ð]hades merke,  
ne brec pu nawt pet seil pet seileð inc togederes.

[And you then, blessed maiden, who are assigned to him with the sign of  
virginity, break not thou that seal which seals you together.] (5-6)

Similarly, the *Ancrene Riwle* uses the imagery of the impermeable, sealed female body as a concrete tower:

Ye beoth tur ow-seolven, mine leove sustren, ah ne drede ye nawt hwil ye  
beoth se treoweliche ant se feste i-limet with lim of an-red luve, each of

ow to other. For na deofles puf ne thurve ye dreden bute thet lim falsi -  
 thet is to seggen, bute luvē bitweonen ow thurh the feond wursi. Sone se ei  
 unlimeth hire, ha bith sone i-swipt forth; bute yef the othre halden hire, ha  
 bith sone i-keast adun as the lowse stan is from the tures cop into the  
 deope dich of sum suti sunne. (ll. 593-99)

[You yourselves are a tower, my dear sisters, and do not fear so long as  
 you are so truly and firmly cemented together with the cement of enduring  
 love. You need fear no blast of the devil unless the cement should fail, that  
 is to say unless the love between you should be weakened by the devil. As  
 soon as anyone detaches herself, she is swept away at once (unless the  
 others keep hold of her), at once cast down like a loose stone from the top  
 of the tower, into the deep ditch of some filthy sin.] (Trans. Salu 101)

Lochrie maintains that “the sealed body finds its complement in seclusion and silence,”  
 and she argues that abjection is “the broken seal,” which sees the mystic cast aside both  
 seclusion and silence (“Language” 128). However, Lochrie speaks here specifically of  
 the mystic engaged in *imitatio Christi*, an act that Christina never formally performs,  
 opting instead to perform the suffering of humans in Purgatory, “not for hirselfe, but for  
 hir neighbores” (Thomas 83). Her performative self-abjection in the form of suckling  
 herself is predicated on a social taboo, “dietary or other,” as abjection demands (Kristeva,  
*Powers* 17). It is also an abjective symbol of a woman's autonomy. Abjection of self,  
 according to Kristeva, is “the first approach to a self that would otherwise be walled in”  
 by external social limits (*Powers* 47). Rather than being “walled in” by outside  
 influences, Christina has effectively “walled out” any dependence upon societal

provisions, rendering herself completely self-sufficient. Her “sealed body” is a new sign of female autonomy and a rejection of imposed frailty. She is an impregnable fortress, immune to disfigurement and death, able to heal, feed, and nurture herself exclusive of the external world.

Bodily discharges of oil are rare but not unheard of in hagiography. Christina’s lactation of oil is reminiscent of the story of Lutgard of Aywières, who found her hands were dripping with a blessed oil understood as a manifestation of grace from God (Thomas, “Lutgard” 231). Margot King concludes that these two miracles of oil are similar and “common among the Cistercian writers of the twelfth century.” However, Lutgard’s oil drips from her hands, serving no purpose other than as a sign of “an invisible grace” (153). Christina’s oil miracle emanates directly from her breasts and serves a specific function in her health, bodily image, and life. Its source indicates that it is food; its purpose is to keep Christina alive. Lutgard’s grace is free-flowing, dripping to the floor. Christina’s grace, manifested in the oil, is comparably contained and shared with no other person.

With her lactation miracles, Christina re-appropriates the breast away from the church, making it a symbol of women’s autonomous life-giving power. It is no wonder that scholars and theologians have glossed over this aspect of Christina’s *vita*; the lactation pericopes can be confusing in that they are unprecedented. No other known saint or biblical exemplar uses lactation for self-sustenance; without a theological and literary analysis, readers may wonder what these acts signify, or they may simply defer to the association of the Virgin as a similarly lactating saint. Simultaneously, Christina’s lactation is a symbol of self-empowerment, gnostic knowledge, and independence from

the church, potentially creating delight for women readers who could presumably recognize the power of womanhood and the breast, exclusive of the outside world.

### THE SUBVERSIVE BODY III: FLYING

As evidenced by her lactation, Christina's somatic practice is not restricted to physical suffering. There are several instances where Christina takes flight, fleeing to "the cobby of tourys [tops of towers] of chirches or of othere hye things" as she "skaped aweye and fledde ferre into deserte [of] wodes and there she lyued as bryddes [birds] doon in trees" (Thomas 57). "Hire body was [so] sotil and lighte that she wente in hyghe thynges and as a bredde [bird], hengyd in ful smale twigges of trees" (Thomas 61). When she escapes from her prison cell, she flies "as a bridde in the eyre" (Thomas 63). Why Thomas would include these miracles is a mystery; they do not provide the reader with any theological pedagogy, other than to extoll Christina's unbounded physical power. Having an ability to fly does not impact soteriological outcomes, and it certainly cannot be emulated.

These kinds of theologically empty pericopes force a reconsideration of the attributes of the God of the Middle English Life of Saint Christina. This God is a rather Deist construct: that is, he is the prime mover in creating the resurrected Christina, but he is largely absent once she returns to the world. Thereafter, miracles occur because she can see, speak, and act. So what is the exact purpose of Christina's gift of flight? It may be a symbol of the Holy Spirit, which is represented as a bird in the New Testament: "and the Holy Ghost descended in corporal shape as a doue vpon him" (Luke 3:22). Perhaps flying is a feminine phenomenon.<sup>97</sup> Hélène Cixous may have struck upon the meaning behind

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<sup>97</sup> Flying should not be confused with levitation during prayer, an act attributed to Douceline of Marseilles (1215-1274), a French Beguine mystic (Bynum, *Holy Feast* 204).

Christina's flying. It is a sign that she is free from the constraints of the patriarchal church:

Flying is woman's gesture—flying in language and making it fly . . . . for centuries we've been able to possess anything only by flying; we've lived in flight stealing away, finding, when desired, narrow passageways, hidden crossovers . . . . It's no accident: women take after birds . . . . fly the coop, take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it . . . . emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down. (887)

In the end, one must conclude that Christina's flying is above all performative: an act of the body that demands an audience to appreciate its spectacle. More than the levitating saints who float in space, Christina transcends the earthbound life, affirming her divine powers, and transcending a biography that attempts to press her into the mold of a conforming female saint.

#### TWISTED TROPES

How is it that Christina's *vita*, explicating her numerous supernatural gifts and independent authority, could be conscripted as a relatively benign Christian saint's life? The text masquerades as a genre-specific story of a medieval saint by presenting highly recognizable hagiographical signposts dictated by genre. These signposts point to scriptural or devotional tropes, but the tropes are promptly inverted or subverted by Christina's actions. The struggle between Thomas of Cantimpré and his subject matter becomes obvious once the traditional tropes are deconstructed through close reading. I will examine here three (seemingly) familiar hagiographical literary devices and demonstrate the ways in which they are subverted in Christina's *vita*: myths of women's



obedience, myths of women's weakness (both physical and intellectual), and the notion of the holy fool for God's sake. Demonstrating what Teresa de Lauretis calls "the failure of the interpretive moment" on the part of scholars, analysis of Christina's *vita* will demarcate the ways in which the reader might be misled as to the intrinsic meaning of the text (*Figures* 255).

Obedience, patience, and humility are presumed qualities for medieval holy women, expected to be "models for personal conduct and patrons with access to heavenly power" (Salih 6). Hence, Elliott writes, "the female mystic was alternately represented as passive object and active subject of voluptuous desire for her supernatural lover [Christ]" (*Bride* 284). Usually, then, the woman saint passively awaits the intervention of God in times of trouble, as in the accounts of the martyrs. Delany sums up the passive death/spiritual victory conundrum concisely:

the hagiographical female hero is always rescued, and she sometimes achieves the death of her persecutor as well, through either her own prayer or a natural event (earthquake, a fall, etc.), which is seen as divine retribution for the persecutor. The saint's "rescue" is spiritual: she is taken up into heaven as a bride of Christ while the persecutor is destined for hell . . . . physically, the martyr is not rescued but suffers and eventually dies.  
(*Impolitic* 188-9)

The spiritual rescue of the female saint is exemplified in *De Sancta Sophia et tribus filiabus ejus* (Jacobus 203-4). Sophia and her three daughters, Faith, Hope, and Charity, are charged by the Emperor Hadrian with proselytizing for Christianity. Each daughter passively endures sadistic torture, but none feel pain; each daughter "tripudio transiit per

gladium ad coronam” [passed gladly by means of the sword to the crown] (Jacobus 204). It is Hadrian who is left to suffer, cognizant of his error and the fact that he will eventually go to Hell: “Adrianus autem totus putrefactus emarcuit confitens sanctis Dei injuste injurias intulisse” [Hadrian rotted confessing that he had unjustly inflicted injuries on saints of God] (Jacobus 204).

In direct contrast, Christina subverts yet another hagiographical tradition; she is not passive, nor is she gentle. Her only persecutor is herself. She exhibits characteristics that stand in stark contrast to the idealized female saint. She is often angry, as in the example where she is asked to pray for the safety of a knight by his wife, and “with endyne [displeasure], seyde to his wyfe . . . I haue broghte thy husbande safe ageyne by importunite . . . but wit thou wele that thou shalte not haue iuye longe of his presence” (Thomas 79). She is frequently aggressive when begging for food “fro dore to dore” (Thomas 65); and she is often wildly impulsive, performing acts of spectacle for no apparent reason:

aboute mydnyghte, she ros and prouoked and callid for alle the dogges of the cite of Seinte Trudous to barke and ranne faste byfore hem as a beste; and they folod after hir and droof and chacyd hir thurgh buskes and brerys and thikke thornes, soo that there lafte no party of hire body vnwoundyd.  
(Thomas 61)

These behaviours distinguish Christina from other female saints whose *vitae* adhere to more traditional tropes. Take, for example, Christina’s antithesis, Saint Margaret, who was lauded for possessing the six virtues:

Thus for this sexefold propyrte

Of the margaryte wych deuly longe  
 To seynt Margarete be congruyte  
 Of simylytude, we may vndyrfonge  
 That in sexe vertuhs she was stronge,  
 As in chastyte, mekenesse, & suyngly  
 In cheryte, constaunce of suffryng wronge,  
 In goostly counfort and in vycory. (Osbern 9)

Christina is chaste, “vnknowen to alle men” (Thomas 54), and suffers pain for others, but she is certainly not meek. Nor does she emulate the demure character of Saint Faith, who

Thow she fayre were, she also was good,  
 And in al hir werkys both clene & pure,  
 Of contenance sad and of chere demure,  
 Neythir in worde nere dede wantoun nere byce,  
 For no ping she hatyd but oonly wyce. (Osbern 99)

There is no description of Christina’s appearance beyond sartorial details. Never described as “good” or “demure,” instead she is terrifyingly, physically powerful. Efforts to contain her are directly related to her family’s fear of the church’s authority; Christina shatters the bondage imposed by those who attempt to control her. In the self-baptismal account, she rushes over traditional patriarchal boundaries of the church, plunging herself into the font. These are images of physical defiance and penetration into restricted environments open to women only with the permission of men. Her physical strength is evidenced by the times her sisters attempt to curb her erratic behaviour by capturing her twice, and each time they “bonde hir with chynes of yren” (Thomas 57); each time she

escapes. The sisters then hire “a ful wicked and ful strange man” to capture Christina. She fights him off until he breaks her leg with a cudgel; injured, she is too weak to escape, so he brings her home. The strange man “knewe the spirite of hire strengthe,” and “bonde hir faste to a piler in a celer, willid alle aboute, and lokked faste the dore” (Thomas 62). Suddenly,

the Holy Goost felle in hire, the bondes that she was tyed with were loused and she, alle hoole and harmeles, walked in the celar flore, daunsynge and blessynge oure Lorde to whom allone sche hadde chosen to lyue and to dye. (Thomas 63)<sup>98</sup>

Dancing is explicitly a performance, even though she has no audience. Christina then uses her unbounded strength to escape: “she toke a stoon of the celare flore and in an houge spirite she made the walle thurgh.” Making her escape, she flys out of the prison with amazing speed:

And as an arowe that euere the faster it is streyned in the bow, the strenger it fleeth, euen [so] hir spirit artyd abouen right with the selfe body of verrey fleshe, as hit is seide, flowe forth [like milk from a breast] as a bridde in the eyre. (Thomas 63)

The loosing of chains is a common saintly trope that appears in numerous hagiographies, such as the story of Saint Peter, in which an emissary of God miraculously frees the captive saint (Jacobus 455-461). But it appears that when the Holy Ghost falls into Christina, she is able to escape the chains and use her physical power to smash a stone

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<sup>98</sup> The inclusion of Christina’s “dancing” is curious: the thirteenth century church had “a negative moral attitude towards dance” (Arcangeli 39). Thomas himself was the compiler of the *Bonum universale de apibus* (1263), which discusses the dancing of devils, luring innocents to join in and subsequently dragging victims to the Rhine River to drown them (Arcangeli 37).

wall and escape, without the need for any emissary. Critics readily discuss the loosing of her chains, as it falls into familiar hagiographical territory, but they seem to overlook Christina's uncanny female strength and agency in her escape, which is yet another highly physical act of defiance against male and church-established boundaries.

Christina's character is that of a female superhero, but in order for her story to fit into the hagiographical genre, she is not celebrated for her strengths, which are largely ignored by scholars; her power is viewed from a reductionist position. For example, she is frequently associated with the concept of the "Holy Fool for Christ's sake" by scholars, portrayed as a penitent madwoman and holy fool (King 153; Thomas 73). Rather than being a "fool," Christina is far more intelligent than most critics might admit. In spite of the fact that she grew up a poor orphan without education, Thomas observes that Christina "vndirstood soothly alle Latyn and knewe plenirly all the menyng in scripture," though he seems to find the source of this skill a mystery: "sche neuer knewe lettir sythen she was borne" (Thomas 74). In the service of proselytization, Christina uses her wit to capitalize on male vanity and shame an unfaithful man:

Also whan the same Erle Lowys layed hym down vpon a daye in the  
chircheyeerd, and many a knyghte aboute hym, she come priuely by, nere  
to the Erlis heed. And holyng vpon hir eyen and handys began to seye with  
wonder grace of mouthe, "O Lorde thou arte ful feyre!"

The knyghtys, heerynge that, seyde to the Eril: "Sir Eril, heerith thous not  
how this holy womman preysity the?" "Yee," quod the Eril, "I woot  
whome she preyseth. Hit am not I. She louveth hir heuenly Lorde that is  
feyrest of alle and maker of feirnesse."

“Thou seith ful sooth,” quod she, “therefore, why ne loues thou hym not?”

(Thomas 75)

She briefly appears to be a woman who lacks continence in the area of sexual desire, but only in order to make her point. Her impertinent address of the lord shows that she is not beholden to class structures, nor is she concerned about the influence of powerful men. This pericope thus comes over as humourous and demonstrates her active intelligence and her insight into character.

Christina’s knowledge of scripture and the language of the church gives her intellectual credibility alongside her physical exploits. Again, critics avoid mentioning this attribute, which she uses to address complicated matters of church doctrine:

And whan she was asked moost dyuyne questyons of holy wrytte, she wolde declare hem moost openly to summe of hir spritual freendes, but ful gretely ageyns hir wille and ful selden; she wolde so do seyngne that hit byfelle to clerkys to expoune holy writte and that sicke mater felle not to hir. (Thomas 74)

Cautious but capable in matters of theology (another sign of her measured intellect), Christina avoids confrontation with the authorities. Thomas, too, is restrained in his praise of her here, understating her knowledge and abilities while attempting to emphasize her positive relationship with the church:

She worschepyd the clergye—and namely prestis—with a wonder manere for the houge loue of Cryste, thagh neuertheles she on contrary wyse suffred many wronges of hem. She monyshed esely and priuely with a wonder reuerens prestys and clerkys that synned as hire owne faders, leste

by hire excesses they schulde scorn the good name of Cryste amonge the pepil. (Thomas 74)

Thomas minimizes any negative associations between Christina and the clergy, but reveals that she “suffered many wrongs” because of them. What exactly those “wrongs” are goes unrecorded, but they cast a dark shadow over the relationship between Christina and the religious authorities, and explains her hesitancy in discussing matters of theology. The fact that Thomas mentions this suffering suggests it may have been substantial. Although he is directing the text and controlling the content regarding Christina’s life, his witnesses may have disclosed uncomfortable truths that were so well known that he was obliged to at least mention them briefly. Newman suggests this passage indicates that “not all priests shared James of Vitry’s and Thomas of Cantimpré’s view of Christina as a holy woman” (*Thomas of Cantimpré* 148). I suspect the conflict was much greater than the *vita* would have the reader believe.

