

COMMONPLACE DIVINITY: FEMININE TOPOI IN THE RHETORIC OF
MEDIEVAL WOMEN MYSTICS

A Dissertation

by

CHRISTINA VICTORIA CEDILLO

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2011

Major Subject: English

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ABSTRACT

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(August 2011)

Christina Victoria Cedillo, B.A., Texas A&M University; M.A., Texas A&M

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This dissertation examines the works of five medieval women mystics—Hildegard of Bingen, Hadewijch of Brabant, Angela of Foligno, Birgitta of Sweden, and Julian of Norwich—to argue that these writers used feminine topoi, commonplace images of women symbolizing complex themes, to convey authority based on embodied experience that could not be claimed by their male associates. The lens used to study their works is rhetorical analysis informed by a feminist recuperative objective, one concerned with identifying effective rhetorical strategies useful to many women and men who have traditionally been denied speech, rather than with women's entrance into traditional rhetorical canons. In addition, the project deliberately engages scholarship by critics whose work has been informed by postcolonial, gender, and queer theories. This preference allows an exploration of the ways in which legitimized language becomes unstable and permeable, permitting members of oppressed and suppressed groups to usurp the authority of dominant discourse, and of historically situated rhetorical practice as the result of cultural and textual negotiations of gender.

That the writings of the women mystics derive from diverse educational and geographical backgrounds suggests the effectiveness and scope of reinscribed feminine topoi. Traditional feminine images circumscribed women's agency by authorizing rhetorics of embodiment that emphasized the devalued status of living women who, like topoi, were viewed as ontologically derivative and subordinate to male authorities. In response, the women mystics revised feminine topoi to create embodied rhetorics that allowed them to benefit from personal experience "in the flesh" while situating their rhetorical endeavors within conventional rhetorical frameworks.

This study reveals that the women mystics' reliance on the interplay between words and bodies in the construction of mystical identities exposes the subjective quality of discursive objectivity and calls attention to the importance of emotions and corporeality in communication. Their rhetorics challenge the conventional dichotomy between the mind and body, which essentially prove too contiguous for medieval religious. Their works speak to current re-evaluations of rhetoric as a multimodal practice, shedding new light on current women's communication paradigms and challenging delineations of epistemology that privilege traditionally "rational" ways of knowing.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my parents, Daniel Hector Cedillo and Edilia Cedillo, whose love and faith in my ability to succeed gave me the courage to undertake this course of study. They are always with me, ever present in the mind and heart that composed these words. The project is also dedicated to the countless women throughout history who were, and continue to be, denied educational opportunities on account of their sex, but who still manage to make themselves heard by the simple fact that they *are*—women like my grandmother, Ernestina Perez.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	iii
DEDICATION	v
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS	viii
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION: RHETORIC, EMBODIMENT, AND MYSTICISM.....	1
Contesting Dominant Discourses	17
Feminine Topoi in the Works of Medieval Women Mystics.....	29
II A RADIANT AND RATIONAL LADY: ENTELECHY AND THE FEMALE BODY IN HILDEGARD OF BINGEN'S <i>SCIVIAS</i>	35
Ecclesia and Synagogue	36
Hildegard's Rhetorical Practice.....	59
Conclusion.....	70
III MINNE, QUEEN REASON, AND THE TREE: RHETORICAL RE-VISION IN THE WORKS OF HADEWIJCH OF BRABANT	73
Hadewijch, Feminine Influence, and the Rhetorical Tradition	74
Hadewijch's Mystical Ethos.....	84
<i>Minne</i> , Reason, and the Tree.....	96
Conclusion.....	104

CHAPTER	Page	
IV	CONSUMING THE TOPOS: LEPROUS EFFLUVIUM AND THE REINSCRIPTIVE FEMALE BODY IN THE <i>BOOK OF ANGELA OF FOLIGNO</i>	107
	Constructing the Holy Woman: Social, Religious, and Political Factors	109
	Consuming and Becoming the Topos	117
	Corporeality, Orthodoxy, and Feminine Agency	129
	Conclusion.....	143
V	OF LADDERS AND THE QUEEN OF HEAVEN: THE MOTHER TOPOS IN THE <i>REVELATIONS OF BIRGITTA OF SWEDEN</i>	145
	Birgitta’s Rhetorical Contexts.....	146
	Birgitta’s Ethos and Her Use of the Mother Topos.....	158
	Corporeal and Textual Bodies.....	172
	Conclusion.....	183
VI	“[T]HE MOTHEROOD OF GRACE”: GOD AS MOTHER IN THE <i>SHOWINGS OF JULIAN OF NORWICH</i>	186
	Julian’s Rhetorical Contexts.....	187
	Reframing the Feminine Flesh	207
	Julian’s Rhetorical Defense and Offense	218
	Julian and Margery Kempe: A Rhetorical Relationship	232
	Conclusion.....	248
VII	CONCLUSION: REEVALUATING MEDIEVAL WOMEN’S MYSTICISM.....	250
	REFERENCES.....	260
	VITA	275

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: RHETORIC, EMBODIMENT, AND MYSTICISM

When I consider that my body shall fade away at death that I shall no longer suffer or praise my beloved Jesus, then I feel such pain that I desire, if that were possible, to live till the last day.

—Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*

Due to historical philosophical and religious ideologies that associate men with the intellect and women with the body, women's rhetorics are unavoidably laden with corporeal as well as verbal significance. In this study I examine how medieval women mystics draw upon textual and bodily modes of expression to promote Christian rhetoric as a "verbo-physical" tradition, one that authorizes and even calls for women's participation in rhetorical endeavors. I propose that medieval women's rhetorics are particularly relevant to current re-assessments of rhetoric as a practice that encompasses emotive, physical, and nonverbal systems, beyond intellectual theory and linguistic action. The project examines works by five women mystics composing during the High to Late Middle Ages: Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), Hadewijch of Brabant (13th century), Angela of Foligno (c. 1248-1309), Birgitta of Sweden (c. 1303-1373), and Julian of Norwich (c. 1342-c. 1416). These authors articulate an engagement of the female body's potential to be a receiver and transmitter of knowledge, one that functions together with their words to create polyvalent arguments about women's being-in-the-

world. Their works engage prevalent rhetorics of embodiment by medieval philosophers and the clergy, and create in response textually-conveyed embodied rhetorics that contest established views.

In the context of medieval systems of belief that cast women as foolish and immoral due to femininity's alleged ties to corporeality, these medieval women mystics construct feminine topoi—commonplace figures of women that represent philosophical or religious concepts—that depict the female body as a distinctive channel of divine wisdom.¹ Traditionally, the personification of abstract ideas as women falls under the purview of *conformatio*, one of the rhetorical “figures of thought,” so termed because they aid in the invention of arguments. Although I do address the semblance of disputation that this figure entails below, throughout this project I focus on the broader implications of the feminine image as a symbol that encapsulates social negotiations of gender, dogma, and agency. For this reason, I examine images of women in terms of their occurrence as topoi. A recurrent image, device, or theme, a topos is defined by Aristotle as “that location or space in an art where a speaker [or writer] can look for ‘available means of persuasion’” (45). The term derives from a geographical metaphor that indicates the location of a rhetorical performance—“topos” literally means “place”—since the mental image of the event site is intended to facilitate a recollection of the themes appropriate to that site. Medieval women mystics complicate traditional

¹ “Figure” denotes a transformation in the communication of meaning, as in “figuration,” rather than the emblematic character herself. James J. Murphy defines *conformatio* as a figure “representing an absent person as present, or in making a mute thing or one lacking form articulate, and attributing to it a definite form and a language or a certain behavior appropriate to its character” (373). This rhetorical process allows the author to anticipate possible counterarguments by means of a staged debate; for this reason, *conformatio* was often used as a rhetorical training exercise.

feminine topoi, as well as the notion of woman itself, since metonymic associations between the authors' bodies and the bodies they compose in their texts reinscribe what images or themes their audiences associated with the topic of "woman." Consequently, the facets of medieval femininity personified by feminine topoi become contestable ideological spaces where positive and negative beliefs can be appropriated and re-evaluated, whether as individuals these women authors actively support patriarchal authority or genuinely seek to subvert its hegemonic control.

Classical and medieval literature is replete with images of women that function as topoi. Topoi facilitate *inventio* by providing bases for new arguments, since a topos contains all of the significance available to a particular figure, permitting the author to pick and choose whatever meanings advance a particular line of reasoning. More prominent examples include the wise and constant Lady Philosophy who, in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, comforts Boethius after his luck has soured due to the fickle Lady Fortune, and Lady Rhetorica herself, depicted as a mighty queen in Martianus Capella's *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*. These feminine images embody abstract notions, but they tend to be assigned anthropomorphic characteristics so that they may be seen as independent parties that interact with the authors of their depiction. By using these rhetorical figures, the author can expound on his chosen topic, while communicating his own ideas under the disarming guise of dialogue or narrative. He persuades his audience to more easily accept his conclusions by means of a deliberately crafted, doubly contrived demonstration of dialectic.

The process by which an author constructs his original depiction of a traditional female topos is predisposed to authorize the discourse of misogyny. To create his take on the embodied figure, the author enacts a process of externalization and personification that results in the construction of an object identity. Thus personified, this “being” whose entire identity is tied to another’s rhetorical purpose permits the author to ventriloquize his thoughts using its own voice. Likewise, the classification of female nature in medieval (and some contemporary) intellectual and religious circles entails the fabrication of a receptive object that reinforces masculine subjectivity in the subject’s own words. R. Howard Bloch points out that this discourse of misogyny is difficult to contend with precisely because it is “a citational mode whose rhetorical thrust is to displace its own source away from anything that might be construed as personal or confessional” (Bloch 6). Instead, misogyny relocates its biases to the realm of supposed fact even as the male author “speaks of the other in terms that bespeak otherness, and this through the voice of the other.” The Other refers always to the figure of woman, living or textual, an invented persona continuously re-created for the express purpose of reflecting her author’s ingenuity. She is categorized rhetorically passive and ontologically derivative—feminine—even if she displays an active disposition diegetically or in the world.

As a topos, “woman” contains the socially determined codes that define the female gender at a given time, providing a site where these codes can be re-inscribed often and over time. Yet, even as restrictions change and contexts shift, one condition remains constant: just as the women on the page are designed foils, women out in the

world remain Othered figures, constructed discursively to underscore the superior centrality of their authors. The feminine topos functions as a rhetorical handmaiden to theologians, philosophers, and rhetoricians, existing only to assist the *auctor*.² Moreover, feminine topoi tend to be positive only when they display characteristics like loyalty and strength, virtues traditionally regarded as masculine. When they represent negative qualities, feminine topoi assume fundamental connections to flesh-and-blood women, whom male authorities viewed as deficiency epitomized. Boethius' Lady Philosophy counsels only those who are able to seek her out through systematic reflection—namely, men—and she bestows fortitude in the face of adversity, but only to the more constant sex. In contrast, Fortune seduces fools with promises of future success, drawing them away from meaningful pursuits. Faithless and capricious, she lacks moral and ethical integrity, as do the flesh-and-blood daughters of Eve. Even when the male clergy use feminine topoi to emphasize their humility, they do so only to highlight their renunciation of “the prerogatives of wealth, strength, and public power that their world connected to adult male status” (Bynum, *Holy Feast* 288). The appropriation of women's low standing by medieval male authors reaffirms adverse impressions of women because these authors communicate the disproportion in status between themselves and God in terms of the disparity present between the sexes.

However, as is demonstrated by texts composed by the medieval women mystics, the negative propensities built into the construction of feminine topoi do not

² The notion of the topos as a handmaiden derives from the idea of rhetoric as a handmaiden to more authoritative subjects, particularly philosophy; this commonplace appears to have originated with Plato (Cohen 32-33).

preclude their reinscription by persons circumscribed by their social impact. Kenneth Burke explains, “The complicating element to do with images, when used as the narrative embodying of principles, or ideas, is that the images bring up possibilities of development in their own right” (*Rhetoric of Religion* 214). In attempting to convey particular concepts, images cannot help recall also their opposites, by which they are demarcated. A reference to the Tree of Life causes the reader to contemplate the meaning of death, Burke argues, just as a sword that connotes protection for the Tree portends as well the execution that punishes transgressions against the Tree. Likewise, representations of women that convey negative ideology inspire speculation over feminine qualities that do earn social approval. Denunciations of corporeality as mere irrational materiality invite us to question what might constitute a rational body. The adaptable images of women borrowed by the women mystics contain prospects for overturning inured views of femininity and embodiment.

Seeking to reclaim the body as a potential source of understanding, feminist rhetorical scholars now argue that “recognition and articulation of the embodied, sensual dimensions of knowledge and reason are essential to the feminist project of envisioning ‘a more just future’” (Spoel 202). However, as the words of the thirteenth-century Beguine mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg reveal, this insight is not a novel development. An examination of the rhetorical strategies employed by the medieval women mystics shows that their works deliberately reframe the authors’ embodied ethoi by modifying feminine topoi so as to exploit the female body’s potential as an affective, experiential, and teleological rhetorical presence. These mystical texts highlight different ways by

which women authors create *embodied rhetorics* in response to *rhetorics of embodiment* constructed to circumscribe their communication practices. In other words, they transcend communal guidelines that delineate public and intellectual spheres as masculine by “carving out places from which to speak, places that are also related to the body’s relationship to lived context” (Kennedy 55), and they do so by purposefully stepping into and assuming woman’s social function(s) and reframing their meanings from within. In turn, such amended embodied ethoi allow women to rewrite prevailing rhetorics of embodiment to suit their compositional needs in contexts that engage traditionally masculine public and intellectual domains. The anchorite Julian of Norwich emphasizes her role as an obedient daughter to God the Mother to support her rewriting of “hierarchy, dualism, misogyny and the exclusively ‘masculine’ nature of the Trinity” present in the religious beliefs of her late-fourteenth/early-fifteenth-century context (Beer 71), and the thirteenth-century Franciscan tertiary Angela of Foligno depicts her body as an agent of order by drawing upon ideological connections between feminine bodies and leprosy when she portrays herself as a consumer of leprous byproducts.

Works by the medieval women mystics remind their audiences of Christianity’s past accommodation of rhetorics that engage the body holistically, and of its historical attention to corporeal (including emotional) modes of reading and engaging with others. According to Kristie S. Fleckenstein, among the ways by which we interpret the world are *somatic literacy*, which permits us to interpret “the reciprocity between place and bodies” and allows us to respond in kind as persons similarly situated within specific geographical contexts, and *polyscopic literacy*, which entails the “development and

deployment of multiple ways of seeing and multiple networked images” so that we can shift perspectives as rhetorical contexts change (*Imageword* 78, 86). The works of the medieval women mystics, much like biblical accounts of Christ’s earthly mission, call for these types of reading because they enlighten how the ideological reframing of rhetorical contexts enables a revision of the ways in which bodies are interpreted. Gospel accounts relate that although he could heal by word alone, compassion moved Jesus to touch those whom the law deemed unclean, providing them with the first human contact they had had in many years. The Gospel accounts all agree that he touched lepers even when he did not have to do so (Matt. 8:3, Mark 1:41, Luke 5:13). Touching Jesus’s robe healed the bleeding woman so that after twelve years she could be reintegrated into the community (Matt. 9:20-22, Mark 5: 25-34, Luke 8:43-48).