The text demonstrates that Christina has a distaste for the church. Thomas explains that she refrains from castigating clergy not because she holds them in high esteem, but rather because she is protecting the reputation of Christ. She does not attend mass, instead regularly avoiding the trappings of organized religion:

She fledde worshepes and preisynges with ful mykel bisynesse and seyde that for suche thingis they were moste turmentyd in Helle or Purgatorye to whome Cryste hadde gyuen knowynge of his treuthe in hir lyfe. (67)

This statement inexplicably contradicts Thomas’s claim that Christina worshipped the clergy, presumably due to her knowledge of corruption and undue control exercised by men of the cloth. Taking the moral high ground, she assigns some of these men to

Purgatory; others, as she warns, will be tormented in Hell. Just like her other activities, she pursues this one, as the phrase “Mykel bisynese” indicates, with physical energy and abandon.

#### ANTI-ASCETICISM, MENDICANCY, AND THE SACRAMENTS

Christina’s lactations demonstrate that food figures large in her *life*. Unlike Elizabeth of Spalbeek or Mary of Oignies, both of whom subsist almost wholly on the Eucharist, Christina is an anti-ascetic, an anomaly in mystic circles, with a huge appetite that must be satisfied. Immediately after her resurrection, her first act is to return home to “eet hir meet” (Thomas 55).<sup>99</sup> We have seen that hunger was an issue for her when she fled to the wilderness; rather than embracing her suffering, she manages to feed herself from her own breasts twice (Thomas 58; 63-4). Her poverty poses no obstacle for her, nor does modesty hold her helpless in the search for food. Although Christina attempts to fast, her appetite gets the better of her and she is not above eating food that has been thrown away by others:

The meet that she vsyd was foule and abiecte and washynges [scrapings, leftover food] of dysshes that schulde be caste aweye, she boyled with watir; and that yeet she with brede of bran ful harde, netheles firste softened in watir. And this was hir mete after she hadde fasten two dayes or three togedyr. (Thomas 67)

To put it bluntly, Christina is a failure when it comes to fasting. Rather than finding ecstasy in renunciation, her appetite grows, and like an animal, she forages through garbage seeking food.

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<sup>99</sup> This episode recalls Margery Kempe’s enormous hunger after her first vision. Having lost her mind as the result of sins not confessed, she remained in a terrible state until Christ appeared to her. Fully recovered, she “toke hyr mete & drynke as hir bodyly strength wold seruyn hir” (8).



Christina does not only consume the discarded food of others. She often engages in begging door-to-door for food and drink. In exchange, she offers an opportunity for salvation:

Therefore she—that hadde forsaken for Crystes loue hir owne godis—  
myghte nothings vse in mete or drynke of thoos thinges that felle to hir bi  
righte eritage, but she vsyd comun meetis of men and beggid daye be daye  
fro dore to dore that she myghte beer the synnes of hem with whos almes  
she was compellid of Goddes sprite to begge, almes of wicked men, that  
thereby they shulde be callyd to loothnes of synnes and to penauns of hire  
lyfe. (Thomas 65)

There are two curious points here: the first is that Thomas says Christina would take no food that, according to a Latin version, “rightfully belonged to her.”<sup>100</sup> She was a poor, orphaned child, who lived in the woods during this part of her life: abject. Therefore, her anti-asceticism is based in poverty; she cannot voluntarily give up food as a gesture that identifies her suffering with Christ when she has little to eat in the first place. Secondly, she is offering to take on some, or perhaps all, of the purgatorial suffering of those who might feed her, functioning as a type of sin-eater.

Thomas attempts to contextualize Christina’s scavenging and begging as saintly acts filled with self-abnegation. But it is clear that Christina does *not* do this because she is trying to humiliate herself through ascetic practice, but rather because she is hungry. Proof for this contention exists in Christina’s door-to-door begging. When she eats “alms of yuel doers” or anything that “was wrangesly goten” she becomes ill: “hit semyd to hir that she yeet the bowellis of paddokes [frogs] or of todes or the guttis of neddirs [adders,

<sup>100</sup> This translation, by Jennifer Brown, comes from the Latin St. John’s MS (Brown, *Three Women* 65).

snakes]” (Thomas 66). An ascetic would refrain from eating whenever possible; a mystic engaged in self-mortification would embrace the sickness. But rather than welcome this suffering in empathy with God, Christina shrieks and complains loudly to whomever will hear:

She cryed as a womman trauelynge of childe and seyde: “O Cryste, what dost thou with me? Why turmentis thou me thus?” And knockynge hir body and breste seyde: “O thou wrecchyd soule, what desyres thou? What coueites thou these foule thinges? Why etis thou these filthe?” (Thomas 66)

Christina’s appetite is unbounded, like her body.<sup>101</sup> She does not understand why she is driven to eat anything she can get her hands on, and she does not welcome any physical suffering that occurs outside of her intentional abjective performances. This pericope emphasizes Christina’s lack of self-control, a most unusual quality for a female saint.

Food and its control, particularly by women saints, was “central to women socially and religiously . . . because by means of food women controlled themselves and their world” (Bynum, *Holy Feast* 193). Christina’s insatiable appetite and her quest for food marks her disinterest in controlling her world, as she has, in some ways, already left it behind. Perhaps she especially wants to leave behind a world that treats women so poorly. Certainly, her diet further denotes her indifference to self-control; it is one more indicator of her unbounded spirit/body and her rejection of social convention. Where

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<sup>101</sup> Bakhtin’s discussion of the grotesque body adds another subversive layer to the account of Christina’s unbounded appetite and resultant stomach troubles. He writes: “Eating and drinking are one of the most significant manifestations of the grotesque body. The distinctive character of this body is its open unfinished nature, its interaction with the world. These traits are most fully and concretely revealed in the act of eating; the body transgresses here its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world’s expense . . . Here man tastes the world, introduces it into his body, makes it part of himself” (Bakhtin 281). Christina, a woman and a saint, “tastes the world;” it tastes like garbage, and it makes her physically ill.

most women of her day had little autonomy, resorting to food control permitted them some power over their own lives. Women's value and holiness were "the consequence of sacrifice and willpower" manifested through food control, among other deprivations (Bell 150). In contrast, Christina enjoys immense autonomy, including control over her life and death, but cannot seem to control her appetite.

In discussing abjection and its relationship to food, Kristeva writes that Christian abjection is "a fantasy of devouring" (*Powers* 119); Burrus relates this fantasy to the devouring of Christ's flesh in the form of sacrament.

Jesus' nourishment lies in being consumed, his followers' in consuming Jesus. If eating results in their virtual identification (I in you and you in me), it also results in a mutual and ongoing transformation of identity.

(Burrus, *Saving* 50)

Based on Burrus's contention, the significance of Christina's consumption of garbage may point to a gradual transformation in which she is becoming more monstrous as she ages (her body is made up of discarded items); it also signifies her status as Other. Cohen argues that one of the elements of monstrosity is the consumption of "vast quantities of disgusting foodstuffs," revealing inhuman appetites:

In isolation from the civil world, precisely because the desires to which [her] excessive form gives instant expression mark [her] as not quite human: men [and women] control their appetites . . . and that domination over their own bodies is what constitutes their humanity. (Cohen, *Of Giants* 38)

Christina's hunger and satiation challenge the traditional mystic model of ascetic self-denial, confronting "ascetic aspirations of individual women . . . channeled into an acceptable pattern of behaviour that confirms the authority and virtue of male leaders and bishops" (T. Shaw 486). Marked as "not quite human" by her excessive appetite, rejecting the appropriate behaviours that reinforce the church through her anti-asceticism, Christina is further distanced from humanity.

Christina's begging, although traditionally associated with vows of poverty and based on the lives of Christ and his apostles, was not considered appropriate behaviour for women in the Middle Ages. Her willingness to exchange forgiveness of sins for food is another *quid pro quo* transaction that completely undermines the church's emphasis on confession and contrition, while suggesting that Christina's licence transcends that of any earthly religious authority. God has given Christina an immortal body; has he also given her the power to grant absolution for sins?

Pope Innocent III's call regarding the *vita apostolica* may have been presumed to include mendicancy in its dictate for a return to the primitive church, "poor, simple, and humble," alongside an emphasis on "evangelical poverty" (McDonnell 141). However, Innocent shortly thereafter declared that preaching, teaching, providing the sacraments (except in an emergency), and begging were "an unacceptable novelty" that must be limited to male clergy (Synek 601-602). Guillaume de Saint-Amour, Jean de Meung, and Rutebeuf roundly denounced religious mendicancy in the thirteenth century. Saint-Amour specifically targeted the mendicant orders, and especially the Beguines, whom he saw as "seducers and hypocrites" harming the reputation of the church (McDonnell 457). Guillaume would likely thus have considered Christina a *pseudo-praedicator*, a false

preacher, “who invaded the ‘home’ with evil design or usurped other rights of the hierarchy” (McDonnell 461). Ernest McDonnell explains that there are four classes of preachers, all of whom, mendicant or not, encroach on church privilege:

- a) Individuals and brotherhoods guilty of anticlerical teaching;
- b) Delinquent or unqualified clergymen including collectors of alms (*quaestores*);
- c) Duly licensed and officially approved preachers who were intended to supplement but actually usurped the prerogatives of the seculars; and
- d) As a further complication women, abbesses, nuns, and beguines claimed the office of preaching despite inveterate hostility from church authorities (461).

Christina falls into categories b), d), and perhaps a). Guillaume makes it clear that preaching and collecting of alms, alongside the administration of other sacraments, was reserved for “only the twelve disciples and their successors, the parish priests . . . as well their representatives, the archdeacons and vicars”—that is, the *ex-officio* authorities. Besides, Guillaume argued, Beguines and Beghards (the male counterparts of the Beguines) were young, could work, and should not depend on alms (McDonnell 461-2).

Christina’s Beguine contemporary, Mary of Oignies (1170-1213), also attempted to live a life of mendicancy, but was quickly prevented from doing so by her confessor, Jacques de Vitry, who writes, “Therefore she was constrynyd of two thinges: hauynge desyre to fle and begge with Crist . . . . She didde therefore that she myghte” (Jacques 125). Newman believes that Mary’s “constraint” regarding mendicancy was based on

“her dutiful obedience to the Church teachings” (*Mary* 82). Christina, on the other hand, has shown repeatedly that church teachings are irrelevant to her.

An account of a medieval woman begging alone while preaching represents a violation of Innocent’s decree; at the same time, it evokes images of Christ and his followers as “fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19). However, Christina does not simply beg; she engages in a host of bad behaviours associated with her mendicancy. Once, struck by “an vnsufferabil thriste,” she ran to the home of “a ful wikked man . . . and askyd hym drynke”:

Thenne he, ageynes his custome, was stirid with pite and gaf hir a litil wyne to drynke. Wherfore Cristyn seide, ageyne the opinyone of alle that knowe that man, that hee hadde forgifnesse of penauns and contricyone atte his deed. (Thomas 66)

This is a clear example, and not the only one in the *vita*, of Christina fabricating contrition and giving absolution, acts that are expressly forbidden for anyone except clergy by Innocent III. In another chapter, she takes confession and gives satisfaction for the Count Louis of Loon: “Goynge to hym in his palys, reprehendid hym with a moderly triste and sche gate of hym for satisfaccione whatsoeuere righte wolde aske” (Thomas 75). The details of the satisfaction for sins are unclear, although she has been acting as his “confessor.” Presumably, she has assessed his sins as a confessor and determined the means for atonement. The sacraments should never be performed by someone outside of the clerical circle, let alone a woman.

Later, Louis grows ill and gives Christina his deathbed confession, “knelynge byfore Cristyns feet, rehercyd to hir with ful many terys alle his synnes that he hadde

doon fro the eleuenthe yeere of his age vnto that day.” After detailing Christina’s breach of church law, Thomas then attempts to steer the narrative back into church-sanctified territory by clarifying that the confession was not valid and could not be construed as such: “And that not for indulgens—the whiche sche hadde no powere to gyf—but atte she shulde be the more stired thereby to praye for hym” (Thomas 76). Although Thomas reminds his audience of the church’s authority, it is unexpected that this act would be recorded in the *vita*, given that Christina is fully expressing her *ex-gratia/ex-ipsa* authority fearlessly when she clearly usurps the place of ordained clergy.

While she generously gives contrition to some, Christina also offers up threats of punishment in the afterlife to those who are not as generous as the “wicked man” who gave her drink. When denied her object, Christina uses her superlative physical strength to simply snatch away what she desires:

Vpon a tyme it happed that she toke away, with strengthe, a thinge that a wicked man denyed hire and seyde: “Yif thou wilte not now, hereafter thou shalte not repente and thanne shal it profit thee that profetis now nothings.” (Thomas 66-7)

Furthermore, Thomas unashamedly explains that Christina uses her strength to steal regularly, without remorse:

And whanne she wantid a sleue in hir cote or an hode in hir scapulary, if she mette anybody—of whome whe knewe by spyrite that shulde take hit of—she preyed hym [for hit]. And if he wolde gif hit, sche thanked hym; and if he denyed, she toke hit ageyne his wille and sewyd it to hir owne clothes. (Thomas 67)

This saint of all saints is a woman, as light as a bird, who engages in physical fights with men over bits of clothing. Generally, the stealing of shreds of clothing to add to her own motley demonstrates once again the dominance of her desires over those of others, and turns her dress into a collection of others, even a collection of signs that can represent her willingness to take on the sins of others (with an emphasis on “taking”). More specifically, the stealing of the sleeve is a symbol of the subversion of established power structures facilitated by Christina’s larger performances. In addition, the idealized trope of the mendicant saint is smashed to bits. This scene alludes to a “Feast of Fools” sensibility. These medieval feasts, celebrated on saints’ days, were “a parody and travesty of the official cult” of a given saint (Bakhtin 74). They often celebrated the inversion of societal mores, as “the jester was proclaimed king, a clownish abbot, bishop, or archbishop was elected at the ‘feast of fools’, and in the churches directly under the pope’s jurisdiction a mock pontiff was even chosen” (Bakhtin 81). The fight between Christina and the man with the sleeve is a bit of festive folk humour, signifying “victory . . . over the sacred, over death; it also represents the defeat of all power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts” (Bakhtin 92). The fact that the *vita* does not discredit her begging, stealing, and fighting, while recording her self-imbued authority to hear confession and give absolution, confirms that her autonomy, both religious and female, cannot be impeached. She is indomitable.

The authors of medieval women saints’ *vitae* often include descriptions of a woman’s beauty and fairness to complement her feminine piety: Osborn bemoans the fact that he cannot adequately report the beauty of Saint Margaret, “a doughtyr fayr” (10); he describes Saint Faith as “she fayre were, she also was good, / And in al hir werkys both



clene & pure” (99). In contrast, Christina is presented as a terrifying figure of a woman, akin to the Mary Magdalene of the wilderness found in *Legenda Aurea* (407-17), or Saint Mary of Egypt as she exists in the desert (*Early South English Legendary* 260-71).

Christina, having risen from the dead, runs from place to place in a fervour, subjecting herself to all manner of torture. Her appearance evokes pagan imagery better suited to a wild maenad than to a Christian saint.<sup>102</sup> She dresses in a ragged, piecemeal beguine habit:

white coote and a white scaplury . . . often sewyd togedir with noon othere  
thredebut with the barke of a tree that is callid *Tilia* or with wykers of  
salow or with prickes of wode. Hoses or shoes hadde she noon, goynge  
barefot alwey. (Thomas 67)

Thomas paints a picture of a disheveled mad woman in clothes sewn together with bark, running barefoot in winter and summer. Toward the end of her life, she “dwellid often in the deserte and solitude,” returning to the world of men when she was hungry, presumably to demand food when she “were constreynyd of spirite to take mete” (Thomas 77). Her time in the wilderness has turned Christina into a terrifying, ethereal spirit figure whose visits to the town spark fear in the local people:

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<sup>102</sup> Euripides’ play *The Bacchae* provides a detailed description of the maenads, wild women who worshipped Dionysus. While the maenads were extraordinarily violent, many of their similarities with Christina are striking. Their appearance was tied to nature: “they let their hair fall loose . . . breasts swollen with milk . . . they crowned their hair with leaves . . . And when they ran, everything ran with them” (ll. 695-728). Possessed of superhuman strength and an appetite for meat, “you could have seen a single woman with bare hands / tear a fat calf, still bellowing with fright, / in two” (ll. 735-8). They move quickly like Christina: “carried up by their own speed, they flew like birds / across the spreading fields” (ll. 748-9). Their power is terrifying, but they are holy women: “what weird fantastic things, / what miracles and more than miracles, / these women do” (ll. 667-9).