Within the emergent Christian framework, the erstwhile polluted body constitutes the highly visible center of a new, sanctified community because it instigates revelation (of Christ’s divine identity, and hence, of his truth). Similarly, the women mystics redefine their public personae through their use of feminine topoi by representing the female body as a multivalent construct the meaning of which shifts according to rhetorical context rather confirming its accepted condition as a monolithically negative object of discourse. Unable to speak publicly because she was a woman, Mary Magdelene gained the primary right to proclaim the news of Christ’s resurrection through an ideological reframing of the empty grave that transformed a feminine site of mourning—since women prepared bodies for burial—into the heart of a

new faith. Likewise, the women mystics authorize their writing by reframing their denigrated corporeality as a perspectival vantage point.

The women mystics portray themselves as active agents who eat, embrace, weep, and love. As Rhonda Shaw argues, the relegation of “emotion and affect to the world of instinct and the prethought” coupled with a tendency to conceive of moral principles “in mentalist rather than materialist terms” obscures the body’s capacity to embody and respond to social mores (100). Yet the exemplar provided by the Biblical Christ reveals that the expression of personal, communal, and religious ethics entails the participation of—as well as in—the flesh. In addition, as Jennifer Glancy explains in *Corporal Knowledge: Early Christian Bodies*, bodily knowledge allows the individual to interpret his or her place within the community in relation to others, and bodies communicate those perceptions via the rhetorical arrangement of physical attributes, including posture, voice modulation, or the gaze (11). I would add to that the disposition of human contact. Gospel stories suggest a nascent Christianity’s recognition that the human senses work together to produce the exteroception that elicits verbal and physical communication with others. Thus, the women mystics’ appeals to the senses engage readers by appealing to various embodied literacies of which all human beings are capable.

The reinscription of the body in the works of medieval women mystics is especially effective via the Christian context of the Gospel of John, where rhetorical exigency has a corporeal locus: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (1:14). Christ assumed physical form to communicate his truth because human beings must

communicate via the senses of the body. We listen to others and, based on emotional or mental reactions, reply verbally or through the use of signed or written symbols. Hence, medieval theorists located reading “squarely under the rubric of the physical” (Solterer 130). Not surprisingly, medieval literacy referred to diverse physical engagements of a text, from caressing and kissing its illustrations to listening to its oral delivery and visualizing its contents—quite a contrast to today’s standard view of literacy, which implies private perusal of literary texts. And, as Brian Stock explains, a written text proved unnecessary to the formation of textual communities so long as a group agreed on a common message (*Listening* 37). What this information suggests, then, is that emotional responses have the capacity to build communities of “readers” around shared ethics that have their origins in the flesh of their proponents. This group ethos informs how members of the community read others’ corporeal rhetorics and respond in kind. Thus, we can see that the presence of the female body in the mystical text is “hyper-rhetorical” because it demands an ethical response from its audience not only due to the exemplar that it presents, but due to its gender as well.

Nevertheless, I wish to stress that despite the female body’s rhetorical utility, we cannot assume that the women mystics necessarily viewed corporality in a completely positive light or that they all construed its potential for good in the same manner or to the same degree. Despite their constructive rhetorical interpretations of the body, medieval women mystics composed during a period that had absorbed negative ontological views of corporeality espoused by the ancient Greek philosophers and by exegetes influenced by these early thinkers. During the Middle Ages, scholars combined philosophy with

religion to explain differences between the genders, and women were systematically excluded from these pursuits.³ The intellectual elite followed the example of many writers, including Philo of Alexandria, the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher who reconciled the existence of contradictory Creation accounts by arguing that the first account—where God creates woman and man in His own image (Gen. 1:27)—depicts the creation of the soul, while the second account—where God fashions Eve from Adam’s rib (Gen. 2:21-23)—signifies the creation of the body. Church authors interpreted the same problem through an Aristotelian lens, construing metaphorically the creation of the soul as the origin of form and the creation of the body as the inception of matter. Thus, man maintained a primary relationship with the Creator since God breathed life into Adam personally and imbued him with His spirit, while woman could only aspire to a lesser connection since Eve proved an imitation, flesh stemming from flesh rather than from God’s own hand.

Furthermore, Aristotle’s notion of *entelechy*, which posits that all things have the potential to embody the quintessence of their own kind unless accidents occur, allowed medieval philosophers to regard women as individuals who did not fulfill their potential due to some inner deficiency. Augustine irrevocably married this perception of women’s inadequacy to Eve’s participation in the Fall: “woman, although created to be man’s helper, became his temptress and led him into disaster” (Pagels 114). The implications of

³ According to Julia Dietrich, this exclusion held especially true during and after the rise of the university: “Barred from university admission and seldom able to get equivalent education privately, all but the most exceptional women were cut off from the intellectual debates of consequence to their societies as long as dialectic and philosophical discourse held sway. Whereas Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) could write and preach with some authority, using divine revelation as her warrant, the arrival of the ‘New Aristotle’ into universities in the middle of the twelfth century so transformed methods of thinking and arguing that ... women were largely cut out of the public discourse” (24).

Platonic form and substance further coalesced with theological exegesis by writers like Bernard, who emphasized the distinction between a hidden reality and illusory appearances, appearances composed by the faulty senses. He argues in *On Loving God*, “Not knowing himself as the creature that is distinguished from irrational brutes by the possession of reason, he commences to be confounded with them because, ignorant of his own true glory which is within, he is led captive by his curiosity, and concerns himself with external, sensual things” (7). Due to the association of woman with the body and its deficient senses, women were also perceived as suspect and as less rational than men—a grave denunciation since it was primarily reason that was thought to lead to a reconciliation of the soul with God’s will.

Even so, logical gaps in these medieval ontological models allowed women religious to exploit their ideological connections with corporeality to achieve their rhetorical aims. Citing the Aristotelian notion that at conception the female body provides matter while the male body provides form, Judith Butler points out that “[i]nsofar as matter appears in these cases to be invested with a certain capacity to originate and to compose that for which it also supplies the principle of intelligibility, then matter is clearly defined by a certain power of creation and rationality that is for the most part divested from the more modern empirical deployments of the term” (32). Despite its subaltern status, matter shares in the creative and logical functions typically ascribed to form since together they compose the order of reality. The women mystics highlight this affirmative view in their writing by emphasizing the female body’s teleological function, made possible only by women’s secondary ontology: because their

inferior flesh, and hence their inferior social status, reflects Christ's humble status on earth, women are likewise charged with redeeming the very world that demeans their being. In this, they strategically accentuate gender differences to depict themselves "as the symbol for all humanity" (Judge 23), censured like Christ for speaking truth. Even those women who did not write mystical texts were able to take advantage of the female body's connections to Christ via *imitatio Christi*, constituted by intense meditation on Christ's humanity and by ascetic practices designed to produce affective sympathy for the suffering Christ.

In the writings of medieval women mystics, female bodies imitate physically the body of Christ in ways that male bodies cannot since feminine corporeality, like Christ's human aspect, is made to comfort and nurture, suffer and bleed. Medieval religious exegetes stressed three fundamental qualities in describing womanliness: "the female is generative (the foetus is made of her very matter) and sacrificial in her generation (birth pangs); the female is loving and tender (a mother cannot help loving her own child); the female is nurturing (she feeds the child from her own bodily fluid)" (Bynum, *Jesus as Mother* 131). However, the women mystics also bear an additional, essential resemblance to that of Christ because these women writers must effectively translate their bodies into language via *ekphrasis*, or vivid rhetorical description. Ironically, because medieval women held derivative ontological status, viewed as nothing more than unrealized men, the female body could be read as a discursive alternative to the realized potential of the male form, a conceptual liminality that allowed women mystics to generate textual bodies imbued with salvific properties in their works by using

feminine topoi. That is, since the female body already provided a contrapuntal text against which lofty masculinity could be promoted, the female bodies depicted in the works of the women mystics retain their marginal status; however, within the rhetorical framework of their respective texts, these bodies prove strategic contrasts to the unexceptional bodies of their audiences. The women mystics are worthy of being read, either through their works or their embodied ethoi, because their alterity allows them to engage and invert discourses predicated on feminine sensuality's threat to the social order. The female bodies composed by the women mystics both in life and in text are depicted instead as spiritual exemplars, worthy of imitation. And, because femininity serves as the perceived low-point in human quintessence, experiences embodied by the topoi in these texts are represented as capable of emulation. The rhetorical appeal posed by the use of such textually embodied imitation simultaneously authorizes these authors' works and calls for simulative responses from their audiences.

Yet, paradoxically, the use of feminine topoi still permits the women mystics to model their writing after orthodox religious composition. Since a topos can be any recurring image, theme, or pattern that signifies an entire literary tradition by evoking a network of texts that employ the same rhetorical device (Cherchi 285), critics have tended to regard topoi as simple mnemonic devices. Roland Barthes attempts to complicate this idea by asserting that they are “not arguments themselves but the compartment in which they are arranged” (qtd. in Crawford 72). Alternately, Ilene Whitney Crawford states, “compartments need to be built, and because they are built they also function as arguments in and of themselves” (72). However, I contend that the

definition of the topos must account for the process of deliberation by which rhetorical commonplaces come to signify certain ideas and not others; it is *how* the topos is built that illuminates most the ideological contests that decide its meaning(s), and this eristic quality permeates its essence. Because topoi become commonplaces based on their use by different authors, topoi highlight the mediated nature of the meanings with which they are imbued in any given context. By using feminine topoi common to the works of male authorities, women mystics situate their works within established traditions of religious discourse, thereby demonstrating their orthodoxy. They also gain the ability to transform the conventional meanings of feminine topoi since these commonplaces function only by way of semantic adjustment.

In addition to the rhetorical support provided by this anticipated change in meaning, the women mystics' emendations of feminine topoi can also be justified as the result of *parrhesia*, or truth-telling. Keenly aware that their speaking out about spiritual matters might be met with disapproval or censure, medieval women mystics use feminine topoi to play what Foucault terms the "parrhesiastic game" (Henderson 428) by which they acquire the authority to speak publicly because their words are explained as those of God Himself. Through a complete alignment of her voice with truth, the female mystic justifies her writing by assuming the role of divine conduit, a function requiring the evacuation of meaning from her own words so as to make room for the divine message. The use of feminine topoi allows the medieval woman mystic to assume the role of *parrhesiastes*, or truth-teller, because God's Word creates a surplus of meaning when translated into human language; and, like an overflowing cup, the mystic's words

cannot contain the fullness of the all-transcending Logos without the use of “open” metaphorical figures familiar to her audience. The assumption of parrhesia that accompanies mystical speech characterizes feminine topoi as changing to accommodate the message that God is trying to convey. Rhetorically, the notion of God struggling to communicate with humanity points to the efficacy of the female embodied voice, perhaps most amenable to His purpose because it is seen by philosophers and ecclesiastics as the most tractable.

It bears repeating that the use of feminine topoi by medieval women mystics as a means to authorize their works does not automatically denote that as individuals these writers saw themselves as rebellious proto-feminists. Nor should their seeking entrance into traditional discourses that cast women in a bad light brand them as wholly passive instruments of orthodoxy, even when they use humility topoi and slight their own rhetorical efforts. These authors’ personal viewpoints remain a mystery for the most part, since it is only on the rhetorical level that their use of feminine topoi openly confronts the negative views espoused by male authorities. Each of these women writers needs to secure approval of her works, but that does not mean that she sees every other woman capable of similar accomplishments, though certainly there are times when they facilitate the rhetorical agency of their friends and followers. A significant portion of literary activity attributed to mystics like Hildegard and Hadewich of Brabant is dedicated to epistolary exhortations to their female associates, enjoining them to follow their calling and speak up for God. Whether absolute faith inspired these female mystics to side with Church authorities against their own interests as women, or whether their

spiritual experiences drove them to shake things up in earnest, it is through the act of writing that each author challenges an institutionalized misogyny that pronounces women incapable of intellectual and rhetorical composition.

Contesting Dominant Discourses

The primary lens that I am using to study the medieval women mystics is rhetorical analysis informed by a recuperative objective, such as that advanced by feminist rhetorical scholars such as Cheryl Glenn, Andrea Lunsford, and Christine Mason Sutherland. Through the filter of their collective scholarship, I look at the ways in which voices typically excluded from the canons of medieval rhetoric can provide interrogation and alternatives to more conventional entries, that is, men's philosophical and religious writings about women. Sutherland sums up the feminist rhetorical project thusly: "I prefer to think of women in relation to rhetoric as belonging not to a margin but to a matrix: women have been an important—a vitally important—part of the human activity from which the particular rhetorical tradition has sprung. We are anterior to, rather than exiled from, that rhetorical tradition; our part in it has been to feed it, to support it, to enable it" (10). Critics like Kenneth Burke and Pierre Bourdieu have influenced definitions of rhetoric by opening up the discipline's focus to include non-verbal communications of meaning. This expansion would seem amenable to women's historical lack of oratorical opportunity; yet women remain excluded from rhetorical history. Burke's and Bourdieu's works also reveal that language is inherently driven by proportions of power within given situations since at its core human speech depends on

the inability of other things to speak.⁴ The use of language, defined by Burke as *symbolic action*, creates and alters the circumstances of reality by allowing human beings to interact with their environments, while signifying also the cultural notions that prescribe how the world may be interpreted. These revelations prove especially pertinent in relation to feminine rhetorics, not only because they allow us to ascribe some degree of power to women rhetors in direct proportion to their cultural circumstances, but also because they explain why rhetoric's scope has expanded tremendously in recent decades but women's rhetorical practices still tend to be ignored by a large number of scholars. Open any anthology on historical rhetorics that includes even the briefest examination of medieval women's communication practices, and chances are that the text stems from the school of feminist rhetorics.

This project looks at but a few works composed by women rhetors in order to illustrate the multiplicity of rhetorical practices that can potentially facilitate communication by all human beings in need of a public platform. As essay collections like Lunsford's *Reclaiming Rhetoric: Women in the Rhetorical Tradition* and Sutherland and Sutcliffe's *The Changing Tradition: Women in the History of Rhetoric* reveal, historical women had to discover corporeal and textual means of "speaking" that allowed them to circumvent the gender norms of their times, but they appear to do so in order to be heard as persons rather than as women. Thus, we are permitted a view of medieval women mystics that frames their treatment of gender as a persuasive strategy

⁴ As Kenneth Burke stresses in "Language as Action: Terministic Screens," language reflects reality even as it selects those aspects that are desirable and deflects those that are unwelcome (114). Residual phenomena not bound by official names are either dislocated or translated into the ineffability of personal experience. In this manner, authoritative discourse aims to inhibit those forms of communication that are inconsistent with conventional—and conventionally gendered—speech genres.

that permits their strong identification with Christ at a time when religious beliefs determined all manner of social life. This view, then, corroborates the impression that people may selectively and effectively deploy the performance of gender, at times even unintentionally, as a rhetorical device, as opposed to the perception of people as eternally doomed to inhabit inflexible gender roles. These collections contest the negative outlook that Scheelar identifies in the work of many contemporary critics writing about women rhetors—that “they are victims of patriarchy who live in imaginary worlds of freedom” (67).

Furthermore, it is not my intention to present the works by these six women mystics as constitutive of a canon, thereby minimizing the efforts of other rhetorical women, but as a broad sample of writing by women that helps illuminate effective rhetorical strategies useful to many women writers. The matter of inclusion proves a thorny issue indeed, as is revealed by debates over Glenn’s *Rhetoric Retold: Regendering the Tradition from Antiquity through the Renaissance*. *Rhetoric Retold* speaks to the recovery of suppressed voices by listening for those confined to rhetorical backgrounds rather than the main stage. However, the text also sets up an alternative tradition to the time-honored masculine canon. The seemingly noble effort of such projects has been discounted by scholars who argue that “radical and progressive political goals [do not] necessarily guarantee better stories or histories” (Gale 106). These views have been countered by others’ claims that these works may “[correct] historical wrongs and [open] a new path for restudying the rhetorical tradition in which women have lived in oblivion” (Wu 105). Although I agree with this latter view, I would

also like to recall the words of feminist critic Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who argues that “[a] focus on herstory as separate and outside history not only hands over all of world history to the boys but potentially suggests that women have been universally duped” (113). Paradoxically, when feminist canons profess to attribute to historical women the agency that they did not assert in their own eras, they threaten to erase traces of the exceptional conditions that may have allowed historical women to compose during their lifetimes and that helped their writings to endure over time. My focus on the rhetorical implications of feminine topoi is meant to suggest strategies of literary survival employed by those excluded from traditional canons rather than impressing upon history a new record that covers as it recovers.

Canonical approaches engender further complications by setting up a system of tokenism in order to meet our rhetorical need for female historical models, as has been argued by feminist rhetorical scholars like Carole Spitzack and Kathryn Carter, Barbara Biesecker, and Karen A. Foss and Sonja K. Foss. Female tokenism in rhetorical studies ensures that the works of a certain select few are studied time after time while those of “many other women remain entirely neglected” (Foss and Foss, “Status of Research” 196). It celebrates women whose works measure up against patriarchal benchmarks that debar most women’s efforts, and deploys such works to assure other women that they, too, would find inclusion if only they proved exceptional (Biesecker 141-142). As Karlyn Kohrs Campbell notes, we cannot forget that those historical women who do find inclusion within feminist rhetorical canons, women whose works are now studied alongside those of men, also had to contend with gender proscriptions because “their

rhetoric was not part of public address as it then existed” (54).⁵ I contend that a strategy-based approach recognizes the efforts of canonical women rhetors, but does not preclude the recovery of rhetorical women whose writing did not—and still does not—conform to traditional masculine notions of rhetoric.

We cannot forget that canons are constructed by reflecting the efforts of some and deflecting those of others, as Burke would say, or that they mystify the societal mechanisms that define “real women” against women without historical, as well as rhetorical, presence. As queer and/or feminist critics of color like Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde have demonstrated, the seeming universality of these repressive conditions should not be taken to mean that “all women are equally unequal” (Foss and Foss, “Our Journey” 39). Not only do women within particular demographics experience oppression differently from those situated within different historical, geographical, and political contexts—individual women within those groups do as well. Certainly, bodies mean differently across cultural contexts. Yet the capacity of the female body to signify its social situation in relation to other bodies transcends circumstantial particulars. In turning to the past to find constructive models of women’s rhetorical grappling with issues of embodiment, we may uncover useful models and approaches to communication that have served many, if not all, historical women and men whose voices have been obscured by their societal contexts.

In addition to taking up and adapting the methodologies of feminist rhetorical scholars, my work is informed by analogous recuperative objectives of medieval

⁵ Likewise, social conditions have ensured that men without power are similarly ignored, and that women who enter the canons of historical rhetoric did not necessarily support the status quo.

scholars whose work is informed primarily by theories of gender, queer studies, and postcolonial criticism. Although medieval women mystics shared epistemologies with male contemporaries and contributed to collective ways of knowing, they had to amend their rhetorical techniques to secure the agency to act. They did so by employing male-authored topoi about women, foreshadowing the imitative strategies employed by oppressed populations of the present day. Post-colonialist critic Homi Bhabha asserts that the discourse of authority is permeable and unstable due to its own ambivalence towards all other voices that have been rendered abject (90). Oppressed—and therefore suppressed—groups are able to usurp the influence attached to a ruling power’s discourse through reiteration. In much the same manner, medieval religious women utilize predominant rhetorics, at times repeating misogynistic notions of the time. By using familiar commonplaces, they secure a compelling foundation for their words and legitimize their feminine authority. Deepika Bahri writes that compositions studies’ “interest in rhetoric, discourse, and power; in the recovery of hitherto silence voices; in the liberatory possibilities of advanced technologies; and in the relation of the text to the social finds” may find “counterparts” in the conversations that fuel postcolonial theory as long as both interrogate power dynamics rather than exalt difference (70). With that in mind, this project explores how the works of marginalized women writers contested the overarching discourses of their time and the ways in which these discourses defined gendered rhetorics.

An attention to postcolonial approaches has also sparked an awareness of the ways by which prevalent discourses coalesce in Burkean fashion against those that are

ignored, both in past and contemporary critical circles. Kathleen Davis points to “a double reliance by Westernizing/globalizing rhetoric upon the concept of the Middle Ages, which supplies both the image of the common past necessary for a sense of cohesion among modern nations in the present, as well as an alterior, static mode of existence against which claims of modernity can define themselves” (107). Writings by medieval authorities devised consistent identities at all levels of social life that mainly defined the Other, and consequently, the Subject as its opposite. This process remains in effect among academics and speakers that imbue the Middle Ages with a single, stable character against which they may lionize modernity’s “advances.” This tendency perpetuates the impression of the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages—static, stagnant, and benighted—rather than a period of dynamic social, political, and scholastic movement. “For a long while now the idea that modernity comes into being partly by casting off the medieval—leaving behind childish and spiritual things, as it were—has been readily accepted as an unquestionable fact of the times in which we live,” Eileen Joy states pointedly. “And yet there is almost no aspect of our contemporary culture, either academic or more public, that is not somehow rooted in and permeated by the medieval.” A reevaluation of medieval rhetorics in praxis reveals that a lot was “going on,” so to speak, more than has been acknowledged by traditional studies of medieval rhetoric. The Middle Ages still have much to communicate to (post-)modern audiences.

Queer theory informs the study of medieval women through its pursuit of a history where a “problematic” lack of explicit sexual categories permits a constructive comparison between past and contemporary performances of gender, sexuality, and

rhetorical identities. Evelyn Gajowski explains that “queer theory [is] concerned with deconstructing static, fixed ideologies of identity and the binary oppositions of male/female, hetero/homo, past/present” (5). It also contests universal and essentialist views of identity formation, positing instead that we cannot make assumptions about extensive groups of people brought together under arbitrary labels. Instead, queer theory “celebrates the diversity of humanity by emphasizing diversity and difference of those who are oppressed by the mainstream” (Slagle 133). Even a perfunctory examination of religious women’s writings, especially those of the mystics, reveals that there is no monolithic definition of woman or mysticism to contain all of them. They do not rely on the same topoi nor stress the same expressions of gender, and they all express their particular objectives in individual terms. They often contradict themselves and each other as their rhetorical contexts and aims change.

Finally, gender theory permits an exploration of rhetorical expressions and practices as they relate to ideas about biological sex that result from cultural negotiation, rather than relying on the essentialist dichotomy between male and female. For example, Bynum’s historical work on social and religious history is such texts as *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* and *Jesus as Mother: Studies in Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, among others, looks at ways in which medieval women could transcend gender constraints and identify with Christ using conventional embellishments found in veneration literature. However, as Kathleen Biddick cautions, we must be careful not to assume that textual depiction equals historical certainty. Speaking of medieval women mystics that seem “female hysterics or

anorectics” in a reading of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, she writes that we should “figure these textual effects as performance of gender” because “there is no mystical body prior to the performance” (412). Biddick speaks of the mystical bodies in terms of “textual effects,” for we do not know to what extent these performances existed outside of the texts in which they appear. I argue that “gender” in the works of the women mystics, along with its myriad physical expressions, should be regarded as an agreement between audience and author that certain images will materialize in the text, thereby speaking to communal assumptions about what it means to be gendered in a certain way within a particular genre of composition.

Consequently, by focusing on feminine topoi in the works of medieval women mystics, I attempt to address the problem described by Michel Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* when he addresses the problem of objectifying discourses. Foucault argues that a “problem arises of knowing whether the unity of a discourse is based not so much on the permanence and uniqueness of an object as on the space in which various objects emerge and are continuously transformed” (32). I claim that while the continuous discourse of misogyny written over centuries creates an impression of women as inferior beings, a belief that may have been accepted by women themselves, this same impression is challenged by the many medieval women writers who communicate mystical knowledge. By situating women’s own works at the center of mystical discourse, we may create a new “totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and [her] discontinuity with [her]self may be determined” (Foucault, *Archaeology* 55). Reading the works of medieval woman authors in this way reveals that the social

construct of femininity is an exceedingly polymorphic notion, and that this insight is present in the texts composed by the medieval women mystics. Though their use of feminine topoi they contend with the “patriarchal strategy of collapsing the feminine into the female” (Moi 114), a process all too often paralleled by contemporary attempts to read textual depictions by male authorities as biographical truth. Too many attempts at critical recovery have focused on male manipulation of the female word and image, and overlooked the painstaking rhetorical efforts of these medieval women authors themselves.

As Karma Lochrie has successfully argued, too often scholars base studies of mysticism in hagiographical works, though the two rhetorical forms aim to realize very different objectives; while hagiography promotes a particular cult of personality within the “legitimate” power structure of the Church, mysticism tends to defy the constraints of religious organization by invoking a direct association with divinity (*Margery Kempe* 59). Hagiography and mystical texts are intended for different readers. Hagiography is geared toward mediating beatification and canonization procedures, whereas works of mysticism describe individuals’ attempts to commune with the divine, often beyond the scope of religious order and even Holy Scripture itself. A conflation of these two rhetorical forms leads to a denigration of women’s authorial accomplishments since their efforts frequently challenged the rigidly gendered standards of rhetoric that denoted the yardstick for “true” writing. Furthermore, as Amy Hollywood proves in “Inside Out: Beatrice of Nazareth and her Hagiographer,” hagiographers are not above reframing women’s mystical texts concerned with spiritual advancement in terms of the corporal

asceticism expected by hagiography's audiences.⁶ We must remember at all times that the hagiographical and mystical genres served different communal functions and attended to different audiences.

Moreover, the conflation of these two very dissimilar genres tends to render an analysis of mystical texts a quest for the mystic's "real" identity. For example, in "Hildegard and Her Hagiographers: The Remaking of Female Sainthood," Barbara Newman describes Hildegard of Bingen as a woman whose biographers drew personal authority from the inscrutability of her visions, and who therefore emphasized her mystical tendencies. It is only by investigating various interpretations of Hildegard's life rather than attempting to pinpoint the "correct" version of the mystic's life that Newman sheds light on Hildegard's life as a text meant to be read according to diverse audiences' needs. And, in "Ethos Over Time: The Ongoing Appeal of St. Catherine of Siena," Margo Husby Scheelar claims that St. Catherine of Siena cared more for active participation in public works than did her hagiographers, who accentuated her ecstatic episodes. These treatments of the literature provide indispensable insight into the rhetorical proclivities of male hagiographers and reveal the collaborative establishment of the woman mystic's public persona. However, they may also situate medieval audiences as passive recipients of whatever message these mystics, their scribes, or their biographers wished to convey. Medieval audiences were active participants in the meaning-making processes that produced the mystical or saintly identity, through their public veneration of these figures; they made the women mystics public figures by

⁶ It must be noted, however, that Beatrice's hagiographer did not serve as her amanuensis, but composed her vita to secure her spiritual legacy after her death.

reading their works and heeding their words, despite the location of the mystics' physical bodies. A focus on the women mystics' use of feminine topoi necessitates an attention to audience participation because it is according to their readership's assumed knowledge base(s) that these writers selected their topoi. Their readers needed to "fill in" the meaning of topoi in order to interpret their use.

Thus, I have chosen to consider the ways in which the medieval women mystics employ feminine topoi to fashion themselves rhetorically to convey "a concept of subjectivity that possesses a potentially critical rather than merely complicit relation to emerging forms of power" (Gajowski 11). Though male authorities did exert influence on writers like Beatrice or Hildegard directly or through scribal interaction, care must be taken when situating works by these medieval women within their respective rhetorical traditions. Otherwise, two disparate but equally prejudiced prospects emerge—that male hagiographers and redactors invariably altered the woman mystic's ethos to promote a masculine agenda or that they did so to assure the survival of her example, without any acknowledgement of the woman author's agency. Instead, the mystical experiences related by medieval women writers make clear that while women of the Middle Ages endured misogynistic discrimination in both the secular and spiritual realms. They were "actors who resisted, spoke, wrote, and devised structures to confront oppression" (Dreyer, "Whose Story" 158). Moreover, they acted using varying rhetorical approaches that ran the gamut, from Hildegard's championing of orthodox beliefs against the heresies of the Cathars, though they believed women had the right to preach, to Julian's dedication to an extreme form of enclosure, though her works challenged traditional

views of the Trinity. Their unique styles reveal their individual propensities for insightful analyses of their discursive contexts.

Feminine Topoi in the Works of Medieval Women Mystics

In Chapter II, “A Radiant and Rational Lady: Entelechy and the Female Body in Hildegard of Bingen’s *Scivias*,” I examine Hildegard of Bingen’s use of female topoi as symbols of spiritual community, in particular her portrayals of Synagogue and Church as a pale, aged woman and a young, radiant woman, respectively. I contend that in either case posture and the viability of its sensory faculties indicates its respective members’ shared capacity for congregating as a community—that is, their ability to form the body of Christ. A notable prodigy, Hildegard of Bingen wrote both religious and scientific works; their corresponding discourses are not mutually exclusive but serve to complement each other. Consequently, her best-known work, *Scivias*, relates her mystical revelations using language found in works like *Physica* and *Causae et curae*. She employs nature metaphors in her mystical texts and works of natural philosophy to explain metaphorically the soul’s metonymic associations with all of God’s Creation, including man. I assert that Hildegard promotes the Christian community—including women—as the quintessence of rationality, a notion that she revises to suggest the senses as fundamental to knowing God. In addition, Hildegard equates the female body with that of Christ, both reaffirming and destabilizing the prevalent philosophical view of women as metaphysically inferior to men. Situating even women as capable of redemption through Christ, Hildegard’s use of female topoi brings together the male and

female genders, a rhetorical move that affords a woman such as Hildegard the authority to engage in masculine activities.