No erthely man myghte . . . withholde hir whanne she desyred to go to deserte. And whanne she come ageyne, no man hir salutid, ne no man durste aske hir anythinge.

She frightens and silences the men of her district, a rare accomplishment for a medieval woman:

[she] passed by hous-myddes as a spirite on the erthe . . . . Soothly, in the laste yeere of hire lyfe the spirite hadde gotten the beestly body wenye in alle partyes, that mennes myndes or eyen vnnethes hit myghte beholde the shadowe of hir body withouten feere and drede of spirite. (Thomas 77-8)<sup>103</sup>

Up until this time, Christina enjoyed an unbounded body, superhuman in some ways, but also mortal in appearance. She may have been viewed as monstrous in the moment of her performative self-abjections, for a monster's body incorporates "fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy" (Cohen, *Monster* 4); those watching her jump into fires and subject herself to the wheel while invoking the fear of Purgatory may well have felt these emotions. But she always returns to her healed, "normal" physical appearance. In a similar way, her insatiable appetite temporarily suggests her otherworldly being, but her appearance always returned, in the end, to that of a mortal woman. With age, her body metamorphosizes to reflect her inner power. She becomes completely unbounded, a monstrous, supernatural being.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Newman translates: "indeed in the last year of her life, the spirit so controlled almost all the parts of her corporeal body that scarcely could human minds or eyes look at the shadow her body cast without horror and a trembling of the spirit" (*Thomas* 78).

<sup>104</sup> Cohen finds a commonality between the monstrous and the powerful female figure: "The woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender role risks becoming a Scylla, Weird Sister, Lilith . . . or Gorgon" (*Monster* 9). Christina has overstepped the boundaries of medieval women's existence, and Thomas must find resolution for her story. As a result, he makes her monstrous at the end of her life in order to clearly

Monstrous Christina stands in stark opposition to scholarly characterizations of Christina as a “holy fool” (King 153). Critics use the holy fool attribution to try to soften and feminise this powerful woman, making her more palatable and manageable, rather than reading her for what she is: a pro-feminine, unimpeachable woman of amazing physical strength. Even her biographer, Thomas, overlooks much of her inexplicable behaviour, summing up her life as one of pure penitence (83-4).

#### ALWAYS A VIRGIN, NEVER A VIRAGO

Because of the ancient and medieval notion that women are “a sign for all that is weak, carnal, and sensual” (Newman, *From Virile* 22), a strong religious woman was typically described as a *femina virilis* or virago (Newman, *From Virile* 3). Bynum notes that men writing hagiography concerning women saints “assumed women were going through sharp crises and conversions and that their liminal moments were accompanied by gender reversal” (*Fragmentation* 37). The ecclesiastical patriarchy apparently felt obliged to designate any positive attributes in women as a turn to the masculine nature. The concept was based on the biblical injunction claiming that baptism eliminates all differences in the family of man: “There is not Iewe nor Greeke, there is not bond nor free, there is not male nor femal. For al you are one in Christ Iesvs” (Galatians 3:28). As Jerome (347-420) had declared, “As long as a woman is for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than this world, then she will cease to be a woman, and will be called man” (qtd. in Newman, *From Virile* 4). There is some controversy among scholars about the virago figure, and

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delineate between Christina and the traditional expectations set out for other women. *Admiranda sed non imitanda* polices behaviour; Christina’s unbounded body and limitless freedom, her life implies, should never be imitated.

whether it is a feminist or patriarchal concept. The *virago*, Newman writes, is “an image of progress from the lower to the higher” (*From Virile* 23). Giselle de Nie explains,

some feminist critique sees in this overcoming of the material by the spiritual the overcoming of the female by the male principle . . . . This is dangerously close to agreeing with the late antique tendency to limit femaleness to affect and sensuality. (103)

One of the sources that appears to support the limitation of femaleness is the hagiographical account of Saint Perpetua (died ca. 203), who, in being condemned to die by facing an Egyptian gladiator in a coliseum, has her clothes stripped off and in that moment notes that “*et expoliata sum et facta sum masculus*” [suddenly I was a man] (“*Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*” 116-7). Waugh argues that Perpetua’s “manliness” does not alter her gender, rather that the text’s referral to the masculine simply expresses that “she has done everything a man can or would do” (55). Whether the *virago* figure implies a kind of metamorphosis from male to female or simply represents actions associated with masculinity, it is a trope that is often employed in reference to women with a modicum of agency and authority. The *virago* figure, like Lochrie’s “conscripted” saints, frequently serves the patriarchal church hierarchy. It makes sense then, that Christina’s character, exhibiting all her intellectual, physical, and divine power, nevertheless rejects the *virago* trope. Her gender is unaffected by her unbounded powers: she is always a virgin, never a *virago*, due to Thomas’ characterization of her as unquestionably female. Descriptions of Christina regularly refer back to qualities of motherhood. However, there is one exception to this, when Thomas writes about “How she was constreyned of spirite to lyue with almes and as a man”

(Thomas 65). It is significant that Christina living “as a man” is associated with her begging, and not with her other attributes. As the church authorities make clear, mendicancy is a male pursuit (Synek 601-602), so this reference to her being like a man does not cast any aspersions on her female gender. For instance, the accounts of Christina’s miraculous lactations stand in direct contrast to the virago model typified by Perpetua, who experiences the miracle of her lactating breasts drying up while she is imprisoned:

quomodo Deus uoluit, neque ille amplius mammas desiderauit neque mihi feruorem fecerunt ne sollicitudine infantis.

[as God willed, the baby had no further desire for the breast, nor did I [Perpetua] suffer any inflammation.] (*Passio* 115)

As a sign of her virago status, Perpetua’s body is cleansed of the abject when her bodily fluids dry up. She is purified, satisfying the traditional patriarchal requirements inherent in much of the hagiography concerning women saints. As Kristeva argues, “The various means of *purifying* the abject—the various catharses—make up the history of religions” (*Powers* 17). The abject is sourced in the maternal body, and purifying the abject by erasing it is central to the virago figure. “Any secretion or discharge, anything that leaks out of the feminine or masculine body defiles,” Kristeva writes (*Powers* 102). Yet, Christina remains stubbornly female as she lactates, cries frequently as “a womman truelynge of childe” (Thomas 69, 73), and is recognized by others as a maternal figure, “callynge hir ‘moder’” (Thomas 75). It is a literary act of defiance for Christina to remain wholly female in this *vita* as she asserts her intellect and physical strength from a strictly feminine position, while exhibiting none of the typical weaknesses attributed to women

saints. The account of her life is thus a new type of hagiography, detailing the life of a new kind of woman saint.

The first half of Christina's *life* features dramatic performances of self-abjection and other demonstrations of her singularity. But the second half of the *vita* becomes more prosaic, as the acts of self-abjection cease to be a focal point. In their place, Thomas employs more familiar saintly tropes regarding Christina, who is then portrayed as more sedate, retreating from human companionship.

she wolde not sitte—as she vused byfore—to speke with sisters and  
religous but, etynge a litil and refreshed with slepe a while before  
myddenyghte, she went to deserts . . . she was like to hym that for ouer  
mykel sorowe is made myndeles. (Thomas 80)

She spends her last years “praynge, weymentynge, and mournynge” (Thomas 80). But in Chapter 31 of the *vita*, titled “A tale of Dan Thomas, Abbot of Seinte Trudous,” there is a story of the aged Christina that refers back to her unbounded body, and her way of dealing with the pain of immortality. Returning home from matins, “Crystn passed by with grete bire [commotion]” and went into a church. The abbot follows her, hiding behind a pillar to see what she will do when unobserved.

Cristyne cast doune hirsself byfore the auter as a sekke ful of drye boonys.  
Then she made wementacyone greuously and bygan often to knocke hire  
breste and hir body with hire fistes. “O,” quod sche, “thou wrecchyd and  
miserabil body! How longe shalte thou tourmente me, careful catyfe?  
How longe schalte thou tarye me fro the sighte of Criste? When shalt thou

forsake me that the soule maye turne ageyne frely to hir creature [creator]?

Woo to the, mykel wrecche! And woo to me that am ioyned to the!”

She then turns to the reprimand of her soul. Pounding on her chest, she cries out:

O thou wrecchyd soule! Why peynes thou me thus? What holdeth thee in me or what delites thee of me? Why lettys thou me not go ageyne to the erthe that I am of taken, and reste till I be restoryd to the in the laste daye of grete dome? Why goth thou not to thy reste where thou mayste haue bettir abouen? (Thomas 78-9)

Her act is a significant variation on the commonplace, guilty-Christian act of breast-beating, because Christina must realize that pummeling her own seemingly invulnerable body will not harm her. Blaming both her body and her soul for a life that she has tired of is fruitless. At this moment, she appears to have a revelation. She begins to laugh and kiss the soles of her own feet, in a gesture of reconciliation with her body. Kissing of feet is an act of abjection, a sign of genuine love that proves contrition and facilitates forgiveness, according to Christ:

Doest thou see this woman? I entred into thy house water to my feete thou didst not giue: but she with teares hath watered my feete, and with her heares hath wiped them. Kisse thou gauest me not: but she since I cam in, hath not ceased to kisse my feete. With oile thou didst not anoint my head: but she with ointment hath anointed my feete. For the which I say to thee, Many sinnes are forgiuen her, because she hath loued much. (Luke 7:44-47)

But once again, Christina subverts the sign. Like the incident in which she feeds on her own breast milk, Christina kisses her own feet, not those of Jesus, and hence remains self-contained and self-referential. She is not apologizing to God, nor does she seek his mercy. Instead, she shows contrition and great love to her own body, and grants herself forgiveness.

In her moment of revelation, Christina understands that she has the power to invoke death just as she had the power to reject it in the past. Since her body has always obeyed her, the solution to her fatigue with life is to bring about her own death, not by suicide, but by telling her body that it is time to die. In the Middle Ages, the body was

a slave's prison for the soul. This was not merely a commonplace image but a definition . . . . The height of abomination, the worst of the body and of sexuality, was the female body . . . . the devil's stomping ground. (Le Goff 83)

Yet, Christina reverses this literary trope, addressing her body lovingly in preparation for death:

O ful swete and ful blessyd body, why haue I beten the? Why haue I do wronge to the? Haste thou not obeyed to me in ilke good dede that I thurgh Goddes helpe haue done? Thou hast suffred ful goodly and ful pacyently penyne and trauelles that the spirite putte vnto the.

Telling her body it will die, she promises a resurrection when Christ returns:

Now I suffre pacyently, my beste and moost swete body. *Now is an ende of thy laboure. Now schalte thou reste in poudir. A litil schalt thou sleep. Schalte thou nappe.* And thou, atte laste whan the trumpe blowes, thou



shalte ryse ageyne cleen fro alle corrupcyone and be assooyed to the soule  
in euerlastynge ioye that thou haste hadde folowe in this worldes sorowe.

(Thomas 81; emphasis added)

She is like God, setting an event in motion through a speech act: “And God said: Be light made. And light was made” (Gen. 1:3). By saying “now is the ende of thy labour,” she has set her death in motion. Shortly after her speech to her body, Christina decides that she “should be sick” and prepares for death. In having the power over death, she is like Saint Perpetua, who could not be killed in the arena until she assisted the gladiator in guiding his sword to her throat: “fortasse tanta femina aliter non potuisset occidi, quae ab inmundo spiritu timebatur, nisi ipsa uoluisset” [perhaps so great a woman, who was feared by an evil spirit, could only be killed if she herself wished it] (*Passio* 130).

That the abbot follows Christina into the church suggests some suspicion toward her on the part of the clergy. Does Christina know he watched her in the church? She is quick-witted and clever, so it is not impossible that this episode was an intentional performance for the benefit of the abbot. If she is aware of his presence, this pericope recalls Christina’s exchange with the knight who is tricked into thinking she is attracted to him when she murmurs, “O Lorde thou arte ful feyre!” (Thomas 75); similarly, knowledge of the abbot would constitute a voyeuristic exchange of both seeing and being seen (Gordon 420). The abbot’s voyeurism is an attempt to possess Christina, “demystifying her mystery” (Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure” 65). Teresa De Lauretis suggests, in her “Oedipus Interruptus,” why Christina might not look back at the abbot, if she, who is becoming more monstrous in age, knows he is there:

the sight of Medusa's head makes the spectator stiff with terror, turns him to stone" . . . . This is what Cixous parodies in "The Laugh of the Medusa," when she says: "[Men] need femininity to be associated with death . . . . "What then of the look of the woman?" . . . . The reply given by psychoanalysis is . . . if the woman looks, the spectacle provokes . . . the Medusa's head is not far off; thus, she must not look, is absorbed herself on the side of the seen, seeing herself seeing herself. (84)

Christina is in control of what the abbot sees; she engages in the narcissism of performative self-abjection for her own pleasure. If, as Kristeva argues, the abject is related to perversion when it turns aside, misleads, and corrupts prohibitions and laws while establishing "narcissistic power while pretending to reveal the abyss," Christina has performed well (*Powers* 16). That is, we may presume that she has enjoyed creating this spectacle for the Abbot, where she pretends to reveal something about her power over life and death (the abyss). But in actuality, he learns nothing. The story is merely another unsettling anecdote Thomas includes in his hagiographical account. Christina's pleasure in being seen surpasses any pleasure or insight the abbot may have derived from watching her.

Christina's *vita* creates new hagiographical signs and symbols that redefine the qualities of feminine religious expression and *ex-gratia* authority: self-breastfeeding signals autonomy; flying symbolizes complete freedom; exhibitions of uncommon physical strength bespeak power and authority; avoidance of clergy and liturgy confirm the superfluous nature of the church; self-baptism indicates the impotence of church doctrine; performances of death-defying tortures decimate the validity of ordeal and

inquisition. There is one other “new sign” that Christina facilitates through Thomas: a conception of a God who will rescind death, opening the door to issues regarding bodily immortality, providing further possibilities for those who will enjoy everlasting life with Christ in the New Jerusalem. The text is a mystical quagmire of heretical,<sup>105</sup> pro-feminine thought that leaves theologians and critics with little choice: they can either attempt to press the *vita* into a traditional hagiographical mold, or gloss over it as a freakish anomaly. What begins as an account of a woman saint who experiences a divine intervention leaves behind a morass of contradictions within the genre of hagiography alongside unanswerable theological questions

The *vita* that critics have pressed into the conscriptive role is now revealed as a text of subversion. But that does not mean that Christina’s *life* has been neatly deconstructed, either. What remains is the “secret” of the *vita*. From the very beginning of her story, Christina knows a secret that she learned before her first death, before her journey to see God. When she was a child shepherd, God “visityed hir ful often with priuētis of heune,” but the details of these privities are not revealed in the text (Thomas 54). Omitted from the English *life*, the mention of “privities” in the Latin text references Isaiah 24:16, which says: “My secret to me, my secret to me, woe is me: the preuaricatours haue preuaricated, and by the preuarication of trangressours they haue preuaricated.” This, of course, is Thomas’s voice, attempting to contextualize and define the meaning of Christina’s “secret.” Theologically, this verse from Isaiah addresses those who praise God but are still unsatisfied with his gifts; their praise is false (*Oxford Bible*

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<sup>105</sup> I use the term “heretical” here in the sense explicated by Michel de Certeau: “Heresy presents the *doctrinal legibility of a social conflict* and the *binary form* of the modality by which a society defines itself, excluding that which it casts in the role of its other . . . ‘Heresy’ may be said to exist when a majority position has the power of naming *in its own discourse* a dissident formation and of excluding it as marginal” (17-8).

455). Associating Christina's secret with this verse from Isaiah is facile; Thomas cannot contextualize a secret that is never disclosed to him. Hence, Christina remains a gnostic who has a hidden knowledge. She alludes to her knowledge post-resurrection when she tells her family, "be not ye troubled with thos thinges that God schal ordeyne with me, for soothly there were neuere sicke seen in this worlde" (Thomas 57). Before her second death, the secret is mentioned again, as she lies in her sickbed, with Beatrice at her side: "Beatris knelyd down byfore Cristyn and prayed that she shulde *clarifye hir in sum thinges* or [before] she passed of lyfe" (Thomas 81; emphasis added). Although Thomas does not disclose what "sum thinges" are—I suspect he does not know, or he would explain—they are clearly important enough to be mentioned, because they are one of the reasons Christina is roused from her second death. Beatrice leaves the room, and Christina dies, for the second time. Returning to find Christina's body, Beatrice begs Christina to return, saying,

O Crystyn, thou has ben in thy lyfe euere obedyente to me! I adiure the now and byhote the, by oure Lorde Jhesu Criste whom thou louedist in thy lyfe with brennyng desyre, that thou obey to me also now . . . . turne now ageyne to lyfe and *telle me that I haue asked with grete desyre to be openyd of the in thy lyfe*. (Thomas 82; emphasis added)

It would appear that Christina has promised to share an insight with Beatrice, and Beatrice, having no doubt that Christina will respond, demands she return. Christina obliges, and "then Beatrys, *askynge that she purposed, hadde wityrynge* [knowledge, learning] *of Cristyn*" (Thomas 82; emphasis added). That is, Christina provided Beatrice with a piece of information, a secret, after which she died for the third and final time.

This secret is important enough to be mentioned at the beginning and the end of the *vita*. Finally, at death, Christina passes this knowledge on to another woman, Beatrice. It is a secret exclusive to women, another kind of power, denied to the men Christina meets in her life. Waugh recognizes a “female line of inheritance” conceptualized by Clement and Ambrose, in which “knowledge, language, and speech . . . are passed along like breast milk” (*The Genre* 46).<sup>106</sup> Christina, on the other hand, engages in a female line of inheritance that is specific, passed on through language rather than the breast milk she declined to share, and only at her death. For most of her life, the hidden knowledge Christina learned from God as a child was not shared with anyone, parallel to her act of suckling herself and no one else. It lends further credence to the *ex-gratia/ex-ipsa* authority of women mystics; this knowledge is inaccessible to *ex-officio* men. The woman who was free to fly like a bird and submit her body to outrageous pain was the confidante of God. Her secret remains with women.

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<sup>106</sup> Waugh specifically references the *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* in which Perpetua passes on her leadership of the martyrs to Felicitas, and indirectly to Felicitas’s daughter, suggesting that a knowledge of “Christian practices” will continue into the future through “the heritage of the mother” (49-50).

## Chapter 4

Conclusion: Performative Self-Abjection and Women's "souerayne deuocoyne"

*"There is some evidence that from the beginning of the fifteenth century onwards [the spiritual climate of the late Middle Ages] was contaminated by another current, that of a more emotional and idiosyncratic devotion, manifesting itself in visions, revelations and unusual behaviour. . . . The most familiar example of this type in England is Margery Kempe, whose spiritual experiences lie outside our province, and it seems to have flourished chiefly in individual groups in the more important towns."*

-David Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, vol. 2, *The End of the Middle Ages*. (223)

*"Botte god for bede that the schulde saye or take it so that I am a techere, for I meene nouth soo, no I mente nevere so; for I am a womann, leued febille and freylle. . . . Botte for I am a womann, schulde I therfore leve that I schulde nouth telle thowe the goodenes of god, syne that I sawe in the same tyme that is his wille, that it be knawenn?"*

-Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, The Short Text. (222)

According to the criteria of my argument, MS Douce 114 has two possible narrative arcs implicit in the arrangement of this *compilatio*. Few scholars have addressed the possible implications and message of the collected works as a unit beyond the manuscript's thematic similarities (Vander Veen 4; Brown, *Three Women* 11).<sup>107</sup> However, the arrangement of the manuscript itself has something to say about medieval women's religious expression. Using the traditional formalist reading of the attendant texts recommends the first arc: the first two *vitae*, those of Elizabeth and Christina, present uncontrollable *mulieres religiosae* who practice their spirituality using performative self-abjection as a means to autonomy and authenticity; neither is canonized. The third *vita*, detailing the life of Mary of Oignies, sees her attempts to

<sup>107</sup> Sarah Macmillan explains the selection of the works in the MS Douce 114 as "preconceived as a whole book, one which guides the reader through several, increasingly involved stages of reading . . . unified by its overarching theme of contemplative development" (23). My perspective on the works differs. I agree that they could be "preconceived as a whole book," but with an overarching theme related to satisfying the pro-feminine reader's appetite for stories of autonomous women saints.

engage in performative self-abjection as a part of her religious practice, but, unlike the unbound Elizabeth and Christina, who are largely independent of clergy, Mary is restricted by her confessor, and the reward for her obedience to Jacques de Vitry is beatification. Following the three *vitae* is a letter recommending Catherine of Siena for sainthood. The letter describes her as performatively abject, but always conformable to clergy and church; she is canonized. Finally, the fifth document in the manuscript is the *Orologium Sapientiae, or the Seven Poyntes of Trewe Wisdom*.<sup>108</sup> The *Orologium* serves as a type of mystical conduct book prescribing appropriate behaviour for women religious. We may read this narrative arc as an effort to turn religious women's subversion into conscription, serving the church by providing a context in which obedient women are glorified while the disobedient are held up as examples of how a woman should *not* express her piety.

In the second narrative arc, the stories of empowered women achieving and expressing *ex-gratia* authority outside of the control of the patriarchal church create a pro-feminine subtext to the manuscript that is both subversive and powerful. This alternative arc uses the first two narratives to demonstrate the possibilities of women's autonomous religious practice: thereafter, the extent of personal freedom exercised by a woman religious is the inverse to the level of obedience demonstrated by the practitioner. In arc two, which is my reading of these texts, performative self-abjection binds these various accounts of women's religious praxis together. In this reading, the *Orologium*, with its disputation of dramatic physical expressions of piety performed publicly by women, is contextualized by the *vitae* that preceded it. My argument supports a pro-

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<sup>108</sup> The *Horologium Sapientiae* is attributed to Henry Suso (1295-1366), himself a beatified mystic. Suso followed the teachings of Meister Eckhart; both subscribed to the mistaken notion that religious mysticism was "primarily a male phenomenon" (McGinn 20, 22, 297).

feminine reading of MS Douce 114 in which fifteenth-century readers are provided with examples of autonomous religious women. The manuscript illustrates how some women managed to resist patriarchal oppression (Elizabeth and Christina) and how some capitulated to controlling clergy (Mary and Catherine).

Why would the *lives* of Elizabeth, Christina, and Mary be translated into Middle English and circulated in England some 150 years after their deaths and approximately a century after the Latin versions of their lives appeared? The unusual tenor of these accounts, due to the eccentricity of the subjects, does not recommend them to readers of traditional hagiography. However, fifteenth-century East Anglia, where the manuscript turns up, had many women's cloisters and anchorages (Gilchrist 14), and was also home to a number of Beguine-like communities (Tanner 64).<sup>109</sup> There had been a successful campaign conducted by the church to shutter beguinages in the Low Countries, but the *sorores* of East Anglia largely avoided the church's incursion into women's religious communities (Tanner 66). In a period reminiscent of the flourishing of independent Continental beguinages (ca. 1170-1319), the East Anglian *sorores* of the early fifteenth century apparently created communities that enjoyed a period of relative peace and autonomy for religious women (Tanner 66). In this environment, MS Douce 114 surfaces, when examples of devotional vernacular literature went unregulated and many were read as subversive:

The writings of some of the most controversial women mystics of Europe were flooding into English translation. And these English works were not,

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<sup>109</sup> Tanner notes that "communities in Norwich were never called beguinages in the records referring to them" (64), although these groups "resembled Continental beguinages" (66). Instead, the women living in these communities were described as "*sorores pariter commorantes*" [sisters living together] and "*sorores castitati dedicate*" [sisters dedicated to chastity] and "*Deo*" [to God] (65).



as we now know, simply translations; they were creative and editorial reshapings—at times and for certain audiences, suppressive, but at times and for others, not at all so. (Kerby-Fulton, *Books* 16)

Mystical treatises such as the *The Chastising of God's Children* and the resurrected Middle English version of Marguerite de Porete's *The Mirror of Simple Souls* had become popular in England (Kerby-Fulton, *Books* 260, 263).<sup>110</sup> In the midst of this literary revolution, MS Douce 114 appears, as does *The Booke of Margery Kempe* (ca. 1431-1438), suggesting an East Anglian readership interested in pro-feminine accounts of extraordinary women saints. Accounts of women saints, or would-be women saints, are traditionally understood as *exempla*, or idealized models to be imitated. Scanlon broadens the meaning of *exempla*, defining them as “a narrative enactment of cultural authority,” which “assumes a process of identification on the part of its audience.” In turn, a “performative model of exemplarity assumes a model of cultural authority that is equally performative” (34-5). This definition of *exempla* complements the notion of performative self-abjection by suggesting that there existed an alternative, performative cultural authority for women—one with which they could identify—beginning during the blossoming of mysticism in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. This cultural authority resurfaced in the fifteenth century via literature, facilitated by translation into the vernacular. The creation of an alternative culture for religious women was necessary because, outside of this vernacular literary model, “women [were] excluded from culture

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<sup>110</sup> *The Chastising of God's Children*, a vernacular guide to “appropriate” mystical behaviours, was written specifically for a female audience, likely the nuns of Barking (Kerby-Fulton, *Books* 263). Although Porete was burned at the stake for heresy in 1310 after writing *The Mirror*, the Carthusians imported the book and translated it into Middle English. Kerby-Fulton refers to the *The Mirror* as one of many proofs of “significant infiltrations of the literature of European ‘left-wing orthodoxy’ (and in the case of Porete, heterodoxy) into England—infiltrations that I believe had an impact on some of our most important religious writers, including probably Langland, Julian, and Kempe” (*Books* 261).

in the Middle Ages because they [were] denied access to Latin and the institutions it circumscribes” by the church (Lochrie, *Translations* 125). As a result, the disenfranchised of the Middle Ages, who were not clergy, merchants, or nobles, could embrace an alternative cultural authority, promoting vernacular devotional literature primarily aimed at women and pro-feminine readers. Recalling the opportunities women found in the *frauenfrage* to create their own communities, the church’s denial of access to religious culture and language for women and the poor facilitated the growth of alternative mystical literature in the subversive mother tongue, Middle English.<sup>111</sup>

Situated in the context of East Anglian Beguine-like communities, in a time that saw an influx of controversial hagiographical texts, Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 114 can be positioned as a *compilatio* of holy womens’ lives aimed at pro-feminine readers. I have focused here on the two lives that best exemplify performative self-abjection and its examples of unrestrained religious practice for women in the accounts of Elizabeth of Spalbeek and Christina the Astonishing. One *life* is largely without miracles, the other brimming with accounts of miraculous events. These *vitae* transform over time – while the original Latin iterations of the texts may have served the cultural authority of the church, the vernacular translations and their context in MS Douce 114 further assert the pro-feminine underpinnings of their stories. The cultural authority shifts from the clergy and its use of sacred fictions in which the saint is the object, as in the example of

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<sup>111</sup> The thirteenth-century “surplus” of unmarried and widowed women in Europe as a result of a high male mortality rate. See chapter one for further information. Catherine Sanok writes that while the late Middle Ages saw a rise in literacy and an increase in heterodoxy, the church affirmed that hagiography was “the single genre universally endorsed as women’s reading” as opposed to the fictions of romance and the sophistication of theology (27). Accounts of women’s performative self-abjection then become doubly subversive, because *vitae* like those of Elizabeth and Christina would run counter to the presumption of the qualities of a woman saint.

Saint Mary of Egypt, to eyewitness accounts of female exemplars of autonomous spiritual life, such as Elizabeth of Spalbeek.

#### WHAT ELSE IS IN THE MANUSCRIPT?

In order to develop a greater understanding of the possible reception and influence of these texts, as well as the concept of performative self-abjection in medieval saints' lives, and particularly in MS Douce 114, a brief outline of the other texts in the manuscript is required. Taken together, the manuscript's contents reflect the messiness of the fifteenth century,<sup>112</sup> filled with religious and social tensions while humanism and Wycliffism challenged the traditional authoritarian establishment.<sup>113</sup> The saints' lives in MS Douce 114 reflect the "apparently contradictory impulses of late medieval social and religious experience" (Staley xii).

Following the *vitae* of Elizabeth of Spalbeek and Christina the Astonishing is the *life* of Mary of Oignies, whose practice of somatic mysticism I will discuss in greater detail after this brief overview of the rest of the manuscript. The fourth text in MS Douce 114, somewhat similar in format to that of the three *lives*, is a *post-mortem* letter recommending Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) for beatification, written by her letter-writer, Stephen Maconi (Stephen 184-95). The inclusion of this letter places Catherine within the manuscript's apparent theme of women practising dramatic affective piety, and, in particular, performative self-abjection. However, the inclusion of Catherine's

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<sup>112</sup> This is an age of upheaval in the medieval world, and in medieval England: the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453) between the French and the English continues—Joan of Arc is an active participant (Scanlon 329); outbreaks of the plague "occur at regular intervals until the 1660s" (Rawcliffe 137); the division of the papacy and its fallout during The Great Schism (1378-1417) shakes faith in the church (Swanson 18); Wyclif and the Lollards threaten the Catholic church's authority, setting the stage for a bloody struggle (Hudson, *Premature* 60-1).

<sup>113</sup> Censorship of devotional literature is attempted by Arundel in the fifteenth century; Kerby-Fulton remarks that the suppression of vernacular devotional literature in this century marked "an age of *failed* censorship . . . . Manuscript culture . . . . was not much amenable even to *authorial* control, let alone authoritarian control" (*Books* 16-7).

letter in the manuscript is meant to offset the clearly subversive nature of the women who come before her, especially in relation to the *lives* of Elizabeth and Christina.

Unlike Elizabeth and Christina, Catherine experienced contestation of her *ex-gratia* status; although she died in 1380, she was not canonized until the mid-fifteenth century.<sup>114</sup> Nonetheless, her legacy was that of a successful saint, a Dominican (not a questionable Beguine from the Low Countries) whose head was removed as a relic before her canonization even took place. Instead of performing her *ex-gratia* authority like Elizabeth and Christina, who express their self-interest and independence without confessors to guide them, Catherine spends her life directly in the service of others (Noffke 5). Like Mary of Oignies, she lives under the supervision of male clergy members, “mayster Raymond [de Capua], hir confessour,” and “maister John, [also] hir confessour” (Stephen 187, 192). Where Elizabeth and Christina are aberrant in their self-directed exercise of spirituality, Catherine, although a mystic, is much more conscriptive and self-controlled, praised for her “profunde mekenesse, most myghty pacyens” having never “seyde o worde with vnpacyens or angrynes—and pat sopely is an euydens of ful grete perfeccyone” (Stephen 193). Catherine’s power is intellectual; she discusses doctrine with Pope Gregory XI, and fearlessly faces the clergy to debate them as “pey put to hir ful grete questyons and many, namely of hir abstraccyons and raueshyng and maner of most singularly liuyng” (Stephen 193). Like Christina and Elizabeth, Catherine’s gift is attributed to God’s intervention rather than to the woman herself; she is denied credit for her ability to discuss theology: “pis is no woman pat spekes, but pe

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<sup>114</sup> Tommaso Caffarini, a disciple of Catherine’s, was dedicated to obtaining posthumous sainthood for her. After inappropriately declaring her a saint in a sermon (pre-canonization), an inquisition, known as the *Processo Castellano* (1411-6), was begun on her behalf. Witnesses testified to her sanctity over a period of five years, until she was finally canonized by Pius II (Tylus 56).

holy goste,” Stephen professes. Catherine also “delyuerid and expounyd alle-holy writte so clearly and so openly” (Stephen 192). This, in itself, is shocking, because women were not supposed to take on the responsibilities of priests.<sup>115</sup> However, Catherine enjoyed the support of Pope Gregory XI as her influential advocate. With such an assertive and well-known woman acting as a preacher who “made ful quykke and spedful sermons” (Stephen 192), the church was obligated either to place sanctions against her or bring her into the fold so that they could control her narrative and discourage imitators. As Jantzen points out,

it was crucial to the ecclesiastical establishment that those who claimed knowledge of the mysteries of God should be contained within the structures of the church, since the power of the church would be severely threatened if it should be acknowledged that access to divine authority was possible outside its confines. (1, 2)

Consequently, the church eventually chose to subsume *post-mortem* Catherine into its male-dominated hierarchy, neutralizing her pro-feminine authority, altering her source of authority, and changing her *ex-gratia* sovereignty into *ex-officio* privilege. She became an instrument of the patriarchal church, evidenced by the permissions she was given to preach sermons

firste in the presens of oure lorde Pope Gregor elleuenpe, after in pe presens of oure lorde Pope Vrban sexte, and of Cardynals, alle wip grete meruel seiyngre pat neuere man spake so. (Stephen 192)

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<sup>115</sup> “Let a woman learne in silence, with al subiection. But to teach I permit not vnto a woman nor to haue dominion ouer the man: but to be in silence” (2 Timothy 2:12-3).