In “*Minne*, Queen Reason, and the Tree: Rhetorical Re-vision in the Works of Hadewijch of Brabant,” I examine Hadewijch’s use of feminine topoi in her descriptions of her visions, which are informed by the courtly love tradition of the High Middle Ages. Little is known about the 13th century Flemish Beguine except that given her writing in various genres, she was probably highly educated, and that she, like Beatrice of Nazareth, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and other near contemporaries, extolled love mysticism (*minnemystiek*). Her works reveal a complicated theology that relies on the concept of “being-one-ness,” a desire to be one with God that reveals paradoxically the soul’s immaturity and inability to commune with the Divine. I claim that Hadewijch’s use of these topoi connects to one of her more celebrated and discussed visions, that of an upside-down tree that extends from the earth to the heavens. Evocative of the Cross, the tree becomes a symbol of humanity’s spiritual trek toward God. I propose that this vision serves as an epistemological tool designed to help the reader navigate the “topsy turvy” nature of *minnemystiek*, a complicated theology that cannot be expounded outside of paradoxical imagery since its purpose is to erase the limits of perspective. *Minne* blurs the line between the soul and God because the term represents God as the target of the soul’s passionate pursuit, the soul perfected by way of the quest, the reflection of divinity within the soul, as well as the absolute union that proves the quest’s fundamental objective. By illustrating the irrational quality of *Minne*, Hadewijch’s vision of the tree guides her readers toward understanding that union with God entails

the obliteration of individual perspective via affective understanding. Ironically, only Queen Reason can lead the novice soul toward this discovery, a point that implies that the emotional life is not incompatible with rationality.

Chapter IV, “Consuming the Topos: Leprous Effluvium and the Reinscriptive Female Body in the *Book* of Angela of Foligno,” examines the nauseating behavior of Angela of Foligno as she presents it in the *Memorial*. Angela relates that she not only associates with lepers, but ingests pus and scabs from their wounds. Nevertheless, during her own time many considered her a great *magistra*, or spiritual teacher, and she is one of the few women mystics whose works have remained well-known throughout the centuries. By suggesting that Angela’s consumption of leprosy effluvia is a symptom of pathological inedia (extreme religious fasting) or an attempt to reenact the hardship of Christ’s Passion, critics like Bynum and Rudolph Bell have tended to regard such portrayals as historically accurate. This chapter takes a different approach by asserting that, while we cannot confirm a somatic basis for Angela’s consumption or that she indeed engaged in such erratic behavior, we may determine how such astonishing depictions function symbolically in the everyday lives of their potential reading audiences. By exploring the divergent threads that swell within the hagiographic topos of leprosy, I interrogate how the consumption of its waste products emerges as a transforming and circumscribing feminine, and feminizing, commonplace. What emerges from an exploration of medical and religious discourses about leprosy is a textual record of public anxieties over related issues—corporeality, gender, faith, and community—socially-stabilizing notions disrupted by the presence of leprosy. By

depicting her consumption of this topos, then, Angela transforms her body into a circumscribing agent of orthodoxy that works rhetorically to contain the threat to society posed by the disease. The portrayal of Angela as eater of effluvium demands an empathetic response from her audience that enables identification between Angela and her audience. Via their Christ-like compassion, her readers share an intimate moment with Angela that she, in turn, shares with those hidden from the rest of society, lepers. Hence, Angela's body itself becomes a topos, one that unites her and her readers to the afflicted, and even to Christ Himself.

In "Of Ladders and the Queen of Heaven: The Mother Topos in the *Revelations* of Birgitta of Sweden," I examine how Birgitta's visions of the Virgin Mary authorize her worldly activities. During her lifetime, Birgitta traveled extensively and engaged in political affairs, working to restore the papacy to Rome and seeking to end strife between French and English rulers that would result in the Hundred Years War. She also established a new monastic order. In her *Revelations*, Birgitta teaches that true contrition leads to a spiritual discourse with God, while meditation on the Passion weakens the hardness of humanity's heart. Despite her theological ambitions, typically reserved for men, she proved a highly orthodox mystic who submitted her visions to examination by her confessor and other masters of theology. And yet, in Birgitta's visions the Virgin Mary often stands in for Christ by demonstrating emotionally the signs of His Passion so that when the Virgin commands her to act, those commands derive by association from Christ Himself. That the orders come from the Virgin Mary instead of Christ, however, reveals the importance of motherhood in Birgitta's

cosmology. I assert that the Mother topos, which commonly depicts Mary as an active intercessor in her own right, informs one of Birgitta's well-known visions, that of a ladder that connects heaven and earth. At the top of the ladder sits Christ enthroned with the Virgin beside him. The vision emphasizes the essential and corporeal bonds between mother and child, which secure the Virgin a dynamic role and inspire Birgitta's own active lifestyle on earth. By employing the Mother topos, Birgitta can speak and act with (maternal) authority without opposing outright the gender roles dictated by ecclesiastical authorities.

In the final case study, "[T]he Motherhood of Grace': God as Mother in the *Showings* of Julian of Norwich," I examine a variation of the Mother topos present in Julian's *Showings* by exploring anchoritic literature and "Lollard" texts to provide context for her strategic use of maternal themes. As far as we know, hers is the first book written by a woman in English. Julian composed *Showings* as a short text soon after experiencing a series of visions received while she suffered a deathly illness; she then rewrote her book over a period of two decades, elaborating upon and interpreting her visions. She engages in exegesis of her own work, and so she defends herself from accusations of heresy by using humility topoi. Describing herself as uneducated, though scholars are unsure whether this means she is illiterate or simply knows no Latin, she is careful to declare her orthodoxy by stating that her audiences should rely on reason, Church doctrine, and the Holy Spirit for guidance. Nonetheless, the theology she espouses is radical. Borrowing from biblical rhetoric, she depicts a personal relationship with God that is real rather than metaphorical, one that permits her to claim that His

limitless love transforms even sin into a vital piece of divine order. She declares that the Trinity should be viewed as both father and mother. I explore how Julian constructs the Mother topos to counter the theological views of the Wycliffites, a dissenting sect that denied the tenet of transubstantiation and the centrality of the Sacraments to worship and refused to adore the Virgin Mary. Highlighting human aspects of the divine, which she imbues with features that reflect gentle and compassionate qualities, Julian avoids the threat of being labeled a Lollard herself, an accusation leveled against her contemporary, Margery Kempe.

In conclusion, I provide a summative analysis of the preceding chapters to theorize ways in which the rhetorical strategies employed by the women mystics emphasize the use of feminine topoi and embodied ethoi as central to the creation of rhetorics that merge words and textually-composed corporeal examples to persuade. These complex forms of verbo-physical rhetoric allowed these authors to address matters typically deemed off-limits to women. Moreover, I propose that the innovative arrangements of body and text, image and speech, emotion and reason, featured in their works can inform contemporary re-evaluations of rhetoric as an art that transcends mere verballity.

CHAPTER II

A RADIANT AND RATIONAL LADY: ENTELECHY AND THE FEMALE BODY
IN HILDEGARD OF BINGEN'S *SCIVIAS*

The use of feminine topoi by the Benedictine mystic Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) highlights the fundamental—rather than derivative—place of women in her model of the cosmos. This outlook, I argue, allows her to claim a feminine rationality that authorizes her public rhetorical activities. This chapter examines her use in *Scivias* of two traditional feminine figures, Synagogue and Ecclesia, whose bodies represent the Jewish and Christian communities respectively. Based on their corporeal integrity—Synagogue is decrepit while Ecclesia is vibrant—they indicate each religious group's capacity for reason, since medieval philosophers tied rationality to an ability to discern the truth of Christ's sovereignty. Hildegard relies on a model of healthy feminine corporeality as a potent symbol to advance as the epitome of reason a Christian community that necessarily includes women. In this manner, her ekphrastic depiction of Ecclesia collapses the boundaries between the symbolic and literal meanings contained by this figure, a rhetorical feat that she achieves in her works of natural philosophy and music to emphasize the metonymic nature of things within God's totality. Hildegard's rhetoric suggests that the male-female dichotomy theorized by philosophers and theologians fails to account for the overlap in characteristics between the sexes. Demonstrating that women as part of Ecclesia may also receive divine understanding,

Hildegard claims for women the rationality denied them by cosmological designs that tie women exclusively to the senses. Furthermore, her use of the Ecclesia topos allows her to reframe feminine corporeality as a genuine avenue of understanding and fashion an embodied ethos seemingly sanctioned by the Church herself.

Ecclesia and Synagogue

Medieval texts abound with images of women that correspond to theoretical concepts, but women often played no part in the construction or interpretation of these images, nor did they participate in the fields of study that demanded their formulation. Female figures in lay and religious texts emphasized and even promoted women's inability to engage in scholarly pursuits like philosophy, theology, and composition. Women's exclusion from academic arenas stemmed from the inferior status assigned to them by the union of philosophy and theology typical of the Middle Ages. The Aristotelian notion of entelechy postulated that things have the potential to develop into ideal versions of their kind, although poor conditions and accidents have the capacity to influence development in a negative direction. In the case of human beings, women were defined as individuals who did not fulfill their ultimate potential. Albert the Great's commentary on Aristotle's *Ethics* encapsulates the medieval view of women influenced by ancient thought: "For generally, proverbially, and commonly it is affirmed that women are more mendacious and fragile, more diffident, more shameless, more deceptively eloquent, and, in brief, a woman is nothing but a devil fashioned into a human appearance" (454; bk. 15.2). An internalized belief of feminine inadequacy,

indeed of women's intrinsic wickedness, may account for the dearth of woman-authored texts from the Middle Ages handed down to us through history.

Critics have assumed that as a rule women encountered legal sanctions or public censure if they dared usurp male privilege by composing or philosophizing, particularly in Latin. However, as Elizabeth A. Dreyer states, "In the Middle Ages, it was not only that social and ecclesial authorities might disapprove, threaten, or levy punishments when women wrote, but also the women themselves would have interiorized [gender-based] taboos" (*Passionate Spirituality* 11-12). While we cannot discount the material conditions that prevented women's writing with the same frequency or ease as men, conditions that include a lack of education or training, we should also bear in mind the ethical impediments that medieval women confronted. During the 12th century, even women writers like the mystics who composed works renowned for their wisdom and orthodoxy presented the gender hierarchy as an ontological certainty. According to Hildegard of Bingen, not even a divine summons from the angel of God could persuade her to enter into public life; only a long period of physical suffering at last convinced her to take up the pen. She claims in the introduction to *Scivias*, "Although I saw and heard these things, I nevertheless refused to write them because of doubt and evil opinion and because of the diversity of other people's words, not so much out of stubbornness, but out of humility, until I became sick, pressed down by the scourge of God" (3).⁷ Whether

⁷ All quotations from *Scivias* are taken from *Hildegard von Bingen's Mystical Visions: Translated from Scivias*, intro. Matthew Fox, trans. Bruce Hozeski (Rochester, VT: Bear & Co., 1985). Quotations from *Causae et curae* are taken from *Causes and Cures: The Complete English Translation of Hildegardis Causae et curae Libri VI*, 2nd ed., trans. Priscilla Throop (Charlotte, VT: MedievalMS, 2008); and quotations from *Physica* are taken from *Hildegard von Bingen's Physica: The Complete Translation of Her Classic Work on Health and Healing*, trans. Priscilla Throop (Rochester, VT: Healing Arts, 1998).

she asserted her rhetoric narrative⁸ as truth or convention, her words signify an acknowledgement of the time's gender norms and their relation to writing. For many women, internalized beliefs about their essential inadequacy may have prevented their entrance into the public domains.

Therefore, Hildegard emerges as an uncommon example of medieval female authorship, extraordinary not only for composing at a time when ideological forces conspired to silence women, but also for fashioning constructive spaces for women's voices in textual and worldly contexts. She traveled the countryside, preaching against the Cathar heresy to women and men alike with permission from her bishop and the Pope. She asserted her authority to move her convent out of the jurisdiction of male monks and suffered excommunication together with her entire community for burying a young man whose soul she thought had been saved. She gained in prominence in spite of her sex, and while her remarkable achievements may be construed as singular, Hildegard herself attempted to guide other women toward rhetorical greatness. She corresponded with figures like Elizabeth of Schönau, another well-known visionary of the period,⁹ and women like Richardis von Stade, who served as Hildegard's amanuensis. When religious women sought her advice, she demonstrated a similar or even greater concern for their

Quotations from Hildegard's musical compositions are taken from *Symphonia: A Critical Edition of the Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum*, 2nd ed., intro., trans., and comm. Barbara Newman (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1998). All quotations from Hildegard's letters are taken from *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, vol. 3, trans. Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman (New York: Oxford UP, 2004).

⁸ I use the term "rhetoric narrative" to suggest a resonance with the genre of literacy narratives in order to evoke the processes of struggle and cognitive development that readers experience in pursuit of rhetorical expression.

⁹ See Anne L. Clark's introduction to *Elizabeth of Schönau: The Complete Works*, trans. Anne L. Clark (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2000): 1-38.

public roles as abbesses and mystics than she did for the political situations affecting her male letter-writers, some of whom were notable dignitaries.

Born at the close of the eleventh century in the region of present-day Germany known as the Rhinehessen, Hildegard was tithed at the age of eight to the renowned abbess of Disibodenberg, Jutta of Sponheim. Hildegard received a basic education that allowed her to read the Psalter and Scriptures in Latin, although she often asserted her “unlearned” condition, meaning she did not obtain the sort of formal education afforded men during the Middle Ages. Medieval education standards for women support her claims that her wisdom derived from divine or autodidactic means, although her works like *Scivias*, *Physica*, *Causae et curae*, and *Symphonia* reveal an extensive familiarity with many of the major intellectual topics of the period. An accomplished theologian, natural philosopher, musician, and composer, Hildegard examines in various rhetorical genres many of the concerns contemplated by medieval thinkers, including the tension between semblance and being, and recognition of the echoes of divine cause inhabiting the material world. As is evident in her famous treatment of the cheese-making process as a metaphor for human reproduction in *Scivias*, Hildegard’s use of the plain style frames these complicated issues as matters intrinsic to everyday life, while conversely imbuing common images and events with spiritual import. “I also saw the earth with people on it. The people were carrying some milk in their vessels, and they were making cheese from this milk. Some of the milk was thick, from which strong cheese was being made; some of the milk was thin, from which mild cheese was being curdled; and some of the milk was spoiling, from which bitter cheese was being produced” (39; pt. 1, vis.

4). Just as the quality of the milk determines the properties of the cheese, the spiritual integrity of a human progenitor affects the moral potential of its offspring. Hildegard's use of ekphrasis highlights the everyday quality of her comparison, while her use of metaphor stresses reality's analogic revelation of the divine plan.

Like many women mystics, Hildegard reaffirms societal hierarchies even as she defends the centrality of women in God's overarching plan. At the time, philosophy held that man had his origins in God's imbuing of spirit and that man's existence symbolized that living spirit contained in all human beings. Women, on the other hand, represented humanity's corporeal aspect, a trope supported by the tenet that woman stemmed from the body of man (Pagels 114). This reasoning is present in Hildegard's own religious and scientific works, which affirm repeatedly the analogical precept that man signifies divinity and woman humanity (Newman, *God and the Goddesses* 211). Although man and woman were created by God and even shared flesh through Adam's rib, nevertheless the discourse of medieval misogyny set up the two sexes as opposed, antagonistic states of being. For "if man enjoys existence (substance), being, unity, form, and soul, woman is associated with accident, becoming (temporality), difference, body, and matter—and with all they imply by way of a secondariness" (Bloch 11). Through her use of feminine topoi, however, Hildegard's rhetoric draws attention to the centrality of women's roles in everyday life and in the redemptive drama by reiterating a common notion held by medieval theologians. Religious writers posited that Christ's corporeality derived solely from his mother's flesh. Likewise, Hildegard declares in "*O vis eternitatis*" that Christ "put on vestments / woven of flesh / cut from a woman/born of Adam" (*Symphonia* 99).