The reward for relinquishing her religious independence was ultimately the title of Doctor of the Church, and later, canonization (Noffke 1).

Stephen's letter is a brief document that does not explore all the details of Catherine's life, referring the reader to "hir many meruels, as hit is shewyd sumwhat in hir legende" (186).<sup>116</sup> This letter is presented as a translation from a Latin copy: "Here bigynnep pe copy of a letter touchynge pe lyfe of seint Kateryn of Senys, pe whiche lettir endyted in latyn Dan Stephen of Senys" (184). In keeping with the tropes of traditional mystical literature, the letter addresses how Catherine was "raueshed . . . not a hundreth or a thousande sythes, but mykel more oftener." The language here echoes that of Philip describing Elizabeth's ravishments: "Hir membres abode stille alle starke and vnmouabil, so that the bones firste myghte a brusten than hir membris myghte be bowed" (Stephen 187). Catherine is not restricted to self-abnegation; she also engages in submissive abjection, permitting another woman to make her bleed performatively for others:

After masse sche shewed of deuocyone to putte hir face vnder the fete and pricked hir fulle sharply with a nedil in the fete many tymes. But she stode stille vnmoued—for hadde she stonden, thof she hadde cut of the fete . . . wymen that were with hir in cumpany . . . sawe deed blode of prickynge.  
(Stephen 188)

The exhibition of blood, a "polluting" maternal body fluid, affirms her sanctity, sacrifice, and religious authority.

Catherine's desire for the eucharist is enmeshed with a loathing for everyday food (Lochrie, *Translations* 41); food loathing is "perhaps the most elementary and most

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<sup>116</sup> Stephen avoids the more sensational aspects of Catherine's life, such as her invisible stigmata (Tylus 278) and her mystical marriage to Christ facilitated with the use of his foreskin for a ring, which was also invisible (Bynum, *Fragmentation* 185-6).

archaic form of abjection” (Kristeva, *Powers* 2). Both Catherine and Christina eat foul matter to demonstrate their food loathing; however, the execution and results are dramatically different from one another. Catherine lived mostly on water and the juice she sucked out of fruit. At other times, she would chew on offal, inspiring disgust and affirming her self-abjection:

Of an ele she eet allonly pe hede and pe tayle; but chese ete she noon, but  
if hit [was] wel olde and corrupte; and on same maner grapes and siche  
opere. Neuerpeles she ete not pese, but chewyd hem wiphir teep . . .  
soukyng pe iuse, and spittyd oute euery morsel of pe gros mater.

(Stephen 191)

Like Catherine, Christina consumed spoiled food and garbage, but she was driven by a voracious appetite rather than a desire for self-denial. Christina’s food choices would result in terrible stomach pains, causing her to cry “as a womman trauelynge of childe” (Thomas 66). In contrast, after Catherine consumes the juices of eels’ heads and rotten cheese, she ramps up the self-abjection, declaring to all in her presence, “Go we to pe rightwisnesse of pis wrecchyd synner” as she regurgitates everything she had ingested:

with a stalke of fynel or an other thinge that she put in to ir stomake, she  
broghte oute violently by the same weye that iuse and the watir that sche  
hadde taken. And some-tyme she soffred so grete vyolens in that dede,  
that quykke blode come oute of hir mouth. (Stephen 191)

Comparatively, Mary of Oignies vomits, but only when she consumes an unconsecrated host, which causes her to perform an inversion of the Eucharistic feast:

Whanne wee assayed vmwhil whether shy myghte take an obley  
 vnconsecrate [unconsecrated communion wafer], anoon she lothed the  
 sauoure of brede. For whanne a litil party touched hir teeth she bygan to  
 crye, to spitte, and to pante. (Jacques 183)

In all three cases, vomiting is an act of performative self-abjection, where “I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which I claim to establish *myself*. . . “I” am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death” (Kristeva, *Powers* 3). Passive abjection would involve a simple denial of food (as Elizabeth does). Mary is performatively and miraculously self-abjective in vomiting unconsecrated host; the act can be construed as either a voluntary or involuntary miracle distinguishing the sacred host from the profane, but her vomiting does not present any threat of death. Catherine’s vomiting is entirely self-induced; there is no suggestion of divine intervention. In forcing herself to vomit repeatedly until she regurgitates blood, she acts to establish her sanctity and authority as one who is performatively self-abject to the point of death.<sup>117</sup>

Breast milk, a maternal and abject body fluid, is recognized as a method of transmitting religious knowledge in a female line of inheritance (Waugh 46). This maternal metaphor is transmuted by Christina the Astonishing when she nurses herself. Catherine transposes the metaphor further, creating a new line of female inheritance that is less benign and less maternal than that of Christina. Disgorging herself, she uses vomit and blood in a performative act that is wholly abject.<sup>118</sup> With her declaration of “Go we

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<sup>117</sup> Christina is never self-abject unto death because of her superhuman, immortal body. Even though she eats refuse and experiences discomfort, there is no danger of her death occurring as a result.

<sup>118</sup> Catherine chose to enact many unsettling acts of performative self-abjection, including drinking pus collected in a chalice from a woman’s cancerous breast, “rather than drink the blood of Christ” (Corbari



to pe rightwisnesse of pis wrecchyd synner” before she induces vomiting, she is initiating a female line of inheritance demonstrating the soteriological power of *anorexia mirabilis* for other pious women. As “virgin martyr blood” emanates from her mouth, she performs a didactic exercise for the edification and salvation of women. Like Elizabeth, Catherine appears to have two personas: the submissive, humiliated woman engaging in performative self-abjection, and the articulate, assertive woman who, when not performing, employs her intellect to elucidate others.

### *OROLOGIUM SAPIENTIAE*

The final text in MS Douce 114 is the Middle English translation/adaptation of the *Horologium Sapientiae* (ca. 1330).<sup>119</sup> The inclusion of this work is likely meant to contextualize the *lives* that came before it, positioned as an admonition against imitating demonstrative women saints such as Elizabeth, Christina, Mary, and Catherine. Recalling Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, the work is a dialogue between two characters, Christ and a disciple. Christ is represented as Sapientia/Wisdame, “the souvryne doctour, euerlastyng wisdam, Jhesus,” who in addressing the disciple, “tawht him thees VII poyntes of his love” (326). Written “to stirre deuowte sowles to the trewe love of ower lorde Jhesu, the euerlastyng wisdam of the fadere of heuene” (325), this Middle English translation is one of many versions of Henry Suso’s devotional text.<sup>120</sup> The version in MS

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250). I believe this is due to the competitive nature of women saints, who “undoubtedly strove to outdo one another, engaging in behavior that could strike observers as masochistic, insane, or . . . decidedly heterodox . . . to earn respect from the living and gratitude from the dead” (Newman, *From Virile* 121). These behaviours are acts of performative self-abjection used to establish uniqueness, sanctity, and reputation.

<sup>119</sup> The *Orologium* was immensely popular in the West during the Middle Ages, second only to *The Imitation of Christ*. There are 233 extant manuscripts and a suggested 88 lost versions; there were also “no fewer than ten printed editions” created between 1480 and 1540. Translations were numerous: 63 in French; 90 in Middle Dutch; 25 in Italian, and 14 in Middle English, with others in Polish, Bohemian, and other languages (Newman, “Henry” 9, 10).

<sup>120</sup> This version of the *Orologium* is one of many editions that passed through the hands of an inestimable number of translators and compilers. The multitude of versions, translations, and excerpts make the

Douce 114 is titled the *Orologium Sapientiae, or The Seven Poyntes of Trewe Wisdom*, a work that “is not a straightforward translation of Suso’s text . . . [it was] altered and re-organised in the translation process, [so] the voice of the translator is even more evident” (Selman, “Hearing” 254). It appears that the Carthusian scribe who included this treatise in the manuscript believed that the text is a dialogue between the unknown writer of the work and God:

whiche boke the processeccionen, in manere of spekyng by-twix the maystre, euerlastyng wisdam, and the deuowt discyple that wrote the boke; whose name is vnknownen to vs . . . . Neuerlese, as hit scheweth, he was a frere prechour. (325)

That Suso is unknown to the Carthusian scribe suggests that numerous copies of the *Horologium* were created and circulated. Beginning as early as 1400, Middle English excerpts from this popular text were included as companion pieces to other devotional treatises, including the *Speculum Devotorum*, *Speculum Spiritualium*, and *The Chastising of God’s Children* (Schultze 342). The devotional literary pedigree of the *Horologium* is highly respected; Schultze cites it as a source for Nicholas Love’s *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, also circa 1400. The original *Horologium* consisted of 24 chapters, while *The Seven Poyntes of Trewe Wisdom* survives in numerous variations as an abridged version in seven chapters (Schultze 342).

Vincent Gillespie observes that the English versions of the *Seven Poyntes* are directed “to a mixed audience of lay noble women and/or female religious readers” (143).

The Middle English translation confirms its targeted readership:

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discernment of a source document and identification of redactions/editing a herculean task outside of the scope of my research.

My moste worschipful lady aftir zowre hyz worpynesse, derrest-loued  
 goostly douzhter . . . in the forseyde boke there beth manye maters and  
 long processe towchyng him that wrote hit and othere religiose persones  
 of his degre, the whiche, as hit semeth to me, were lytel edificacione to  
 wryte to zowe, my dere ladye, and to other deuowte persones that  
 desyrene this drawyng owt in engliche: there-fore I leve seche materes  
 and take onelye that me thinketh edifiyng to zowe. (Suso 325)

Vander Veen notes that this introduction has been found in at least five other Middle English manuscripts (4);<sup>121</sup> Dirk Schultze's research on Middle English versions of the *Orologium* reveals that the dedication is found in almost all extant manuscripts (353).<sup>122</sup> This generic dedication, suitable for almost any woman, implies that copies of the work were being distributed to pro-feminine readers interested in unusual texts that detail mystical practices.

The translator openly admits that he has taken the liberty of removing from the work material he deems unimportant or “unsavory,” in an apology similar to the one found in the *vita* of Elizabeth of Spalbeek:

Ne I translate not the wordes as thei bene wrytene, one for a nothere, that  
 is to seye the engliche worde for the latyne worde – by-cause that there  
 beth manye wordes in clergiale teremes the wheche wold seme vnsaverye

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<sup>121</sup> It is unclear where this dedication originated. Sarah James cites St. John's College MS G.25, another Middle English *compilatio* featuring the same introduction as that of the MS Douce 114 version. James suggests that the dedication was an “anonymous English paraphrase . . . produced by a chaplain for the use of his lady” (733).

<sup>122</sup> For more information on the origins of the Middle English *Seven Poyntes of Trewe Wisdom*, see Schultze.

so to be spokene in englishe: and there-for I take the sentence as me  
thinketh most opune to the comine vnderstandyng in englishe. (325)

There is a suggestion here that the maternal vernacular, read by those who are not clergy or nobility, cannot adequately convey “complex” clerical concepts. In other words, although this is a devotional guidebook, the translator has opted to perpetuate the confinement of doctrinal knowledge to the male, Latinate sphere.

The *Seven Poyntes of Trewē Wisdom* is a rebuttal to the stories that come before it in MS Douce 114; chapter VII addresses the question of appropriate devotional behaviour, explaining “how the forseide disciple schealle in alle thinges loue, preyse and worschep god” (324). When the disciple puts forth the argument that public displays of religiosity are sincere declarations of faith:

O thou my fader of mercy, I knowe soothly and knowlech that hit is more  
semely to me, wrecchid synner, forto ligge prostrate byfore the and with  
wepyng and with sorowe aske forgivenes of my synnes, thanne to love  
the and preyse, (379)

Wisdame disputes the disciple’s contention, arguing that even the sinner can weep and pray, and therefore, public displays alone are not proof of a true heart:

also thou schalte vndirstande that is the eery[s] of goddes mageste it  
sownith more sweetly an holy meditacyone than maye hyȝ wordes spoken  
with-oute inwarde vndirstondyng, and sorowe of herte thanne oonly  
criyng of mouthe, and trewe meeknesse thanne chauntyng and broken  
voys. (379)

The women of MS Douce 114 embrace the performative devotions advocated by the unsophisticated and idealistic disciple: Elizabeth performs her piety “with sobbynges and weymentynges” as she “leyeth hir downe to the erthe” (Philip 40); Christina dances and chants her faith as she “hopyd and dauncyd at hit was a wonder maruaile to see hir in so grete myrthe . . . . Then sche bigan *Te Deum Laudamus*” (Thomas 68, 73). Without explicitly outlawing performative piety, Wisdam makes clear that women’s cataphatic praxis is somewhat facile and unnecessary to authentic worship/apostolic life:

powȝh hit seme grete in hit-selfe, as chastisyng of the body, fastyng,  
wakyng and sicke opere exercises of vertur, pey schulbe taken and  
demyd as secondarye and lesse worth. (“Orologium” 354)

Prescriptive orthodoxy and the unconventional are juxtaposed within this *compilatio*, creating a textual tension between the *vitae* of Elizabeth and Christina (and to a lesser extent, Mary and Catherine) and the *Seven Poyntes*, mirroring a real-life tension between women religious and the institutional church’s attempts to control them. Although the *Seven Poyntes* features numerous references to “souerayne deuocyone” (388), it censures performative piety; its inclusion in the manuscript appears to be an attempt to counterbalance, if not outright neutralise, the *exempla* of performative self-abjective women and their religious authenticity. There may be any number of reasons why this treatise was included in the manuscript, but I would suggest that it may have served as a kind of disclaimer for the compiler/translator, should he come up against any disapproval of his work in the age of Arundel’s Constitutions and the Oxford Debates regarding the translation of devotional works.

MARY OF OIGNIES<sup>123</sup>

Having touched upon the non-*vita* contents of the manuscript, it is time to turn back to the third *vita* in the manuscript, that of Mary of Oignies. One of the three women of Liège, her *life* is the exception that proves the rule regarding women's autonomy and agency through the power of performative self-abjection in medieval religious life. For the purposes of this dissertation, Mary of Oignies is of peripheral interest to my research on performative self-abjection in MS Douce 114, compared to the lives of Elizabeth of Spalbeek and Christina the Astonishing. Mary's story does not evidence unimpeachable authority via performative self-abjection, because the *vita* instead adheres to mainly traditional hagiographical *topoi*. Although Mary shares similar traits and actions with Elizabeth and Christina, she differs from them on one profound issue: her *vita* presents a servant to the church's agenda, at least in terms of Jacques de Vitry's representation of her, so that her story is not quite a pro-feminine text, in contrast to her Beguine colleagues in the manuscript. Instead, the presence of Mary's *vita* in MS Douce 114 may be read as another corrective to the accounts of the uncontrolled and uncontrollable Elizabeth and Christina; Mary's *vita* is "held up as an example of what a beguine *should* do" (Brown, *Three Women* 274; emphasis added).

Unlike her fearless, wilfull, opinionated fellow beguines, Mary embodies the idealized qualities of a woman saint:

that wee myght neuer or selden perceyue in hir ydel worde, or vnordynat  
lokyng, or vn honest hauyng of body, or vnsem[ly] and vnmanerly  
beryng of body . . . . she forsoke hir owne selfe, submittynge hir to an  
othere mannes wille by obedyens; she toke the crosse, chastisyng hir

<sup>123</sup> 1170-1213; beatified, but not canonized; also known as Mary of Nivelles; feast day June 23<sup>rd</sup>.

body by abstynens; and she folowyd Criste, settynge noghte by hirselfe  
thurgh meeknesse. (Jacques 96-7)

Her meekness and subservience recalls that of Saint Bridget:

Þis Maide bi-gan wel zong : to beo of porture hende;  
Þare ne scholde vil dede ne word : neuere fram hire wende.  
heo bigan ore louerd crist to serui : in worde and in dede. (“Vita sancte  
Brigide virginis” 192)

Mary’s behaviours are subject to the consent and direction of Jacques, as well as her spiritual counsellor, Guy, and a host of other clerics; Jacques affirms that she “neuere presumed of hireselfe nor anythnge wolde do withouten conseilie” (Jacques 107). Where Elizabeth and Christina control their own bodies, the same cannot be said of Mary.

Brown asserts that “unlike Christina Mirabilis and Elizabeth of Spalbeek, who openly engaged in self-mortification, Marie’s body is subject to a man” (*Three Women* 280). But Mary is not entirely discouraged from engaging in self-mortification. She occasionally hides from Jacques in order to practice self-abjection, “wonderly turmentynge hir fleshe for those delytes before siche as was” (Jacques 97). She obtains little autonomy from her mysticism, and her entire spiritual “career” is stage-managed by Jacques, who places himself in the position of spouse/manager/confessor. He writes, “she hadde not openly power of hir owne body,” referencing I Corinthians 7:4, which states “The woman hath not power of her owne body: but her husband. And in like maner the man also hath not power of his owne body: but the woman.” Mary’s *vita* painstakingly adheres to traditional hagiographical tropes; her behaviour is meticulously associated with scriptural references and heavily contextualized, thereby positioned to prepare her for sainthood.

For example, Mary is held up as a model of feminine modesty corresponding to scripture:

Jacques writes,

Seinte Petir seith of wymmen, thus: “Whas araye of clothyng be not withoute for the tressyng and tiftyng of hire, or tire of golde or gownes.”<sup>124</sup> And also Seinte Poule seith: “Not in crumpled lokkys, or golde, or perilles, or precyous clothe.” (88)<sup>125</sup>

Jacques continually holds Mary up as an *exemplum* for all women:

What seye yee to this, yee superflue wymmen, ful of pompe and pryde . . . . The clothes of this holy womman are kepte for relikes and sauoureful swete. Thees are precyous clothes . . . . And sothely for the halowyng, they are kepte ful bisily and worshepyd with affeccyone of pite of deuoute pupi, after hir obyte [death]. (114)

From a cynical perspective, Mary’s *vita* appears to serve as a career stepping-stone for Jacques, because participating in saint-making imbues him with the appearance of his own *ex-ipso* religious authority—by demonstrating his gift for recognizing those who are touched by the divine—which further complements his *ex-officio* status as a high-ranking cleric. Jacques constantly inserts himself into the text and the events that make up Mary’s saintly *life*. The *vita* does not open with mention of Christ; instead, Jacques begins with a brief resumé of his own accomplishments:

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<sup>124</sup> “Whose adorning let it not be the outward plaiting of the hair, or the wearing of gold, or the putting on of apparel (I Peter 3:3).

<sup>125</sup> “I will therefore that men pray in every place, lifting up pure hands without anger and contention. In like manner women also in decent apparel: adorning themselves with modesty and sobriety, not with plaited hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly attires, but as it becometh women preofessing godliness, with good works” (I Timothy 2:8-10).



Heere bigynneth the chapters of the firste boke of the lyfe of Seinte Marye of Oegines, the which lyfe Maister James, confessour and famylier of the same Marye (after Byshop of Attone, and after that Cardynalle of the courte of Rome), endyted in Latyn in the yeere of grace a thowsand two hundred and fiftene. (Jacques 86)

He refers to himself as “a famylier frende and maister on whome she trustid,” as the man who guides her every move (Jacques 107). He thus resembles Philip in being an eyewitness to the hagiographical events that follow. But Brown rightly argues that Jacques is the subject of the text, rather than Mary: “the life . . . is not about Marie at all. Her confessor, promoter, and hagiographer . . . is omnipresent throughout the text, inserting himself both overtly and surreptitiously into nearly every aspect of Marie’s life” (Brown, *Three Women* 248). This is unlike the sovereign Christina, whom “No erthely man myghte . . . withholdde” (Thomas 77), and the fiercely independent Elizabeth who “on no maner wyse to receyue any gifte or anykyns presaunte” (Philip 49). The focus of Mary’s *vita*, then, is primarily God’s intervention in and rule over the entire natural world; secondly, Jacques’s experiences with Mary; and lastly, the life of a saintly woman. Unlike her sister Beguines who are the *subjects* of their stories, Mary is an object used to further the church’s goals of proselytization, coupled with Jacques’s attempts to further his own career goals.

Mary’s *life* is extremely traditional in that she has both a confessor and a religious advisor, heals the sick through touch, and experiences divine visions. Her parents, “lawghynge and scornynge the mayden,” found her religious devotion as a child absurd, and so “whanne she was fourtene yeere olde, [her parents] maryed hir to a yonge man”

(Jacques 88). The marriage soon became chaste; God promised Mary “he wolde gyue ageyne to hir in heuene hir felowe, the which for loue of chastyte withdrow hum from fleshely luste in erthe” (Jacques 90).<sup>126</sup> A devout ascetic, Mary “chastised hir body and broghte it vndir to thraldome” (Jacques 151). She punishes her body by wearing hairshirts “next hir flesche . . . an harde sakke that is callid in open tunge ‘stamyne’ [cloth of hemp, wool, or flax]” (Jacques 113) and rope cilices: “she bare priuely vndir hir smok a fulle sharpe corde, with the whiche she was girded ful harde” (Jacques 88). Obviously, these are examples of a private and hidden mortification differing drastically from activities such as slamming one’s head against the floor as Elizabeth does (Philip 31), or jumping into burning ovens, as Christina does (Thomas 59). However, there is one arena where Mary surpasses her Beguine sisters: her adherence to *anorexia mirabilis* may be the most spectacular ever recorded. Women preparing her body for burial discover that her dedication to fasting was likely the cause of her death at age 36:

Forsoth, whan hir holy body shulde be washen in hir obyt, she was founden so smalle and lene thurgh infirmite and fastynges that the rigge bone of her bak was clungen to hir wombe. And as vndir a thinne lynnene clothe, the bones of hir baksemyd vndir the lital skynne of hir bely.

(Jacques 189)

Mary’s fasting is so extreme that she crushes her own fertility, signifying an effort by Jacques to purify her maternal abject body for sainthood. The destruction of Mary’s womb may have been necessitated by the fact that she was originally a married woman who engaged in sex but later became chaste: “For [husband] John was enspyred to haue

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<sup>126</sup> Mary’s husband, John, simply disappears from her *vita* and her life in chapter IV of a hagiographical account consisting of 26 chapters in total. John may have been eliminated from the narrative in lieu of Jacques’s assumption of the position of biographer/confessor/manager/chaste spouse.

Mary as taken to kepe [into care in a chaste marriage], whom he hadde firste as wife” (Jacques 89). Comparatively, Christina is “vnknowen to alle men” (Thomas 54), and Elizabeth is a “virgyne . . . moost cleen” (Philip 29); their *vitae* are devoid of mentions of sexuality or reproductive body parts. Nonetheless, in terms of *anorexia mirabilis*, Mary exhibits consummate skill. Her fellow Beguines cannot compete with her: Christina avoids fasting, instead indulging her insatiable appetite “stired of God” (Thomas 66), while Elizabeth engages in fasting much like Catherine of Siena, sucking the juices from meat and fruit, but she will “etith and drynketh rathere after othere mennes wille, than for any luste or nede of hirselve” (Philip 49).

The narrative of Mary’s life is tightly controlled by Jacques, who finds her greatest value in her abjection. He castigates other women through his example of Mary, writing that “Hyt better is to the [to] bee abiecte and noghte sett by in the hous of oure Lorde thanne dwelle in haulles and chaumbirs of synners” (91). But in keeping with hagiographical tradition, he ensures that Mary’s abjection is purified in the proper fashion before her death, evidenced through her emaciated corpse.<sup>127</sup> When she is told “that sche shulde ligge dede abouene the erthe on a Monendaye . . . she fasted the same fery so that she that daye yete no maner mete” (Jacques 176). Preceding her death, she rejects all food, but continues to take the Eucharist: “whan sche myghte ete no maner mete, nor myghte sofour the sauoure of a litil breded, lightly she toke often Cristes body . . . withouten tariynge hir bodily sieknesse” (Jacques 183). Elizabeth’s last days are not chronicled, so it is impossible to know if she lingered, taking the Eucharist as Mary did.

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<sup>127</sup> Elizabeth resists abject purification by returning to her performances, while Christina also evades purification, at least until an anonymous author returns to her Latin *vita* to add a supplement where she becomes a ghostly revenant (the supplement featuring the details of Christina’s purification is only included in the Latin versions; it is absent from her Middle English *life*).

As for Christina, right up until “the laste yeere of hire lyfe” she maintained her appetite, “constreynyd of spirite to take mete” (Thomas 77). At death, Mary’s female bodily fluids are dried up, her womb desolate, removing her from the abject and the feminine, cleansing her. She is sanitized for sainthood in a fashion described by Kristeva:

The purification rite appears then as that essential ridge, which, prohibiting the filthy object, extracts it from the secular order and lines it at once with a sacred facet. Because it is excluded as a possible object, asserted to be a non-object of desire, abominated as ab-ject, as abjection, filth becomes defilement and founds on the henceforth released side of the “self and clean” the order that is thus only (and therefore, always already) sacred. (Kristeva, *Powers* 65)

Purification of the abject must occur in women’s hagiography if the subject is to become a saint. It is a patriarchally-imposed process that erases a woman saint’s gender; purged of her maternal qualities, she is “clean” and sacred, eliminating those characteristics associated with the female body, the “weak, carnal, and sensual” (Newman, *From Virile* 22). The abject is sanitized in literature by men, for the benefit of men. Kristeva explains that the feminine abject denotes a primitive “primal repression,” an effort to separate the human from the animal, demarcating between the cultural and that which came before, or, more accurately, the masculine from the porous female body “with all its perviousness to external and internal influences” (Lochrie, “The Language” 125). Kristeva argues that the feminine has long been associated with the primitive and the unsophisticated:

by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder.

(*Powers* 12-3)

In an effort to preserve the appearance of civilization and sophistication, the patriarchal institution must purge the abject from any potential woman saint before beatification. Even though performative self-abjection is frequently the engine that initiates recognition of a woman's sanctity, in the end her sex must be nullified and her authority subsumed by external forces in an act of purgation. In spite of this tradition, Christina and Elizabeth resist the purging of their abjection, maintaining their femaleness, and rejecting the hegemony of the church.

In her lifetime, Mary is frequently self-abject, but rarely performative. She enacts her attempts at self-inflicted suffering and humiliation in secret, or they depend upon the approval of the men who surround her. However, there are spaces in Mary's *life* where she manages to wrest free of Jacques's control, if only for brief periods, when she escapes his scrutiny by fleeing to a private space. In these moments, the reader gets a glimpse of her potential as an autonomous, divinely-inspired, performative self-abjective saint. There are times when she seems to imitate her fellow beguines: travelling to church barefoot "thurgh first [frost], withoutene any harme or hurt of hirselfe," recalling Christina's shoeless existence (Jacques 102); she "proposed to flee that, vnknown and dispised amonge straungers, [she] myghte begge fro dore to dore," as Christina did (Jacques 124). Her desire to beg was promptly denied by Jacques and other clerics (Jacques 125); she acquiesced to their orders. The act of fleeing from her church and

others echoes Christina, whose motive was to escape the smell of men, which she abhorred (Thomas 57); Mary's motivation is similar: "she fledde to felde nerhand and buskys, that sche, eschewynge mennes eyen, myght kepe hir pryuey concelle to hirselve" (Jacques 127). It is entirely possible that she occasionally fled Jacques, who incessantly interfered with her devotional performances, driving her to conduct self-abjection in secret, evidenced by the wounds discovered on her body after death. In contrast to the resolutely public self-abjection of Elizabeth and Christina, many of Mary's self-mutilations go unknown until, upon preparing Mary's body for burial, "wymmen fonde the places of woundes and hadde mykel maruaile," including a large wound on her foot, which "she, lothinge hir fleshe, cutte away grete gobettis and for shame hidde hem in the erthe" (Jacques 97). Elizabeth and Christina have no shame about their abjection, and take every opportunity to make their suffering public.

Mary's performativity of self-mortification is minimized in the text, although she frequently flagellated herself, in one instance "for ouer mykel sharpnesse and harnesse, hir chaules [throat, jowls] were flayne withinne-forth and blode come oute of the woundes" (Jacques 98). But such self-abjection signifies independence, so, rather than play up Mary's active self-abjective violence, Jacques emphasizes her passive self-abnegation via performances of abstinence. These extended periods of self-denial are privileged by Jacques, who finds greater value in Mary's passivity, including her self-imposed silence: "fyue and thretty dayes in a swete and blyssed silens, [she] vsid no bodily mete, and sumdayes she myght brynge for the no worde but this allone: 'I wole' [desire]" (Jacques 100). Ironically, Jacques consistently represses Mary's desire—to beg, to perform her abjection, to escape from the eyes of others—allowing the reader to

interpret her words as a plea for the kind of freedom Elizabeth and Christina had in their lifetimes. In contrast, Mary's silence is construed by Jacques as an admirable female quality that is key to her salvation:

And siche maner silens oure Lorde acceptyd . . . she gat graunt of God  
therefore . . .at she shulde passe to Paradys withouten Purgatory peyne.  
Hereby shewith how grete is the vice of eloquacite and iangelynge.  
(Jacques 115)

In comparing the *vitae* of Elizabeth, Christina, and Mary, it is possible to distinguish between the agential freedom afforded Elizabeth and Christina through performative self-abjection versus the inhibition of performance, and hence the inhibition of personal independence, evident in Mary's *life*. Referring back to Lochrie's argument that determines the pro-feminine value of a saint's story based on whether it is one of subversion or conscription, it is clear that the stories of Elizabeth and Christina are "subversion," while Mary's is one of "conscription" ("The Language" 116). However, there is one episode in Mary's *life* that breaks free of the text's conscriptive role. It is exceptional to the entire MS Douce 114, in that "the weeping incident" is the only time that any of the four women described in the manuscript directly strike out at a member of the clergy.<sup>128</sup> The incident thus expresses Mary's independence, *ex-ipsa* authority, and, for a brief moment, casts her in the pro-feminine light associated with Elizabeth and Christina.

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<sup>128</sup> Mary's "weeping incident" is arguably her best-known accomplishment. Some scholars claim that she also experienced the stigmata. McDonnell makes this claim (318), as does Bynum (*Holy Feast* 119), but there is no mention of it in the Middle English *life*. During the ceremony of the Holy Unction for Mary of Oignies, the sign of the cross is made on the soles of her feet by a priest; the text reads: "And Cryste styked to hir fete the merke of the holy crosse, baner of His Victory" (Jacques 182). Brown suggests in a footnote to the text that this event may be construed as stigmata by some scholars.