Although she was no mother, Hildegard acted as such to the nuns in her care.

Furthermore, as a woman, she embodied the corporeal state that Mary and Christ were seen to share. Whether she wrote or preached or advised her sisters, she exhorted others toward redemption. And so, she performed similar salvific functions to those personified in Christ's "flesh cut from a woman." Hildegard did not claim that every woman could accomplish the same rhetorical feats that she did, but at the very least her example demonstrated that exceptional women like her could promote godliness.

This is but one example of Hildegard's strategic use of simple language to underscore woman's place in the cosmos, one that indicates her advanced knowledge of rhetoric. On the one hand, her use of plain style allows audiences from all walks of life to understand the complex—and amended—theological truths that she espouses, just as Augustine advised in his work on preaching. At the same time, the plain style permits Hildegard to underscore underlying connections between the things she analogizes, connections that transcend the ontological status of the language used to bring them together. In another example, she writes that human beings have "two ears, as if two wings, which bring in and draw out all the sounds of voices, just as wings carry a bird in the air" (*Causae et curae* 36). Just as a bird's wings allow it to live in the sky as is in its nature, so do the five senses permit the healthy individual to live a life characterized by that most human of virtues—reason, which sets humanity apart from all others of God's creations.

All things bear witness to this order because the strongest of all possible hands ordered these things. Such is the very great power of the ruler of all things who did all

these things with such great strength that there were no mistakes in their doing. The movement of all living things is from the omnipotence of the same creator. This is true of all the things of the earth—such as flocks of birds—who do not have the power of reason. It is also true of those who dwell in human flesh who do have the power of reason, discretion, and wisdom (79- 80; *Scivias* pt. 2, vis. 1.2). Still, human beings share with other creatures the spirit that is a vestige of God’s essence and a corporeality that makes them earthbound. “Perfection is shown in the earth’s moisture,” she writes, “so the human being is discerned to have been complete in his formation and physical being; and the human being recognizes himself, among the trees, as corporeal” (*Physica* 177). Medieval bestiaries abound with images of the natural world that comparatively signify human attributes or spiritual concepts. In Hildegard’s writing, human beings and nature assume a metonymic affinity that allows all of creation to express en masse the majestic unity that is God.

Most importantly from a rhetorical perspective, Hildegard’s use of the plain style underscores the essential ground shared by the two halves of a comparison in an Augustinian manner that redeems the seeming falseness of metaphor. Medieval Christian philosophy was intensely preoccupied with the complex relationship between substances and their signifiers, as thinkers worked through the tenet of the Word-made-flesh and Augustine’s notion of “God in all things” (Olmstead 215). *Vestigia trinitatis*, as elucidated by Augustine in *The Trinity*, suggests that through the grace of God, humanity can recognize the evidence of the divine in all things; the mind, the human aspect that comes closest to reflecting the nature of God, must therefore be purged and trained

toward lofty thoughts so as to increase one's recognition of, and association with, God. To do so, Augustine advises, one must distinguish between likeness and fact. "As regards the image, I suppose he [Hilary] mentioned form on account of the beauty involved in such harmony, in that primordial equality and primordial likeness, where there is no discord and no inequality and no kind of unlikeness, but identical correspondence with that of which it is the image" (215;bk. 6.11).¹⁰ If all things bear vestiges of God's essence, medieval writers reasoned, things were like signifiers that conveyed and obscured the truth that they contained. Hildegard's rhetoric proposes that semantic correspondence goes the other way as well: because things like words signify a hidden truth, words share essential qualities with the things they represent.

It is this underlying rhetorical assumption that permits Hildegard to argue for women's necessary inclusion in the dynamic image—and essence—of the Church through her use of feminine topoi, a claim that serves to empower her own public rhetorical activities. In *Scivias*, Hildegard deploys Ecclesia as the potent Christian counterpart to the figure of Synagogue, who represents the Jewish faith and community as a whole. Ecclesia is described as uniquely radiant. She is as beautiful as Synagogue is grotesque. Her sublime splendor is otherworldly rather than earthly. True to medieval form, her clothes disclose her noble ties.

I saw a bright light which was as white as snow and as transparent as crystal. It made the woman of the previous two visions bright from her head down to her throat. From her throat down to her navel, another light

¹⁰ Wendy Olmstead explains that unlike Ciceronian rhetoric, Augustinian rhetoric focuses on the discrimination of truth from "mere similitude or probability" (65).

of reddish color surrounded her. From her throat down to her breasts, she glowed with a reddish color that was similar to the dawn. From her breasts down to her navel, she shone with a color that was similar to a purple hyacinth. Where she glowed with the reddish color, she reflected that light upwards to the mysteries of heaven. And on the reddish color, there was a most beautiful maiden whose head was uncovered, showing her black hair. This maiden was clothed with a red tunic which flowed down to her feet. (103; pt. 2, vis. 5)

Dressed in the reds and purples of royalty, Ecclesia is enveloped in light. She even reflects that light back to its source. Her entire body shines with a reddish glow that appears diffused, not materially melded into her flesh; her tunic is red, giving the impression that she is flush with the blood of Christ. Her black hair reveals her present vitality as well as her eschatological entelechy, which will be fully revealed in heaven at the end of all things. For all her radiance, Ecclesia has not yet fully reached her potential for greatness. This Hildegard suggests when she says that the “teachings of the apostles lighted the head of the church when the apostles first began to build the church by making it publicly known. They traveled to many places where they gathered together the various workers who might help strengthen the catholic faith and who might become priests and bishops as well as members of the other orders of the church” (105; pt. 2, vis. 5.1). Hildegard depicts the living Church as existing at all points in time, conflating the past and the present in a manner that evokes the omniscient perspective of God and His essence, which all things—including language—bear.

That Ecclesia is seen bathed in light rather than touching the altar furthers the connection between God and his Church. Sacred awareness does not reach out to her through ritualistic objects that represent divinity, for that awareness has already permeated and illuminated her corporeal being. “This church is created by a grace that embraces and contains it; God reaches out in grace and gently holds the world in this space. The economy of relating here is one of touch. Flesh meets flesh. Jesus Christ dwells in it; its materiality is as substantial as his own” (Jones 171). She has accepted Christ as her lord, and the two have become one flesh not only figuratively through the metaphor of marriage, but materially through the communion provided by the Eucharist. This belief allows true believers to embody a single “body” that is “*simul iustus et peccator*—straddling the worlds of brokenness and redemption ... a community of implicated resisters who know that God’s love is finally victorious” (Jones 171). Their sins illuminated, the Christians existing within Ecclesia can see two spiritual truths: God’s triumph over sin, and their relation to the divine. By virtue of their ostensible hyper-corporeality, the female members of the Christian community physically embody the permeation of materiality by God’s essence once a person is enlightened by Truth. Women signify Christ’s capacity to redeem even the meanest aspects of creation, the feminine flesh to be exact, and much like the Eucharist—albeit to a lesser extent—they straddle the imaginary border between human representation and divine significance.

To be sure, this rhetorical reauthorizing of the feminine flesh cannot come about except in contrast to a substitute model of irredeemably corrupt corporeality. Hildegard depicts Synagogue as antithetical to the youthful Ecclesia. Synagogue is an ancient and

decrepit woman without eyes. The two women appear to be direct opposites, though they can also be viewed as mother and daughter, since the Jewish community and its religious tradition had produced the Son of God and made possible the holy institution of Church.

I saw a certain womanly image, pale-colored from the top of her head right down to her waist, and dark-colored from her waist right down to her feet. Her feet were bloody-colored and had a very bright and pure cloud around them. She did not, however, have eyes. She had her hands under her sleeves. She was standing close to an altar which is before the eyes of God, but she was not touching the altar. Abraham was standing by her heart, and Moses by her breast. The remaining prophets were standing by her belly, and they were showing their individual signs. They were also admiring the beauty of the church. The woman was of great size, just like some tower of some city. (59; pt. 1, vis. 5-5.1)

Synagogue's physical description reveals her inadequacy. She is pale rather than white, as befits the standard of beauty found in medieval texts, and therefore sickly. She is also dark, a property that reinforces the impression of bad health since the Bubonic Plague and other diseases were known to darken the skin. The rhetorical implication of her "darkness" is that she is an outsider that spreads disease, as are her inhabitants.

Moreover, Synagogue's blindness is not a physical blindness, but a lack of inner spiritual "sight" that guides humanity toward resuscitating Grace that brings eternal life. Sightlessness sets her against the vigorous Ecclesia, who is still in the prime of her youth. Also evoked is medieval lore that equated the loss of the physical senses with the

loss of one's mental faculties. Thus, Hildegard's description of blindness charges Synagogue with a murderous lack of reason, on which Christian writers blamed Christ's death. Rubin describes a common scenario present in artistic depictions of the Ecclesia-Synagogue dyad: "The chancel arch of the Danish parish church of Spentrup was decorated with themes of Mary's life, alongside the scene of *ecclesia* and *synagoga*—triumphant woman and blind one—above whom the Lamb of God is depicted: he is pierced by *synagoga*'s lance, but his blood is collected into the chalice held by *ecclesia*" (162). In other depictions of this situation, Synagogue holds other artifacts associated with Christ's suffering, such as the sponge that fed him gall. That Synagogue is blind and armed but present at the Crucifixion conveys the common Christian notion that even after being witness to Christ's death and resurrection, which they themselves facilitated, those of the Jewish faith refused to acknowledge the truth recognized the Church.¹¹

In contrast, Ecclesia comforts Christ in these tableaux, and often, scenes from Mary's life accompany these dichotomous images, furthering her identification with Ecclesia. Thus, by engaging the image of a blind Synagogue, Hildegard indirectly advocates Christian women's emotional and embodied position against the Jews: they should grieve for His pain, as does His mother, and dedicate themselves to following His example. Emotional identification with Christ becomes a means of engaging the body's own weakness against itself so that it can be ruled by the will of the spirit. This becomes a means of distinguishing between the "industrious" flesh of the Christian, thus put to

¹¹ In a letter to a cleric, Hildegard writes in a similar vein, using representative figures to implicate the Jewish people: "The fact that Moses saw that fire which did not consume [cf. Ex 3.2] signified that divine miracles could not soften the hardness of the Israelites (which is signified by the thorns [of his crown at the Crucifixion], for the Jews do not taste or feel that sweet fire" (109; It. 310).

good use, and the insistent depraved flesh of the Jew. Hildegard makes this clear in a letter to a teacher, whom she advises to counsel a group of Jewish women. “Therefore, warn these women to abandon the wicked way of their sins, which is fed by a deadly sort of apathy, and instruct them to hasten to the fountain of righteousness... to gird themselves for spiritual service in order to gain eternal life” (77; lt. 280). The Christian emerges as perceptive and reasonable in comparison to the Jew, and Christian women, seen as more corporeal than men and thus having to strive harder to self-regulate their bodies, appear all the more Christ-like in their willingness to suffer to embody truth.

Hildegard’s Synagogue also stands in the blood of the sacrificed Christ, which emits truth in the form of a brilliant cloud. But the cloud’s light does not emanate in a substantial way; it remains hanging at her feet, almost like a fog that does not rise. Yet, even if the light ran upwards into her face, she could not see it, lacking the power of perception. Though she stands close to the altar, she does not know that she has simply to extend her hand and connect with divinity. She reflects the common anti-Semitic motif found in medieval art and literature that suggests that Jews are “blind” because they cannot—even refuse to—understand the Truth of God’s Living Word (Kelley 144). Hildegard bases this inability on Synagogue’s role as earthly precursor to a faith that is based in the spiritual realm.

It was not proper, however, that the truth of the evangelists might foretell the protection of the law, but it is proper that fleshly things go before and spiritual things follow after. Similarly, a servant proclaims that his lord is coming, but his lord does not rush in front of the servant. Likewise,

synagogue ran before in the shadow of a sign, and the church followed after it in the light of truth. (64; pt. 1, vis. 5.8)

Bogged down by the mundane, Hildegard argues, those of the Jewish faith are not allowed to know or proclaim the truth embodied by the Christian Church. This idea links Jews, like women, to corporeality because they are seen as so preoccupied with proving the material reasons why Christ could not be the Messiah, that they fail to understand that the Incarnation lies beyond logic.

Rubin observes that Guibert of Nogent (1055-1124) “even mounted a defense of the female body” in condemning the Jewish people for their inability to comprehend this mystery (164). Ironically, although women and Jews shared the same association with the inferior flesh, they were situated as adversaries in a rhetorical relationship that served to denigrate the status of both parties. Writers like Guibert spoke of the Jews’ refusal to believe in God’s humanity as an attack on Mary, the mother of Jesus, since she was the source of his humanity. She became increasingly linked to the most prominent Christian female figures, Ecclesia and the Bride, in religious discourse. Women were encouraged to identify with Mary—and, hence, Christ’s human aspect as well—and defend Christ in their works, even if they could never measure up to Mary’s ideal. Consequently, the two parties set to contend against each other were those established as inferior by the very same discursive processes: Jews and women. Thus, Christian women like Hildegard could find a public forum by serving as Ecclesia’s champions and embodied representatives. Hildegard highlights that these roles cannot be completely inhabited by male ecclesiastics precisely because they hold a worldly status that women did not.

By this same reasoning, Hildegard redefines another feminine topos most commonly associated with medieval mysticism, the Bride, which symbolizes the Church and the counterpart to Christ's Bridegroom. Male authors deployed the Bride to remind women of their duty to remain faithfully silent, but Hildegard re-authors this topos by associating her with her own vibrant notion of Ecclesia. The Bride signifies the love that Christ feels towards his followers, but also the mystical relationship between God and humanity that lies at the core of Christian belief. Christ assumed human form, thereby uniting the material and spiritual realms, and in so doing, he permitted his followers a means to commune with divinity; just as husband and wife become one flesh, so, too, do Christ and his Church. However, as a topos of mystical discourse, the Bride signifies as well the feminine traits that mark the Christian soul. Cistercian monks established this meaning by calling themselves Brides in order to describe themselves as utterly passive and humble before the Lord. However, this was a purely symbolic gesture, for the image indicates spiritual renunciation of the elevated social position that necessitates a demonstration of humility in the first place. That is, they were assuming the wretched position afforded to women, who were perceived as doubly fallen and essentially lower than men. Women could not avail themselves of the irony implicit in such a use of the Bride topos. Male writers often imposed the label on women religious precisely because in reference to women, the Bride reaffirmed their lowly status. Male hagiographers use bridal imagery in their *vitae* of holy women because it suggests those qualities that these women should have displayed in life.