Kristeva claims that tears in themselves are not abjective, because “although they belong to borders of the body, [they do not have] any polluting value” (*Powers* 71). She places polluting bodily fluids in two categories, affirming that they threaten identity either from the outside, or from within:

Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death. Menstrual blood, on the contrary, stands for the danger issuing from within identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalisation, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference. (*Powers* 71)

However, I argue that tears, when excessive or overabundant, *are* abjective – representing a danger to a male-dominated medieval religious society, originating within the social and sexual identity of the independent *mulier religiosa* – that is, when dramatic, public, overflowing tears occur, the sheer volume of liquid exuded by the self-subject defiles social boundaries through “the violence of sobs” (*Powers* 3).<sup>129</sup> Creed also identifies tears as an aspect of both the abject and the monstrous feminine, expressed through “an array of bodily wastes such as blood, vomit, saliva, sweat, tears and

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<sup>129</sup> Kristeva remarks, “The potency of pollution is therefore not an inherent one; it is proportional to the potency of the prohibition that founds it” (*Powers* 69). In my opinion, excessive tears on the part of mystic women, like corporeal waste, “represent . . . the objective frailty of symbolic order” (Kristeva, *Powers* 70). Regular weeping would not likely constitute “the gift of tears”; in order to be judged miraculous, the tears must be extraordinary either in content, like Elizabeth, who has “blode comynge oute at hir eyen” (Philip 41) or quantity, as in the examples of Mary of Oignies and Margery Kempe. Copious tears affirm *ex-gratia* authority and express “emotive piety and secular holiness” (Staley 172).



putrifying flesh” (“Horror” 253).<sup>130</sup> An example of excessive, abjective tears can be found in “the weeping incident” of Mary of Oignies.

Moved by Christ’s compassion, Mary regularly weeps so profusely that she leaves a trail of tears behind her: “hir teerys, copiously dounrennyng on the kirke paumente, shewed where she yeed [walked]” (Jacques 92). Despite efforts to “tempir hire sorowe and to withholde aboundauns of teerys,” the more she attempts to control her weeping, the more it occurs. Mary’s ceaseless display of emotion overwhelms the priest in church on the day before Good Friday:

sche hadde offred hirselle to oure Lorde with mykelle watir of teerys,  
sobbynges, and sighynges. A preste of the kirke, as with plesauns  
blamyng hir, badde that she shulde praye softely and latte be hir  
wepyng. She soothly, as she euer was shamfaste and in alle thinges  
sympil as a doufe [dove], didde hir bisynesse to obey. (Jacques 93)

Here the *vita* becomes a folktale, providing a disempowered woman’s cathartic revenge fantasy against meddling, autocratic clergy members. Jacques says that Mary knows she is “vnmyghte” after her chastisement by the priest, but what occurs next affirms her *ex-gratia* power and authority over men of the church. Finding a secret place, she asks God for revenge:

sche wente priuely oute of the chirche and hidde hir in a priue place fer fro  
alle folke, and gate graunte of [got permission from] oure Lorde with terys  
that He wolde shewe to the same preste that hit is not in mannes powere to  
withholde the stronge streme of teerys whanne a grete blaste blowth and

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<sup>130</sup> Creed defines the monstrous feminine as those things about women that are “shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject” (“Horror” 251).

the watire flowith. Wherfore that preste, the while hee sange Masse that same daye, was so ouercomen with abundauns of terys that his spirite was wel nyghe strangelyd. (Jacques 93)

God's retribution is swift and enduring, as the priest loses all continence and composure. He is unable to speak or say the Mass. Rendered unable to communicate, his position as a representative of the church, and of God, has been impugned. He is shamefully silenced; his *ex-officio* status has been nullified by God through Mary's *ex-gratia* power: "And the more that hee bisyed hym to reffreyne his terys, the moor not oonly hee, but also the buke and the autor clothes, were wette with water of wepyng." The priest has been forced to enter the world of the feminine abject through his experience of the silencing of women in the church and the weeping of tears in identification with the suffering of Christ. Mary further asserts her *ex-gratia* authority by reprimanding the priest:

Soothly, then longe tyme after the messe was endid, Cristes mayden – turnynge ageyne and wondirly as if she hadde by presente – vmbreidyng [upbraiding] tolde what fell vnto the preste. "Now," quod sche, "yee haue leeryd by experyens that hit is not in a man to withholde the fersenes of the wynde whanne the sowth bloweth." (Jacques 93-4)

Mary identifies herself here as a fierce wind, an indomitable force of nature. In this episode, she most closely resembles the insuperable Elizabeth and Christina, exercising authority granted by the grace of God.

A twenty-first century reader may understand the priest's weeping as feminization or emasculation, but that is not the message of this passage. In the Middle Ages, weeping was understood to be an expression of authenticity, one that demonstrated compassion for

Christ's suffering on the cross. The phenomenon of weeping profusely was termed "the gift of tears . . . granted by God as a sign of His presence and . . . seen as an efficacious means of His grace to wash away one's sins" (Nagy 119). This proclivity for tears, known as "compunction," is spontaneous, relying on God's grace (Nagy 120). Placing this scene immediately before Good Friday ties Mary's weeping to the crucifixion, and draws attention to the fact that the priest is *not* weeping; in fact, he finds Mary's tears distracting. In essence, the priest conducting the Mass lacks compassion for Christ and is either oblivious or indifferent to God's presence in the church. His crying also suggests that the priest's sins have not been cleansed, or else he would have been attuned to the divine presence. The text uses Dantean *contrapasso*: the priest's annoyance with Mary's tears is the impetus that causes him to be overcome with the same weeping, as the "gift of tears" becomes a punishment of shame in a scathing reprimand to both the church and the priest. The message is clear: Mary will cooperate with the clergy, but should she be shamed she will take retribution in a public fashion. God is on her side, and those who challenge her will face consequences. However, Mary does not maintain this level of autonomy and authority through her performative self-abjection. Instead she reverts to weakness and passivity, weeping over "any lital venial synne," and attracting the derision of Jacques and other observers:

for gode myndes knowe gilte there where no gilte is, often she knellyd atte prestys feet and, accusynge hirself, confessyd hir with terys of sum things; in the which vnnethis wee myghte absteyne fro laghter [at] sum childely woordes that she sorowed fore. (Jacques 95)

Although she has fearsome power, in her *vita* she becomes a creation of Jacques, “the prelate who turned her *Life* into an ‘ideological program’ that was based on Mary” (Mulder-Bakker, *Mary of Oignies* 10).

#### MARGERY KEMPE AND THE WOMEN OF THE MS DOUCE 114

The weeping incident of Mary of Oignies is the most obvious link between the Middle English MS Douce 114 (ca. 1420-1450) and *The Booke of Margery Kempe* (completed 1438); the two texts are contemporaneous and both originate in East Anglia. It is not within the purview of this paper to discuss Kempe in detail. My interest in her relates to the synchronicity of her life and text in relation to MS Douce 114.<sup>131</sup> Margery’s use of performative self-abjection as a means to achieve her goals finds commonalities with the women of MS Douce 114, pointing to a readership of women and pro-feminine readers interested in the stories of empowered women who transgress medieval social mores through their own demonstrative practices of mystical spirituality. While it cannot be conclusively proven that Margery, an East Anglian woman from Lynn, read or heard the stories of MS Douce 114, it is apparent that, through reinventing herself and taking up her new vocation, she implements a series of performative strategies that originate in texts circulating in her region during her lifetime. Brown holds that “Margery almost certainly did not know the lives of Elizabeth of Spalbeek or Christina *mirabilis*, whose piety is more demonstrative and extreme than that of Marie [of Oignies]; if she had, she very likely would have incorporated some of those practices into her own” (“Gender” 422). I would argue that Margery did, in fact, incorporate the techniques of Elizabeth and

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<sup>131</sup> I am not the first to challenge the idea that Kempe’s text is not isolated from other hagiographies and devotional literatures; Liz Herbert McAvoy argues that Kempe was influenced by Mechthild of Hackeborn (“O der lady” 70); McAvoy and Dianne Watt also contend that continental writers influenced women’s literary culture (“Introduction: Women’s Literary Culture” 7).

Christina into her own practice, because she may have heard about these women from others. Many of the demonstrative acts of piety exhibited by Margery correspond closely to the performances outlined in MS Douce 114; these acts contribute to Margery's ability to enjoy a life with a "relative independence of masculine control" (Aers 74).

Mary of Oignies's weeping is used as an *exemplum* that defends Margery's (1373-1438) noisy spiritual practice. Margery, too, weeps for Christ's suffering, particularly during the Mass: "at . . . sermownys sche cryid ful lowde & sobbyd ful boystowsly many tymes & ofte" (152). Most priests "suffyrd it ful paciently," but her demonstrative response to the Mass annoys one priest, who "prechyd meche a-geyn pe seyd creatur, not expressyng hir name, but so he expletyd hys conseytys pat men vndirstod wel pat he ment hir" (152). In fact, many witnesses to Margery's tears take issue with them, including the people of Seryce in the Netherlands, who were "most displeyd for sche wepyd so mech" (61); in Constance, Germany, she is told to "levyn hir wepyng" (63); a priest in Rome was so annoyed with Margery's tears that he used "euyl langage" against her and had her "put owte" of the hospice where she was staying (80). The anonymous priest writing Margery's story admits that he, like the priest who preached against her, was put off by her weeping. But upon learning the story of Mary of Oignies, the priest becomes acquainted with the value of women's tears and the potential danger of criticizing those tears. Forthwith, his attitude toward Margery is appreciative rather than suspicious, confessing

pat he [the scribe/priest] louyd hir [Margery] mor & trustyd mor to hir wepyng & hir crying pan euyl he dede be-forn, for aftyward he red of a woman clepyd Maria de Oegines & of hir maner of leuyng, of pe

wondirful swetnesse pat sche had in hys Passyon thynkyng, & of pe plentyuows teerys pat sche wept, pe wech made hir so febyl & so weyke pat sche myth not edur to beheldyn pe Crosse, ne heryn owr Lordys Passyon rehersyd, so sche was resoluyd in-to terys of pyte & compassyon. (152-3)

Citing the Latin text of the *Vita Mariae Oigniacensis*, the priest recounts the relevant chapters of Mary's *vita*:

Of pe plentyuows grace of hir teerys he tetryth specyaly in pe boke beforon wretyn pe xvij capitulo pat begynnyth, “Bonus es, domine, sperantibus in te,” and also in pe xix capitulo wher he tellyth how sche, at pe request of a preyste pat he xulde not be turbelyd ne distrawt in hys chirch-dor, wyth a lowde voys crying pat sche myth not restreyn hir perfro. & owr Lord also visityd pe preyste beyng at Messe wyth sweche deuocyon whan he xulde redyn pe Holy Gospel pat he wept wondirly so pat he wett hys vestiment & ornamentys of pe awter . . . hys sobbyng, it was so habundawnt, ne he myth not restreyn it ne wel stande perwyth at pe awter. Ðan he leuyd wel pat pe good woman, wech he had be-forn lityl affeccyon to, myth not restreyn hir wepyng, hir grace pan euyr dede he wyth-owtyn any comparison. (152-3)

In his praise of tears, the priest cites a second comparable example of abject public weeping, explaining that “Elizabeth of Hungry cryed wyth lowde voys, as is wretyn in hir tretys” (154). Osbern of Bokenham elucidates the gift of tears expressed by Elizabeth of

Hungary (1207-1231), a performative self-object in her own right, in the *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*.<sup>132</sup>

hyr preyers to god myht alwey be,  
 Them to wattryn in plenteuous wyse  
 Wyth wepyng eyne ful oftyn oysyd she.  
 And not-wythstondyng þe gretg wepyng  
 Wych she dede vsyn in capyousnesse,  
 In hyr chere apperyd no dyffyguryng  
 By hyr terys, but rather gladnesse (Osberne 265).

Granted, tears are a milder manifestation of performative self-abjection than Elizabeth of Spalbeek's violent performances of self-abnegation in imitation of Christ's suffering, the self-subjection to torture by Christina the Astonishing, or the privately self-inflicted wounds of Mary of Oignies. Nonetheless, as I have already noted, excessive public weeping is performative and signals "God's merciful acceptance of . . . penitential devotion" (Staley 47). Herbert Thurston describes Margery as "a victim of hysteria" (34), classifying her with those "so temperamentally constituted that they never can be happy except when they are miserable" (33). He unwittingly acknowledges Margery's performance of self-abjection, in that the text "leaves an impression of that preoccupation with self, however much it may wear the semblance of gratitude for God's gracious dealings with His unworthy creature" (35). Kristeva explains that abjection is both "a precondition of narcissism" and "a kind of narcissistic crisis," corresponding with Thurston's keen observation regarding Margery's excessive self-interest (*Powers* 13-4). But Margery's is an expressive self-interest like that of the performance artist Elizabeth

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<sup>132</sup> For more on the performative self-abjection and agency of Elizabeth of Hungary, see chapter 1.

and similar to the narcissistic self-interest of Christina, whose family comes to believe her will is “Goddess wille.” Christina’s egocentric self-determination renders her “free” to do “what hire liste” (Thomas 64).

*Ex-gratia* authority displayed through performative self-abjection bestows upon the woman the privileges of clergy, and, like Elizabeth and Christina, Margery takes for herself the role of teacher and counsellor after she is “sent of owyr Lord to diuers placys of relygyon” (25). Hearing the confessions of clergy, she doles out penance and absolution with impunity: “Than cam pe monk a-zen, “Margery, telle me my synnes.” Sche seyde, “I pray zow, ser, askyth not peraftryr, for I vndyrtake for zowr sowle ze schal ben savyd, zyf ze wyl do aftyr my counsel” (26). Margery tells the monk about his sin of adultery, but assures him that he will be saved if he follows her instructions: “veth schrevyn perof & forsake it wylfully. Leuyth pe offyce pat ze han wythowtynforth, & God schal zeue zow grace for my lofe” (27). Controversy exists among scholars as to whether Margery, like Elizabeth and Christina, is appropriating the authority to absolve sins. The church says that these women, who cannot be clergy and who belong to a quasi-religious order barely acknowledged by the church, lack the authority to perform the sacraments as a priest might (that is, in non-emergency situations), including baptism and absolution. Yet, biographers include these kinds of details in women’s *vitae*.<sup>133</sup> Can we construe these acts of audacity as miraculous? It is possible. They may also be included in *vitae* as protest against the church, which occurs frequently in accounts of mystical

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<sup>133</sup> In addition to Christina’s self/re-baptism, Mary of Oignies baptises a child who is tormented by a demon: “she sawe a wicked spirite with grete confusyone in senshype [disgrace] departe from the childe. And whan she hirsselfe heef the childe of the holy founte, her eyen were openyd and sawe the Holy Goste comyng doune into the childes soule” (Jacques 149).



saints (de Certeau 6-7). I contend that these events have been recorded for a purpose, even though that purpose may be unclear to modern-day readers.<sup>134</sup>

Margery also uses laughter to express her self-abjection. In facing and overcoming a charge of heresy before the Archbishop of York, for instance, Margery “toke hir leue wyth glad cher,” infuriating a steward:

And þe Erchebischopys mene preyd hir to prey for hem, but þe styward was wroth, for sche lowgh & made good cher, seying to hir, “Holy folke xulde not lawghe.” Sche seyde, “Ser, I haue gret cawse for to lawghe, for þe mor schame I suffyr & despite, þe meryar may I ben in owr Lord Ihesu Crist.” (134-5).

Here, abjection through laughter is effected by Margery, and it is both performative and self-initiated. Kristeva positions laughter as a part of abjection, with the power to create or diffuse the “dark revolt of being” that is the essence of the abject “directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside” (Kristeva, *Powers* 1).

The church signifies a threat for women who choose to practice spirituality independently; abjection is one of the methods by which a pious woman can differentiate herself from the patriarchal institution:

The one by whom the abject exists is thus a deject who places [herself], separates [herself], situates [herself], and therefore strays instead of

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<sup>134</sup> For example, Christina gives absolution to Lewis of Loon after hearing his deathbed confession. Thomas claims she does not have the power to give absolution, yet he includes the story in her *vita* (Thomas 76). Why would this occur? Le Goff provides another possible reason for the inclusion of absolution accounts in women’s *vitae*: the twelfth-century treatise *On True and False Penitence* (*De vera et falso poenitentia*) put forth a principle that was endorsed by Peter Lombard and became part of church practice: “in case of peril and in the absence of a priest, it is legitimate and useful to confess to a lay person. The lay person does not grant absolution, but the desire to confess is proof of contrition and may lead to absolution” (*Birth of Purgatory* 214-5). In other words, *the intent of the penitent* may be efficacious enough to obtain absolution.

getting [her] bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing. [It is] situationist in a sense, and not without laughter—since laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection. (Kristeva, *Powers* 8)

Margery's laughter demonstrates that she is free to practice her spirituality in her own fashion. Lochrie affirms Margery's laughter as a sign of *ex-gratia* authority and subversion: "she proclaims through her laughter a spiritual mirth which exceeds institutional authority" (*Margery* 143). Margery's *jouissance* compares with the performances of Elizabeth and Christina, who also flout the authority of the church through laughter: Christina "breste into a ful swete laghter" while the abbot spies on her in the church (Thomas 79); Elizabeth displays "a merueilous, onest, and schameful gladnesse of cheer" that reveals the "inwarde mirthe of hir mynde" (Philip 33). As Cixous remarks, women's laughter is subversive because it provides the means "to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the 'truth'" (888).