When male authors use this figure in reference to women religious, the open quality of the topos is diminished to denote a set of strict guidelines that govern female behavior. To become Brides of Christ according to the model advanced by male writers, women had to submit absolutely to the authority of the Church, or rather, to the local representatives of its ecclesiastical hierarchy. By symbolic association, the monk or bishop who regulated their everyday activities evoked the image of Christ as Bridegroom; however, he also maintained the real-world authority granted an earthly husband over his spouse's existence. Thus, while male authors claimed unquestionable submission even while retaining worldly power, women experienced a collapse of the figurative and literal meanings of the Bride image, so that they could only embody its submissive connotations. Just as the rise of the Marian cult during the 12th century hindered rather than improved the status of women in the Church, the abstract Bride became a means by which the behavior of real women could be regulated all the more rigorously.¹²

Conversely, Hildegard imbues the Bride topos with original meanings by using it in conjunction with altogether different figures that exhibited more dynamic traits. In *Scivias*, the Bride is subsumed by a loftier figure, that of Ecclesia, the Church personified. Hildegard reinscribes the figure of the Bride so that she falls within the greater domain of Ecclesia. Thus, in her writing Hildegard “echoes the patristic tradition

¹² Cheryl Glenn explains: “Mary, mother of Jesus, was a prime site of medieval Christian worship. Exalted above all other women and sanctified above all other saints, Mary was Holy Mother, Blessed Virgin, Mother of God. Some Christians considered her the Holy Spirit of the Holy Trinity, while others equated her with Wisdom or Sophia. Mary’s procreative power, her female body, was honored not only as the power through which God created the world but also as the vehicle of redemption. Despite her exalted place, Mary’s role in medieval Christianity did little to advance women’s place in the Church; Mary was superior in every way to all other women, both in body and spirit” (*Rhetoric Retold* 78).

that interprets the bride as symbol of the church. But in other visions, the bride [represents] the Word, the individual soul, virgins, Mary, or personified Wisdom” (Dreyer, *Passionate Spirituality* 85). This figural merging illuminates not only how Hildegard employs topoi to bolster the status of women, but also how she interprets her role in her relationship with divinity. Ecclesia’s semantic range extends to the representation of Christ on earth, as well as the embodiment of order and integrity, whereby she is a powerful figure even though she is depicted as a maiden and a Bride.

However, her symbolic implications run in the opposite direction also; in embodying the Church, Ecclesia’s meaning includes and shades into that of her individual constituents, many of whom are real, living women. Ecclesia becomes a validation of various facets of female spirituality and functions as an access to influence. If, as Ferrante claims, Hildegard did indeed feel “the deprivation of sacerdotal powers,” Ecclesia presents an indirect route to power by reflecting divinity’s female elements and substantiating the existing woman’s claims to insider knowledge of God (140).¹³

Hildegard writes, “Ecclesia! maiden / tall beyond measure, clad / in God’s armor, your gems / the color of heaven: / you are the fragrance / of the wounds of nations, / the city of knowledge” (“*O orzchis Ecclesia,*” *Symphonia* 253). Like and as Ecclesia, women religious could personify a more dynamic rendering of the Bride, one that called on them to stand up and preserve the true vision of the Church. Even if a woman had caused the Fall of Man, as the embodied feminine aspect of God’s community, women religious

¹³ This holds true for other female topoi such as Wisdom, who represents for Hildegard the personification of God’s own insight. Hildegard uses Wisdom to underscore woman’s role in the salvation of humanity by “praising her for finding another woman whom the serpent could not delude, who crowned the *whole human race*, so that the devil now could not delude man (*hominem*) as he had before” (Ferrante 172).

could, like Mary, help to reconcile humanity with divinity. “For heaven flooded you like / unbodied speech / and you gave it a tongue” she writes of the Virgin (“*Ave generosa*,” *Symphonia* 123). Likewise, women could personify the power of the Word.

Hildegard’s rhetoric presents feminine redemptive power as a potential of women who are of the Church, who can be seen as gaining in such wisdom directly rather than through the mediation of male authority. Due to the gender norms of the time, women become as men because knowledge of Christ allows them to inhabit the same spiritual and philosophical spaces reserved for men in that society. Accordingly, Hildegard writes to the nuns of Woffensheim, who are having difficulty electing a new abbess, and advises them to “flee the evil of contradiction . . . so the true sun might emit its rays to you,” and she warns the prioress neglectful of her duties that “no man should flee, if he has the capacity, from sustaining a congregation of holy people with God’s staff” (qtd. in Ferrante 23). Hildegard encourages the good Christian (male or female) to exhibit masculine attributes like constancy and courage, while taking into account the notion that as part of *Ecclesia* they will all embody the feminine characteristics of the Church-as-Bride. However, Hildegard does not necessarily connote the ineffectual characteristics that male writers afforded to women in their religious writings. A conflation of the masculine and the feminine within Hildegard’s image of *Ecclesia* renders each set of gender characteristics as equally active aspects of the dynamic and sublime totality that is salvation. Just as Christ assumed the “feminine” flesh that redeemed the world through the corporeality of woman, so does *Ecclesia*’s humanity gain access to divinity through the flesh of the Bridegroom.

The notion of woman's access to divine knowledge via an intimate connection to Christ has far-reaching implications not just in terms of religious ideology, but scientific belief as well, especially where the notion of rationality is concerned. The biases of medieval philosophers derived from a merging of theological debate with ancient notions about entelechy and gender. Together, these sources enabled a discourse that posited women as the inferior sex, linked to physicality, because they lacked the mental faculties that made reason possible. This idea extended to all others who did not fit the criteria that defined the epitome of human potential, namely, that one be male and Christian. For if perception allowed one to recognize the Word of God, then those who did not accept Christianity must not be in their right minds, so to speak. Thus, theologians like Guibert argued that Jews could not understand the truth of Christ's humanity because they lacked the capacity to reason, an accusation that furthered their association with corporeality. Likewise, women lacked rationality due to their ties to the body. If women signified Christ's humanity and men, His divinity, then men also lay claim to that one human aspect that reflected God's creativity and could lead to realignment with His Will—the mind. Men were the rational sex.

This view reaffirmed women's consignment to mere flesh, and even intensified the degree to which woman could be viewed as inferior. As is seen in the Galenic and Aristotelian models of reproduction prevalent in the Middle Ages, the male provides form while the female contributes matter; together the two components create a human being. But given that form determines the nature and structure of all things, the masculine element governs the process, rendering the feminine substance nothing more

than a passive medium. By extension, woman herself could be considered nothing more than a means to an end. Ulrike Wiethaus writes, “All women, owing to patriarchy’s biological definition of femininity, ‘are’ their feminine identity, they do not ‘become’ or ‘make’ it. Because men are the ideological shapers of culture, men’s development of identity, based on the development of skills, has solicited infinitely more attention and reflection” (94). This bias persists today, perpetrated by critics who argue that women were banned outright from intellectual activity, or that they “did not do” philosophy or “did not do” rhetoric if they did not do so according to the masculine, or mainstream, models. More likely most women were dissuaded from engaging in such pursuits by woman’s supposed basis in the material; she was the instrument that facilitated the activity of those worthy enough to be imbued with reason.

Religious authorities based many of their religious interpretations on such science and used it to bolster their views of a gendered morality. Cheryl Glenn states, “Woman best served man by bearing children, her purpose reduced to procreation, to the material body, to a purpose less than that for man, who transfers the very essence of humanness—the soul” (*Rhetoric Retold* 77). Glenn cites St. Augustine of Hippo and St. Thomas Aquinas as but two of the major Christian writers who maintained that the inferiority of woman asserted in this model was a result of woman’s penchant for the sensorial over the rational. Augustine segregated the sexes by arguing that men and women had originally lived “in a harmonious order of authority and obedience” until Eve’s sin established man’s need to command woman (Pagels 113). If scientific

discourse claimed that women could not express rationality because they were more corporeal than men, religion blamed women because they chose not to be rational.

True to the tenets of her time, Hildegard also ties notions of corporeality to notions of rationality, suggesting that the human body is influenced bodily by its capacity for reason. In *Causae et curae*, she states, “The fact that a person is not hirsute is from rationality. Instead of hair or feathers, he has rationality to protect him and to fly wherever he wishes to go” (28). The ability to reason determines a creature’s physical form, evoking the reproductive models referenced above, and she confirms this point by stating later in the passage that woman is subordinate to man because she was formed from man. Yet oddly enough, even as she connects a lack of body hair to human intelligence—which is supposed to be a masculine virtue—she points out that men have more hair than women do, that they have beards. She reiterates the physiological model that states men have more heat (and are more active) than women because men were formed directly from earth. However, then she highlights that this is the same earth that provides sustenance for hairy and feathered creatures. Women she compares to reptiles, which have no hair, burrow under the ground, and “feel less rain and sun than the animals above the earth” (28). Consequently, men can be seen as bearing a closer connection to the natural world than is commonly expressed, women can be seen as less reliant on the senses than is usually alleged.

By employing this proof from nature, Hildegard sets up a visual argument that is difficult to argue against because the analogy relies on the common tradition of finding correlates in nature because the natural order reflected the unity of God’s design. On the

one hand, one cannot refute the observable “facts” of the example without denying the scientific truths that laid out rationally by established authorities; on the other, one cannot claim this as a false analogy without denying the rational order that God imposed on the world. In one fell swoop, Hildegard revises common lore using philosophical and religious evidence. That Hildegard would have been familiar enough with the scientific developments of the 12th century to craft such an argument is corroborated by the existence of manuscripts of *Scivias* containing illuminations of cosmographic illustrations (Simek 10). Even if, as certain critics have argued, Hildegard herself did not create these illuminations and they were instead added later by male scribes, nonetheless their presence proves that her religio-scientific rhetoric was authoritative enough to fit in with the formal cosmological tradition. For all of Hildegard’s assertions that she is of the lesser sex and therefore not as enlightened as a man, her delving into the discipline of natural philosophy proved that woman, even if just one exceptional woman, could engage in rational philosophical pursuit.¹⁴

As do other medieval writers, Hildegard ties reason to faith in Christ and to the belief that the Church epitomized the human potential for rationality. She also echoes the common medieval idea that the senses used to rationally comprehend God’s plan are not the physical five senses, but metaphoric mental faculties that allow the soul to detect truth. In *Scivias*, she reveals their analogical connection by using the physical five senses to illustrate how the soul strives for good and eludes evil:

¹⁴ Julia Dietrich notes a significant development in the way that women related to the notion of rationality. She states that in the subsequent centuries a “growing uncertainty over rational approaches to understanding God and the emergence of popular religious movements made up of people lacking formal instruction did much to empower women wishing to follow their own spiritual paths” (22).

The work of the inner powers of the soul cling truthfully to the senses. These powers are understood through the senses and through the fruits of their work. The senses have been subjected to these powers, because these powers lead the soul to work. The soul, however, does not put work on the senses since it is only a shadow of these senses which do only what pleases them. . . . The law was made for the salvation of humanity. And the prophets made manifest the hidden things of God. Similarly, the senses drive harmful things away from people, and they underscore the innermost things of the soul. For the soul breathes the senses forth. How does it do this? The soul makes a person alive, and it is glorified by the person's use of sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. A person with the sense of touch is always watchful for danger. The senses are a sign of the powers of the soul, just as the body is the vessel for the soul. (54-55; pt. 1, vis. 4.24)

In a letter to Bernard of Clairvaux, in which she humbly asks for his guidance in determining whether her visions are real, she makes it quite clear that she sees images not with "fleshly" eyes but those that are spiritual. Elsewhere, she clarifies that they do not interfere with optic vision; her knowledge comes through "a mystical and true vision by which I frequently see while fully awake" (45; It. 247). Neither does she "hear" them in German because they do not come to her in human language (Greene 62). Furthering the impression of otherworldliness attached to her visions, Hildegard transcribes her visions in Latin, indicating their preauthorized status. In another letter,

this time to Guibert of Gembloux, she tells Guibert that she writes down only what she sees and hears, but is unaware of what she does not see or hear because she is unlearned (Ferrante 156). Certainly, this is an oblique assertion that what she has composed has come straight from God without any human mediation on her part.

However, Hildegard creates a paradox that cannot be ignored. She calls herself uneducated because she does not have the training that a male author would have; she is a “puny little woman” (185; lt. 389). Nonetheless, she is instructed in the mysteries of truth that scholars work to uncover through rational study by the very Word of God that, when personified and embodied, is literally the supreme Teacher. Her wisdom cannot be denied, and it destabilizes the centrality of the very enterprise of edification that actively excludes women. Stating that she is outwardly untrained but inwardly educated, she claims her knowledge as God’s own. The understanding that sets her apart from all others establishes her association with the soul rather than the body by virtue of the spiritual senses, a point underscored by her consistent claim that she did not experience physical symptoms when she experienced her visions. Even as she previously claims rationality as a mode available to women, she nullifies the importance of the endeavors that it facilitates, thereby fashioning a rhetorical approach that overtly dispenses with the exclusive masculine route to understanding in favor of a more direct, personal path.

Hildegard’s Rhetorical Practice

The rhetorical impact of Hildegard’s use of feminine topoi allowed her to fashion an embodied larger-than-life image, one constituted as much by her works as her highly

civic lifestyle, which demanded that she participate in public discourses of the period. Indeed, her rhetorical styles suggest that her works were intended for wide audiences. As with other women writers of the period, Hildegard's inclination—particularly evident in *Scivias*—is to weave strands of heavily descriptive exposition around a key theme or image, returning time and again to examine its multiple meanings. Each time she revisits the matter, she examines it from a different perspective or by using another mode of exegesis. In the past, the tendency of women writers to “write in circles” around a topic has been regarded as proof of a “natural” form of feminine writing, one that provides a contrast to masculine forms of composition, relies on female-embodied experience, and reveals an essentially feminine point-of-view.¹⁵ From another perspective, circular or seemingly redundant organization has also been explained as orality's lingering influence on an increasingly literate culture (Ong 40). This possibility seems more likely, given that more medieval women than men would have been illiterate. Women would have been more familiar with rhetoric in praxis than with formal rhetorical treatises, and so, those who composed orally may have based the arrangement of their words on homilies or sermons, genres they recognized as a result of regular church attendance. These popular rhetorical forms directed attention to a very specific topic that was then examined thoroughly so as to determine its myriad implications, all of which served as ethical instruction for the audience.

¹⁵ See Elizabeth A. Petroff, “Writing the Body: Male and Female in the Writings of Margerite d'Oingt, Angela of Foligno, and Umiltà of Faenza,” *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994): 204-24.

This objective seems to coincide with Hildegard's treatment of natural phenomena as embodied representations of concepts. For even if her seemingly pleonastic composition style can be attributed largely to a lack of formal training, her main rhetorical intent in revisiting ideas remains the explanation of layered moral meanings hidden in things. Such an interpretation of Hildegard's rhetorical intent is supported by what critics see in her works as the influence of writers like Ambrose, Augustine of Hippo, and Hrabanus Maurus, among others (Schipperges 51). To this list can be added her contemporary, Bernard of Clairvaux, with whom she corresponded and who supported her divine mission despite his often dismal view of women—at least in his exegetical writings. Notably, these are all authors whose works were intended to facilitate the art of preaching even as they expound on the symbolic. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the character of Hildegard's engagement with these authors. Joan Cadden describes Hildegard as “intellectually omnivorous, apparently taking in information from all manner of learned and popular sources,” though Cadden adds that, as was typical for women, Hildegard acquired much of her knowledge indirectly and could not name many of her rhetorical influences (71). Cadden further attributes Hildegard's negligence in determining her sources to a medieval tendency that emphasized the recording, explanation, and elaboration of already-popular lore over the production of new knowledge.

Whatever the case may be, Hildegard frames herself rhetorically as belonging to a tradition of philosophical theology that aimed to interpret the world as a divine text. Medieval scholars defined knowledge production differently, even contrary to, its

contemporary definitions. The field that is today denoted by the term “science” did not exist. Whereas the modern mind relates the production of knowledge to a progressive timeline of scientific innovation, of creating things that do not yet exist, the medieval mind studied philosophy to discover new perspectives that could reveal more about that which was already known about the universe. Augustine had suggested in *On Order*, a work written shortly after his conversion, that philosophy could be used to realign oneself with God’s order as it manifested in the natural world. He argued that it “already contains this order of knowledge, and it need not discover more than the nature of one, but in a much more profound and divine sense” (qtd. in Bloch 10). As can be seen via the concept of *inventio*, everything necessary to living and to language already existed in categorizable form; one’s charge, then, was to create new connections between these forms that revealed the underlying harmony in God’s plan. In this regard, Hildegard’s works produce an exceptionally popular mode of knowledge: she redefined commonplace situations and things, elevating them to the status of metaphors that reaffirm the ontological unity that academic and monastic philosophers sought to understand. For example, in her mystical and scientific works Hildegard introduces the theme of human reproduction as a trope that represents how all things work together to embody the creative impulse, and one that joins ethical and systematic discourses as non-exclusive counterparts. These metaphors are also metonyms, all pointing to their mutual origins in God’s plan.

Hildegard’s learning not only epitomizes the ways by which women of the Middle Ages often acquired a “feminine form” of education, but also confirms critics’

more recent views that during the Middle Ages, literacy and edification entailed the diffusion of wisdom through oral and indirect means. This holds true for Hildegard as well as her more general audience: “This habit of speech stems partly, no doubt, from her unflagging piety but also from her monastic environment and education, which lent a biblical cast to the diction of her medical as well as her visionary writing. She does not seem to have been fully familiar with the vocabulary of anatomy and pathology that was beginning to take hold in the twelfth century” (Cadden 73). Given that the cultural capital to which the general populace had access emanated primarily from the pulpit, Hildegard’s preaching can be interpreted as a rare feat for her personally, and for those without direct access to advanced instruction—those for whom she modeled a popular mode of knowledge production.

That Hildegard had permission to travel and to speak remains a noteworthy achievement even now. Paul of Tarsus’s directive that women should be silent in church (1 Cor. 14:33-34) is still a major point of contention as women aspire to positions of leadership within ecclesiastical hierarchies. To feminist scholars, his words serve as perhaps the most familiar indicator of women’s universal struggle to claim a space in the religious sphere, as well as culture as a whole. Yet Hildegard also embodies Paul’s directive that older women live worshipfully and teach what is good (Tit. 2:3). Ironically, Paul’s letters provide most of the information contemporary scholars have concerning women in positions of authority within the early Christian congregations. This contradiction is nothing uncommon, given that the universal history of “women’s roles in political and religious leadership” tends to overlap with that of “objections to

their presence” (Swearingen 37). During the Middle Ages, this proved especially true, and it appears that large numbers of women did not attempt to speak in public until the later sudden upsurge in popular religious activity that characterized the 13th and 14th centuries.

After the turn of the 13th century, women belonging to groups like the Beguines sought to live semi-independent lives outside of church control, sometimes supporting themselves through mendicancy or even preaching, actions that often aroused the ire of local officials. The idea of women preaching proved so controversial during the Middle Ages the granting of permission to preach to women became a remarkable feature that distinguished the heterodoxy of heretical movements like the Cathars and Waldensians from the conventionality of the Catholic Church. Michael Goodich points out that in order to combat the recruitment of women by unorthodox factions promising greater gender equality, church officials frequently turned to exemplary women like Hildegard and the other mystics to defend the Church as the one true faith. These women even engaged in highly public debates with representatives of the heretical movements, as is the case with Angela of Foligno, the Franciscan teacher discussed in Chapter Six (Goodich 26). Many women engaged in these discussions renounced public life once their appointed obligations had been fulfilled. Hildegard seems a major exception—she spoke out against prevalent heresies as was to be expected, but she also preached the orthodox faith to both women and men with the approval of church leaders, including Pope Eugene III.

That Hildegard based her rhetorical style on writers who expounded the principles of *ars praedicandi* appears all the more a practical possibility, one that speaks to her self-image as a prophet of God who must trudge about the land and call His people to a loftier way of life. Today, Hildegard is best known for her visions, but Hildegard may have had a different impression of her vocation. Barbara Newman asserts that Hildegard “saw herself primarily as a prophet and modeled her understanding on biblical heroes,” gaining a greater reputation as a visionary on account of her male scribes and biographers (“Hildegard and Her Hagiographers” 19). As Newman explains, the visions that provided proof of God’s authorization may have been exploited by Gottfried (her second secretary) to enhance the reputation of Hildegard’s monastery at Rupertsberg. Most likely, his focus also set the stage for an emphasis on the contemplative, rather than active, life that characterized later *vitae*. Heavily reliant on the bridal imagery that situated women as passive partners in the spiritual relationship, the models of feminine behavior propagated by the later *vitae* encouraged women to turn away from the world and discouraged participation in the public sphere. Such a later ideal jars against the information provided by Hildegard’s numerous letters, which indicate that various parties persuaded her to actively share her visions, including her teacher, Jutta, her bishop, and not least of all, the Pope.

Hildegard corresponded with some of the most significant religious figures of her time, but eminent secular rulers, too, sought her guidance. Some received her counsel whether they asked for it or not, such as the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, whom Hildegard admonished for his part in the Schism of 1159, after which the

Emperor installed his own anti-pope. Emperor Frederick had personally attested to the veracity of her visions soon after attaining the throne, so Hildegard's warning that God's wrath had been aroused by his actions must have made quite an impression. In one short note, Hildegard purports to speak solely the angry Word of God: "He Who Is says: By my own power I do away with the obstinacy and rebellion of those who scorn me. Woe, O woe to the evil of those wicked ones who spurn me. Hear this, O king, if you wish to live. Otherwise my sword will pierce you [cf. Ex. 22:24]" (114; lt. 315). She also wrote to Eleanor of Aquitaine prior to Eleanor's imprisonment by her husband, King Henry II. Hildegard provides consolation to the troubled queen, writing, "Your mind is like a wall battered by a storm. You look all around, and you find no rest. Stay calm, and stand firm, relying on God and your fellow creatures, and God will aid you in all your tribulations" (117; lt. 318). Perhaps Eleanor sought counsel and emotional support from Hildegard; perhaps Hildegard reached out to her unprompted by anything more than compassion. In any event, her correspondence with those in the upper echelons of secular power reveals Hildegard's propensity for addressing the most powerful in society frankly and in plain language, reminding them that for all their influence they are still human and under the divine gaze.

As God's representative on earth, Hildegard assumes a dyadic ethos in her letters. She is the unassuming servant who addresses monarchs only because she has been commanded to by a higher power, even as she is the indignant, straightforward seer whose sole purpose is to remind the exalted of God's sovereignty. For Hildegard, there seems to be no division between a male audience and a female audience. Her readership

proves that she wrote for women and men alike, for those in power and those who were governed, for theologians and natural scientists, and those who might read her texts as regular medical handbooks. Just as Christ Himself assumed human form to call all those who might heed His message, Hildegard seems to view all Christians as her potential readers.

A perfunctory survey of Hildegard's writings, including her letters, shows that Hildegard employs the same apologetic language at the beginning of her intellectual or religious writings as she does throughout her letters. She describes herself as "a poor little form of a woman, with neither health, nor strength, nor courage, nor learning, a woman totally subordinate to my superiors" (18; lt. 223r). But the humility topos is not reserved for dealing only with the male sex: just as she apologizes to Bernard of Clairvaux when writing to ask if she should entertain her visions as divine messages, so too does she belittle her learning in letters to female friends that seek her advice. In each case, she stresses her ignorance to highlight her correspondent's own godly wisdom: while in her letter to Bernard she shows deference to his high position within the Church, in her letters to women she claims overtly to recognize the presence of God in them. That Hildegard uses the humility topos to address members of either sex suggests, then, that the statement is more a rhetorical convention than a genuine call for exculpation. This view harmonizes with Barbara Newman's claim that medieval authorities would have been concerned primarily with actual "threats" to ecclesiastical hierarchy and with "speculative" notions that might lead to heretical ideas:

I take the risk of belaboring this point because it flies in the face of so much recent writing about medieval patriarchy. I do not deny that the Church ruthlessly persecuted some groups of women (clerical wives, accused witches), that it subjected others (nuns, visionaries, beguines), to increasingly repressive controls, or that it excluded all without exception from the priesthood. But these persecutions and exclusions did not rest on Mary Daly's famous formula that 'if God is male, then the male is God.' They rested instead on a firm, deep-rooted, and universal belief in female inferiority. (*God and the Goddesses* 309)

Newman echoes a point taken up by critics such as Caroline Walker Bynum and Elizabeth Dreyer, who speak to the depiction of Jesus and Nature as female, to argue that ecclesiastical officials would not have been agitated by such depictions. Newman's words have broader implications, however, for she reveals one of the main misperceptions regarding women's writing and its suppression by male authorities. Frequently, medieval women writers are viewed as unruly and rebellious proto-feminists who faced persecution for their efforts, but women's exclusion from intellectual arenas appears to be rooted less in active subjugation than in the pervasive view of woman as a substandard human being who could simply not measure up.

As a result, Hildegard's use of the humility topos resembles that of many other women mystics who employ this commonplace to prove their reluctance to speak about things beyond their socially-defined scope rather than to genuinely indicate fear or self-doubt. Dale Logan Greene writes, "The confession of ignorance or inferiority

demonstrated the speaker's or writer's acceptance of, or at least compliance with, the conventions regarding womanly behavior," and adds that this apology allowed the women writer to turn "for authority and inspiration away from external sources in education and institutions to internal sources in feeling and revelation" (68). Not all women writers viewed this inward turn as a necessary step; in fact, Hildegard seems to see her mission as demanding just the opposite. Rather than deeming her visions as a source of authority that allows her to carry on a personal relationship with God to which readers are privy, she affords her audience a primary place within a trinitarian connection enabled by her function as prophet. She does not intend to model a passive, internal affective piety for her audience, one that furthered personal reflection that silenced women as the ideal and that elevated the authority of male-authored texts by pronouncing the utter humility of their creators.

Indeed, one wonders whether Hildegard would have even considered imitation of her mysticism plausible, since she uses her visions to suggest that she has been chosen by God above all others to partake of His knowledge. This hidden understanding is one granted only to that one whom God Himself has selected from among the worthiest men and women. Instead, Hildegard's responsibility as God's prophet is to rally His people using an approach that marries the function of her written texts to her highly visible presence in the world. Hildegard does not seek to shift "authority and inspiration away from external sources in education and institutions" so much as attempt to align their discourses with God's truth precisely because these institutions do hold such authority on earth. At the same time, she confirms her own standing as one of these authorities by

virtue of divine endorsement, forestalling any earthly opposition to her claim. Her humble apology demonstrates her awareness that men dominated these institutions, but also reveals two important assumptions about her medieval audience that shade her use of female topoi: that men would be reading her works, and that her works should be examined with the same critical eye reserved for works written by men.

Conclusion

The impression of Hildegard as a public rhetor authorized by her use of feminine topoi provides a perspective by which to examine the constructive overlap between her religious and scientific efforts. While critics tend to highlight Hildegard's mysticism, her writing reveals that she deliberately exploited the potential of her visions to authorize her more public roles of writer, preacher, and religious leader and counselor. Her rhetoric contributes to the medieval circulation of knowledge primarily through attempts at *demonstratio* that derive from manifest reality rather than from her depiction of a personal relationship with divinity. The metaphors she employs in her visionary work come to light in her scientific work as ontological realities laden with moral import, while her visions find manifest expression in the real world via the world around her and her readers. Priscilla Throop states in her introduction to Hildegard's *Physica*: "The distinction between the 'medical' and 'visionary' works is not as clear-cut as we might like to think. Her medical and physiological ideas make up a great deal of her *Liber divinorum operum simplicis hominis*, or 'Book of Divine Works,' and the so-called medical works were revealed by direct transmission from the Divine, in the same way

her more theologically based visions were” (2). Hildegard underscores the primary relationship that women can maintain with God, a claim she makes by virtue of her bold actions even when her works employ apologetic commonplaces. Overtly, her writings may appear to reiterate misogynist notions that situate women as passive and inferior, but the combination of her embodied rhetorics—that is, the way she lives her life in public and the way that her topoi signify with their textual bodies—suggests that she viewed gender roles more as metaphors for social expectations rather than as simple corporeal facts.

When Hildegard borrows figures from dominant (male) discourses, she does not accept their intrinsic biases, but re-authors them to justify her own actions and those of her female colleagues. She advances a new model that situates women as having intimate contact with the divine, a model that serves as a potent contrast to that provided by male authors of the time. Rather than reinforcing the view that women could only approach divinity through mediation by male authorities, Hildegard’s use of female topoi redraws the boundaries of gender, and in so doing, remaps the intersection of the earthly and heavenly spheres. Even the physical senses become a new point of contact with the sacred, centuries before other women mystic extol the virtue of the senses in earnest. “In a brilliant and creative fashion, Hildegard points the reader toward a holistic understanding of religious experience in which head and heart, action and passion partake in focused orientation toward God” (Dreyer, *Passionate Spirituality* 99). Certainly, Hildegard does not deploy her feminine topoi in order to promote an essentially pro-woman agenda or to subvert the dominance of masculine discourse. For

example, she reaffirms the categorization of human characteristics as masculine or feminine. Yet her rhetoric tends to regard the semantic limits of ideas and things as modifiable, reconfiguring notions of gender and piety so that they accommodate her own out-of-the-ordinary actions and views, and those of other rhetorically active women. Her writing rhetoric does not promote a completely womanist outlook, but it does emphasize women's intrinsic and central role in the universal drama of redemption. Consequently, she encourages her female contemporaries to assert "masculine" authority as necessary, and she is able to provide existing audiences an example of the rhetoric medieval women writers used to ensure their textual survival.

CHAPTER III

MINNE, QUEEN REASON, AND THE TREE: RHETORICAL RE-VISION IN THE
WORKS OF HADEWIJCH OF BRABANT

The thirteenth-century Beguine mystic Hadewijch of Brabant composed works that bring together mystical insight and scientific knowledge to reveal the path of wisdom to any soul that seeks truth. Her visionary rhetoric makes use of philosophical elements to substantiate her mystical ethos even as it revises the notion of reason as secondary to personal understanding. As a proponent of *minnemystiek*, the theology of love centered on the figure of *Minne* (Lady Love), Hadewijch composed works that privilege an unceasing affective pursuit of God, cast in the role of the courtly lady to the soul as errant knight. Loyalty and a willingness to suffer for Love are the reasons for—and proof of—spiritual edification since unification of the Soul and God proves an impossible goal in the earthly realm. Engagement of the emotions suited particularly the religious activity permitted medieval women by male authors, who denigrated women's ontological status by associating them with corporeality and the senses rather than the soul. By reinscribing the emotional component of the body as a spiritual advantage, Hadewijch's rhetoric advances feminine modes of knowing over traditionally masculine systems of examination.