Margery also appears to follow the tradition of the women of Liège when she expresses her piety through self-imposed violence. She engages in physical displays of performative self-abjection in which she sobs, roars, and throws herself to the ground. For instance, during her pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Margery performs her physical self-abjection in sympathy for Christ's suffering in a manner that recalls Elizabeth of Spalbeek's performances of the crucifixion, right up to the moment when she should be dead:

whan pei cam vp on-to pe Mownt of Caluarye, sche fel down pat sche mygth not stodyn ne knelyn but walwyd & wretyd wyth hir body,

spredyng hir armys a-brode, & cryed wyth a lowde voys as pow hir hert  
 xulde a brostyn a-sundyr, for in pe cite of hir sowle sche saw veryly &  
 freschly how owyr Lord was crucified . . . . sche myt not kepe hir-self fro  
 kryng & roryng pow sche xuld a be ded perfor. (68)

In another instance of performative self-abjection, Margery shares her revelations with the Vicar of Saint Stephen's church, in a performance that recalls Elizabeth thrashing about and throwing herself to the ground. Margery "fel down & wrestyd wyth hir body & mad wondrousful cher & contenawns wyth boystows sobbyngys & gret plente of terys, sumtyme seyng 'Ihesu, Mercy,' sum-tyme 'I dey'" (40). Similarly, in a chapel at Lynn on a Good Friday, she imitates Elizabeth imitating Christ crucified (and simultaneously upstaging the mass in the tradition of Elizabeth) as "sche sobbyd, roryd, & cryed, and, spredyng hir armys a-brood, seyde wyth lowde voys, 'I dey, I dey'" (140). These performances serve three functions for Margery: they emphasize her piety; they bolster her authenticity as a mystic who speaks with God; and they work to protect her from greater persecution by authorities. Like Elizabeth and Christina, Margery takes her performance of suffering from the feminine private sphere into the public—hence masculine—sphere. She also becomes a medieval mirror reflecting the Lord's suffering for the edification of her impromptu audience:

Þe cryeng was lowde & so wondrousful . . . . sumtyme, whan sche saw pe  
 Crucifyx, er yf sche sey a man had a wownde er a best whepyr it wer, er  
 zyf a man bett a childe be-for hir er smet an hors er an-oper best wyth a  
 whippe, zyf sche myth sen it er heryn it, hir thowt sche saw owyr Lord be  
 betyn er wowndyd. (68-9)

There are other similarities between Margery and the women of MS Douce 114: Margery combines the non-miraculous practice of Elizabeth of Spalbeek—because Margery facilitates no miracles that can be substantiated, although she often performs publicly—with the *idea* of miraculous suffering exemplified by Christina the Astonishing. While Margery performs the suffering of Christ on occasion like Elizabeth (68), she also *imagines* a speedy martyrdom she calls a “most soft deth”: “Hyr pow[t] sche wold a be slyn for Goddys lofe . . . to be bowndyn hyr hed & hir fet to a stokke & hir hed to be smet of wyth a scharp ex for Goddys lofe” (30).

The major plot points of the *vita* of Christina the Astonishing are clearly replicated in Margery’s story at this point. Like Christina, Margery and God make a *quid pro quo* agreement. Christina offers up her suffering body in exchange for reward: “with ensauple of thy peyne and lyfe, [to] stire men to repentauns and penauns. . . . And after alle this is doon, then thou schalte come ageyne to me with many medys [rewards]” (Thomas 56). Margery only needs to envision her own (unrealized) martyrdom to earn her heavenly benefit: “Pan seyde owyr Lord in hir mende, ‘I thank pe, dowtyr, pat pow woldyst [suffer deth] for my lofe, for as oftyen as pow thynkyst so, pow schalt haue pe same mede [reward] in Heuyn as pow pu suffredyst pe same deth’” (30). Both women are assured of their salvation and know they will be taken up to heaven upon their deaths. The earthly, immediate reward for suffering, real or imagined, is (rather mundane and pragmatic) protection in the here and now. For Christina, this entails an “vndeedy soule by a deedy body withouten harme of hitselfe” (Thomas 56), which guarantees that she will survive punishments of fire (Thomas 59-60) and water (Thomas 58-9) in fulfillment of His promise. The promise to Margery is similar:

& zet schal no man sle the, ne fyer bren pe, ne watyr drynch pe, ne wynd deryn pe, for I may not for-zetyn pe how pow art wretyn in myn handys & my fete; it lykyn me wel pe peynes pat I haue sufferyd for pe. I xal neuyr ben wroth wyth pe, but I xal louyn pe wyth-owtn ende. (30)

Of course, after this promise, Margery endures no self-inflicted torture, nor does she defy death as Christina does; instead Margery suffers the indignities of public disparagement, for instance, when her chattiness sparks one monk's wistful desire for more anchorholds and fewer religious lay women. He declares: "I wold pow were closyd in an hows of ston pat per schuld no man speke wyth pe" (27). In other examples Margery is regularly subjected to judgment and derision:

For summe seyde it was a sikkyd spiryt vexid hir; sum seyde it was a sekene; sum seyde sche had dronkyn to mech wyn; sum bannyd hir; sum wisshed sche had ben in pe hauyn; sum wolde sche had ben in pe se in a bottumles boyt; and so ich man as hym thowte. (69)

So, there is a difference between Christina and Elizabeth's performative self-abjection and that of Margery: danger in Margery's life is not, as a rule, *self-inflicted* through performative self-abjection; instead danger—at times life-threatening—is an *external consequence* of her performances. Accordingly, her empathy with Christ is less related to his suffering on the cross and analogous instead to his experience of persecution:

As sone as pe pepyl thorw entysyng of owyr gostly enemy & be pe sufferawns of owyr Lord spak a-geyn pis creatur for sche wept so sor, & seyde sche was a fals ypocryte & falsly deceyued pe pepyl, & thretyd hir to be brent. (33)

On another occasion, she is again threatened with being burned at the stake when “a woman of pe same town” says to her, “I wold pu wer in Smythfeld, & I wold beryn a fagot to bren pe wyth; it is pety pat pow leuyst” (36). Margery was cited or arrested seven times; John Arnold suggests that it was not the threat of heresy that endangered her, but rather “a more general suspicion of a woman publicly out of place . . . . the *Book* and its author have been read as challenging social, cultural and political norms of various kinds: gender roles, normative piety, legal jurisdiction” (90). Margery’s public persecution, based on her unusual expressions of piety, bear witness to the suspicion associated with mysticism by many authorities in the fifteenth century.

Though the results of performative self-abjection differ between the women of Liège and Margery, it is apparent that the affective acts employed by the women of MS Douce 114 are paralleled in Margery’s demonstrative piety. These same strategies are also productive for Margery: her autonomy, gained through the exhibition of *ex-gratia* religious authority protects her from the church’s remonstrances. For example, when the Archbishop of York “seye sche xulde ben feteryd, for sche was a fals heretyke” (124), the clerks fear repercussions, saying, “we wil not suffyr hir to dwellyn a-mong vs, for pe pepil hath gret feyth in hir dalyawnce, and perauentur sche myth peruertyn summe of hem” (125). Like Christina and Mary, Margery is unbowed, threatening her enemies with God’s reprimand should they harm her:

Than pe Erchebischop seyde vn-to hir, “I am euyl enformyd of pe; I her seyn pu art a ryth wikked women.” And sche seyde a-geyn, “Ser, so I her seyn pat ze arn a wikkyd man. And, zyf ze ben as wikkyd as men seyn, ze xal neuyr come in Heuyn les pan ze amende zow whil ze ben her.” (125)

Her performances allow her immense freedom: to leave her husband behind in order to travel the world alone and to imitate nuns without taking vows, as “sche went & ordeyned hir white clothys & was clad al in white liche as sche was comawndyd for to do zerys be-fore in hir sowle be reuelacyon, & now it was fulfild in effect” (80).<sup>135</sup>

Margery’s dramatic expressions of piety also permitted her to straddle the fine line between teaching (permitted for everyone) and preaching (forbidden to non-priests) arguing that her particular brand of sermonizing came not from a “pulpytt,” but by using “comownycacyon & good wordys” (126).<sup>136</sup> Embracing the narcissism of abjection like Elizabeth and Christina, Margery’s story is all about her; God and redemption are the backdrop for her autobiography. Margery imitates the self-empowerment of the women of Liège, taking pilgrimages and positioning herself as a candidate for sainthood. She ultimately failed in her bid, but she is in good company with her fellow non-canonized sisters: Elizabeth of Spalbeek, Christina the Astonishing, and Mary of Oignies.

These Middle English texts concerning the women of MS Douce 114, Osberne’s story of Elizabeth of Hungary, and Margery’s *Booke* converge around performative self-abjection and the resulting autonomy each woman attained through its use. Most scholars

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<sup>135</sup> Margery adopts the beguine habit, which allows the reader to see society’s suspicion regarding female mystics in the fifteenth century. When the Mayor of Leicester sees Margery dressed in her beguine whites, he is both angry and fearful. Margery is questioned about the articles of the faith by monks, friars, and priests, and she answers appropriately. The Mayor accuses her of speaking falsely and rebukes her. Margery responds by telling him, among other things, “Sir, ze arn not worthy be ben a meyr, & pat xal I preuyn be Holy Writte.” The mayor replies, “I wil wetyn why pow gost in white clothys, for I trowe pow art comyn hedyr to han a-wey owr wyuys fro us & leydn hem wyth pe” (116).

<sup>136</sup> Here, by mentioning the pulpit and good words, Margery makes an important distinction between herself and the clergy. The pulpit is a symbol of the patriarchal church’s authority, as an elevated platform from which the priest speaks down to the laity. The language of Latin is another symbol of privilege, understood predominantly by the learned clergy and nobility. By avoiding the elevation of the pulpit, and by speaking her own “good words” in the vernacular, Margery seems to imply that she is not impinging on the church’s sanctions against women preaching because she does not have the tools of pulpit nor the language that would give her words any weight.

have positioned the *Booke of Margery Kempe* as an anomaly, in isolation from other texts in the fifteenth-century canon. For example, Sarah Beckwith sees the *Booke* as:

an isolated English example of a widespread continental phenomenon with which she [Margery] had important connections – connections that were clearly important to legitimize her own form of piety before a disbelieving male clergy . . . . Margery . . . refused the space traditionally allotted to religious women . . . . [H]er lack of circumspection, her insistence on living in the world, enables the social dimension that makes her mysticism distinctive. (“The Medieval Mysticism” 197)

Similarly, in her prefatory note to *The Booke of Margery Kempe*, Hope Emily Allen claims she has “found no equivalent production anywhere. Margery’s originality seems to me indisputable” (lvii). Yet Allen acknowledges an external influence on Margery:

whatever were the causes that made Margery Kempe what she was, the theory of foreign influence helps to explain why her . . . confessors allowed her to continue in a type of mysticism which at many points would almost certainly have been condemned. (Allen lv)

In other words, both authors identify an unknown quantity that influences Margery’s religious practice: Allen alludes to a mysterious “foreign influence,” while Beckwith points to an unspecified “continental phenomenon.” That “influence” or “phenomenon” is performative self-abjection, rooted in the lives of the early martyrs, and then perfected by women saints of the Low Countries during the blossoming of mysticism in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Ute Stargardt does not think highly of Margery’s religious practice, accusing her of “increasing superficiality and falsification of mystical ideas”



(300). However, she acknowledges that Margery knew of this expression of piety because of trade between the town of Lynn and towns of the Low Countries, which Stargardt sees as the source of Margery's understanding of a particular mystical practice: performative self-abjection (Stargardt 301). If we accept that self-abjection is the continental influence that empowered Margery, then we must accept that while Margery herself may have been what Beckwith calls an "isolated English example," her *Booke* is not ("The Medieval Mysticism" 197). Instead, it is part of a small, fifteenth-century corpus of Middle English texts that includes at least MS Douce 114 and Osberne of Bokenham's "Lyf of S. Elysabeth" found in his *Legendys*, which deal with a distinctive mysticism made possible through performative self-abjection. Lochrie contends that "scholarship has tended to isolate Kempe's book by maintaining its failure to influence anyone" (*Transitions* 76); Beckwith and Allen concur with Lochrie's charge of scholarly isolation regarding the *Booke of Margery Kempe*. However, I would argue that the failure to unravel the element of isolation lies not with the text's supposed lack of influence, but instead with scholars' inability to link the text with other Middle English works. Rather than Kempe's *Booke* having influence, Margery's performances and her text may have been influenced by the preceding *lives* of the women of the MS Douce 114.

The *Booke of Margery Kempe* is not an outlier; whatever can be said about Margery can be said about the women of MS Douce 114, and by extension, Elizabeth of Hungary. The texts about these women "belie any preconceived notions we might have of the status and expectations of medieval women" (Staley 1). We may conclude that these works represent a "new" expression of spirituality for women and pro-feminine readers, articulating the "contradictory impulses of late medieval social and religious experience"

(Lochrie, *Translations* xxi). The subjects of the accounts are the antithesis of the submissive woman saint model, represented by idealized saintly martyrs such as Saint Margaret, who was “Be meknesse lytyl, and most singulerly / Verteuous be hyr excellent cheryte” (Osberne 8). Instead, these women demonstrate their examples of authority through ritualistic affective piety that reverses the power structure of the patriarchal church, expressing feminine empowerment and agency:

Through language and within highly hierarchical religious institutions,<sup>137</sup> man hallucinates partial “objects”—witnesses to an archaic differentiation of the body on its way toward ego identity, which is also sexual identity . . . . By means of the symbolic institution of ritual, that is to say, by means of a system of ritual exclusions, the partial-object consequently becomes *scription*—an inscription of limits, an emphasis placed not on the (paternal) Law but on (maternal) Authority through the very signifying order. (Kristeva, *Powers* 73)

The literature of these performatively self-ject women must be distinguished from other hagiographical forms in order to recognize the embedded, exceptional pro-feminine sub-text present in these works.

Further research is required to understand more about the readership for these texts of performative self-abjection, particularly as it relates to the Beguine-like women of East Anglia, the home of MS Douce 114 and the *Booke of Margery Kempe*. I will be investigating other Middle English devotional texts, redressing past formalist readings

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<sup>137</sup> Language and hierarchical institutions constitute Lacan’s symbolic order, a patriarchal social system (230).

and employing a third-wave feminist theoretical approach that rejects essentialism<sup>138</sup> in the critique of medieval devotional writing: *The Booke of Gostlye Grace of Mechtild of Hackeborn*, *The Revelations of St. Birgitta*, and Catherine of Siena's *Orcherd of Syon*, all of which contain elements of performative self-abjection related to independent spiritual practice (Lochrie, *Translations* 76). Interrogating these works often reveals an alternative narrative, separate from generic expectations, hiding in plain view.

The “glue” that binds together the collection of these fifteenth-century women's hagiographies derives from a question articulated in Chaucer's “Wife of Bath's Tale,” which asks: “what do women want?” In the Middle Ages, as now, “wommen desiren to have sovereynetee” (l. 1038), not just in marriage, but “sovereynté every delle [in every way]” (*The Wedding* 776). MS Douce 114 provides us with examples of the ways in which women did, and did not, manage to attain that “sovereynetee” through the unorthodox religious practice of performative self-abjection.

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<sup>138</sup> Essentialism here refers to “the (false) universalisation of claims about women . . . [that] casts particular forms of feminine experience as the norm” (Stone 19). For my research, anti-essentialism entails a rejection of preconceived notions and expectations regarding texts about medieval holy women. See also Reger.

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