This chapter demonstrates that Hadewijch's use of feminine topoi like Queen Reason and Lady Love allows her to reconfigure the relationship between rationality and

feeling espoused by medieval thinkers as she instructs her friends and followers in the ways of *minnemystiek*. As in texts written by Beatrice of Nazareth and Mechthild of Magdeburg, Hadewijch's *Minne* is an ambiguous figure that denotes the soul, God as the object of desire, and the love that binds each to the other. Hadewijch introduces another feminine personality to this relationship by personifying Reason as a stately queen who nevertheless remains subject to Love. Reason prepares the soul to undertake a tireless quest for Love, though the soul's union with Love can never be achieved and the would-be lover's desire to suffer seems irrational. For Hadewijch, then, *Minne* and Reason represent the paradoxical relationship between intellectual and emotional activity that informs her rhetoric. Reading through the lens of *Minne* and Reason Hadewijch's vision of an inverted tree rooted in heaven, I propose that the tree is a spiritual mnemonic that resembles arboreal stemmata constructed by medieval philosophers to categorize knowledge; yet unlike those of her predecessors, Hadewijch's tree signifies a mystical architectonic that renders the epistemological enterprise as subordinate to the passions that lead to divine wisdom. Subsequently, in order to facilitate the spiritual interests of her primarily female audience, Hadewich's rhetorical deployment of feminine topoi permit an appropriation and emendation of the tools of philosophy, a discipline that actively works to circumscribe feminine agency.

Hadewijch, Feminine Influence, and the Rhetorical Tradition

Hadewijch's rhetoric challenges "the damaging fiction that most women simply do not have what it takes to play the public, rhetorical game" (Biesecker 339) and

demonstrates how medieval women helped one another to craft their own particular rhetorics. Social and religious norms circumscribed feminine rhetorical expression, but they did not effect a complete silence. Since embodied performances cannot be preserved and critiqued in the same manner as a written text, medieval women like the Beguines who typified religious bodily rhetorics remain unduly excluded from the rhetorical tradition. If “none of [a woman’s] texts are extant, she is not a rhetorician” (Glenn, *Rhetoric Retold* 15). Despite a cultural tendency to view rhetorical women as a rarity and attitudes that ensured women were not always credited for their achievements, women mystics like Hadewijch “spoke and wrote the common people into their religious beliefs and their discussions” (Glenn, *Rhetoric Retold* 93) in ways that created new opportunities for communication. The incapacity of traditional critical methods to evaluate past performances as constitutive rhetorics says more about historical and contemporary critical convention than it does about medieval women’s rhetorical practices. Women inspired action among feminine and feminized members of society debarred from speaking. They created inclusionary rhetorics that called for interaction between participants and intertextuality between rhetorical works, above all between those composed by themselves and by other women. They revised the “traditional view of the audience as an opponent” (Foss and Griffin 16) and, using bodies and words, reminded others that women’s rhetorics “have always existed, among the innumerable, interminable, clear examples of public, political, agonistic, masculine discourse” (Glenn, *Rhetoric Retold* 175).

Hadewijch's works divulge what little information is known about her life, namely, that she was an educated woman, most probably a member of the higher classes, and the spiritual director of a group of Beguines whose company she was forced to abandon due to internal strife, stemming from the jealousy of others within her group, as well as persecution of the Beguine movement as a whole. We do not know when or under what conditions her life concluded, but one letter states clearly that she considered exile and imprisonment among possible punishments she faced (114; lt. 29, par. 1). She wrote the *Mengeldichten* (Poems in Rhyming Couplets), the *Strofische Gedichten* (Poems in Stanzas), *Letters*, and *Visions*. These texts proved popular throughout the Middle Ages and influenced renowned mystics including Meister Eckhart and Jan Van Ruusbroec. By the sixteenth century, her prominence declined until 1838, when her works were rediscovered in manuscripts located in the Royal Library of Belgium (Milhaven 4). Throughout these works, Hadewijch demonstrates mastery of rhetorical devices that allow her to expound authoritatively on the complicated *minnemystiek*, or love mysticism, that aligns her writings with those of other love mystics like Beatrice of Nazareth and Mechthild of Magdeburg.

Her writing in various genres reveals her proficiency in Latin, French, numerology, rhetoric, and even astronomy. Such extensive knowledge suggests an education based in the trivium and quadrivium subjects; though these fields of study made up the advanced education denied to most women, other well-educated women mystics are known to have received instruction in the seven liberal arts at convent schools (Hart, Introduction 5). Hadewijch's erudition is corroborated by her use of

advanced theoretical details, which add a philosophical dimension to her spiritual works. For example, she illustrates the profundity of Love by comparing its complexity to the more easily determined nature of the universe: “The course of the firmament and of the planets, / And of the signs that stand in the firmament, / We can know to some extent by a similitude, / And we count the number by calculation. / But no master can presume this— / That he can give understanding of Love to the minds / Of all who ever knew and shall know Love” (245; *SG* 40:57-63).¹⁶ By combining scientific and sacred discourses, she composes a sophisticated rhetoric that employs philosophical notions to bolster her mystical claims and distinguishes her efforts from those of male writers who aim to reconcile religious conviction and rational principles. Hadewijch’s goal is not to produce a coherent system that classifies knowledge or nature, but to assert that true knowledge is inaccessible via the purely intellectual routes that excluded most persons. This message is conveyed through her visions, poems, and letters to her fellow Beguines, who benefitted from her knowledge because she wrote primarily in the vernacular Dutch. This rhetorical choice allowed Hadewijch to avoid the ecclesiastical scrutiny that accompanied composition in the official Church Latin while reaffirming her dedication to a popular form of spiritual practice that invited feminine participation.

The inadequacy of the intellect is a persistent theme that distinguishes her works from those of another, later author also known as Hadewijch. For medieval readers and listeners the name Hadewijch denoted one author whose reputation as a spiritual resource flourished over several centuries, but critics now identify the two main writers

¹⁶ Quotations from all of Hadewijch’s works are drawn from *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, trans. and intro. Mother Columba Hart, preface Paul Mommaers (New York: Paulist, 1980).

associated with these texts as “Hadewijch I” and “Hadewijch II.” Hadewijch I (whom I shall refer to hereafter simply as Hadewijch) composed the bulk of the Hadewigian corpus, Hadewijch II, the *Mengeldichten* 17-29.¹⁷ Based on divergences in their vocabulary and content, Mother Columba Hart places Hadewijch II within the tradition of pure speculative mysticism that arose in the years following Hadewijch’s lifetime (32). Hadewijch II stresses “nakedness, the pure unencumbered state of mind, union without mode or intermediary” (Bouyer 52-3), notions that contrast greatly with the intellectual-emotional exchange that I draw attention to in the works of Hadewijch. Given the divergent practices and theological aims that typify a purely speculative mysticism, I will not examine the works of Hadewijch II here. But, before proceeding to focus solely on the rhetoric of Hadewijch, I wish to point out insights revealed by the textual affinity between the two authors, insights that illuminate the composition practices of medieval women as well as those of Hadewijch herself.

The relationship between Hadewijch and Hadewijch II shows that more women than have previously been discoverable participated in medieval rhetorical ventures, even if their activities often went uncredited based on the traditional definition of rhetoric as a discipline or art that occurs in the public sector and the assumption that by and large women received no rhetorical instruction. Because women’s speech was consigned to the private and domestic spheres of the convent or the home, those few

¹⁷ See Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism—1200-1350* (New York: Crossroad, 1998); Paul Mommaers, *Hadewijch: Writer, Beguine, Love Mystic*, trans. Elizabeth Dutton (Leuven: Peeters, 2004); Saskia M. Murk-Jansen, *The Measure of Mystic Thought: A Study of Hadewijch’s Mengeldichten* (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1991); and Josef Van Mierlo, *Hadewijch: Mengeldichten* (Antwerp: Standaard, 1952). Murk-Jansen argues that *Mengeldichten* 17-24 may have been written by Hadewijch I herself or even a third person familiar with her writing, leaving *Mengeldichten* 25-29 as the only writings attributable to Hadewijch II.

who did acquire such training and those who managed to speak publicly or compose works for communal consumption have often been viewed as exceptional cases. As Barbara Biesecker explains, this sort of “female tokenism” reinforces the exclusionary masculine definition of rhetoric by setting apart certain women as worthy of inclusion in the traditional canon, while suggesting that other women rhetors would also be included if only their works measured up against those of their male counterparts (142). Certainly, Hadewijch’s rhetorical stance situates her as an extraordinary woman: by her own report she has been specially selected by God to share his wisdom with others. Yet she also stresses that she is one among many who must struggle vigorously to receive his knowledge: “That Love is so remote from us, / When by right she should be so near us, / Is held by many—of whom I am one—Who depend on worldly consolation” (243-44; *SG* 40:17-20). Rhetorically, Hadewijch creates a spiritual community that unites her with her audience in a cycle of mutual effort and futility. She depicts herself as having worked tirelessly to comprehend Love in the same way that she expects others to struggle, though they, like her, will remain unable to articulate the full extent of their understanding since no one can successfully verbalize Love’s truth. Nonetheless, she encourages her readers and listeners to embody the rhetoric that will allow them to extol *minnemystiek*.

That medieval audiences identified the combined texts of the two Hadewijchs as the work of a single writer indicates also that Hadwijch cannot be considered a singularity due to her advanced learning or writing skills. Whether medieval readers inadvertently or intentionally practiced female tokenism in misattributing to Hadewijch

the works of Hadewijch II, we should not perpetuate this problem by discounting medieval women's engagement of diverse forms of rhetorical activity. Although most male and female denizens of the Middle Ages viewed "the suggestion that masculinity and subjectivity [were] co-extensive notions" (Biesecker 142) as unquestionable fact, the works of Hadewijch II demonstrate that more women engaged in rhetorical pursuits than have been acknowledged. They also reveal that medieval women writers turned to one another's texts to obtain models of authorship. Even when they cited male authorities, they validated their own talents by imitating the works of other women, works they viewed as morally and rhetorically authoritative. If Hadewijch II's religious vocation prevented her from deliberately misleading others into attributing her poems to Hadewijch so as to benefit from her predecessor's renown, she may nonetheless have styled her work so closely on a preexisting model that audiences could not differentiate between the two authors. While Hadewijch's rhetorical expression allowed others like Hadewijch II to authoritatively instruct others regarding divine mysteries, Hadewijch II's own flair for composition cannot be denied. Her exemplary rhetorical skills allowed her to emulate a highly accomplished author whose rhetoric proved quite influential.

In addition, the relationship between Hadewijch and Hadewijch II draws attention to the invitational nature of Hadewijch's rhetorical styles. While she presents herself as an exceptional individual, her rhetoric enables the works of others. Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin define invitational rhetoric as "an invitation to understanding as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination," as "an invitation to the audience to enter the rhetor's world and to see it

as the rhetor does” (5). Foss and Griffin stress the centrality of sharing rather than imposition to this rhetorical form; the goal is not conversion but mutual engagement. Hadewijch’s rhetoric complicates this explanation because while in her letters, she comes across as overbearing and ever dissatisfied with the spiritual labors of the other Beguines, her other works rely on an invitational style to communicate her own experiences. The general tone of her epistolary rhetoric is summed up by the following warning she gives her pupils: “Although I forbid you some works and command the others, you will in either case have to serve much” (84; lt. 17, par. 123). The critical attitude and exceedingly high standards she reveals in the letters appear to have incited ill will among some of the women, and this source of difficulty contributed to her eventual expulsion from the Beguinage. As a spiritual director, Hadewijch is obliged to oversee the behavior of those around her, point out their shortcomings, and urge them toward an ever more flawless piety. However, her letters do not represent her overall rhetorical project.

In her poems and visions, Hadewijch invites her readers to identify with her on an emotional level by depicting her struggles with Love from a personal perspective. This strategy facilitates identification between herself and her audiences, but also between her audience and Lady Love. Suffering for Love is the true goal of *minnemystiek*, not the attainment of divine union since the mystical apprentice should recognize this as impossible. Hadewijch establishes identification with her audience by admitting her own failures in the pursuit of Love, shortcomings that should prove familiar to her female readership. But she also exemplifies the conviction that she aims

to have her readers adopt. She affirms, “Since I have followed in her train with strong fidelity, / That Love might stand me in good stead, / I have renounced all alien sadness, / And I am firm in confidence / Through which I know / That Love one day / Will embrace me in oneness” (178; *SG* 19:64-70). In her poetry, Hadewijch prefers to model rather than demand the response she expects from the other Beguines, even when she communicates the special wisdom God has divulged to her alone. Describing an ecstatic episode, Hadewijch explains that Love commanded her to perfect herself so that they could be reunited and concludes by stating that she “returned into myself, and I understood all I have just said; and I remained to gaze fixedly upon my delightful sweet Love” (272; V. 3, par. 25).¹⁸ The illustration of her private experience invites her audience to remain steadfast in service to Love and to contemplate how best to take action. Although in her letters she appears to maintain set ideas as to how they may accomplish this, in her other texts she moves them to realize the same level of success that she has attained through identification with her and her cause.

Furthermore, throughout her works her rhetorical intentions are framed by genuine affection for these women, and she writes to them as “unrepeatable individuals” (M.U. Walker, qtd. in Foss and Griffin 11), mentioning them specifically by name. If at times her instructive rhetoric appears paternalistic, through this emphasis Hadewijch fulfills the role that the Beguines have given her as spiritual director of the Beguinage—a role, we might add, that represents their collective choice to live free from the

¹⁸ Elizabeth Dreyer draws attention to Hadewijch’s reiteration of a Christian worldview that revises the Neoplatonic premise that the human world originates in God and returns to God (*Passionate Spirituality* 123). This detail confirms my assertion of Hadewijch’s familiarity with contemporaneous philosophical notions.

masculine supervision dictated by the Church. Their religious well-being is her main priority. Hadewijch's rigidity does not diminish the "maternal attitude of warmth and sympathy" that pervades her writing (Hart, Introduction 16-17). Indeed, the masculine rhetoric of her letters supports her use of an invitational style in her most personal works by ensuring the management of everyday life in the Beguinage.

Hadewijch encourages other women to practice their own, embodied rhetorics. She emphasizes that as prospective mystics the Beguines she writes for should exemplify God's Word. They should live carefully because they are under scrutiny. Beguines lived public lives out in the larger community at a time when ecclesiastical officials did not always regard kindly the attempts of single women to lead religious lives without official oversight. While authorities such as noted historian James of Vitry and Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln, commended the Beguines for their piety and hard work, theologians like William of St. Amour assaulted their way of life because they had no place within the organization of the Church (Grundmann 140-41). Simon of Tournai rebuked them for seeking to "read and explicate religious writings in the vernacular, French biblical commentaries, even the Holy Scripture itself, either while hidden in corner or even in public" (Grundmann 145). In this context, Hadewijch encourages her readers and listeners to become embodied texts. She introduces her explanation of Origen's exaltation of Mary Magdalene by saying, "Concerning one (I pass over all others) / I wish to write something / By which we may learn to recognize / Great marks of spiritual love, / And also find a great example / In what union she gave herself to Love" (322, *M.* 3:49-54). Renowned for being the most faithful of Christ's

followers, Mary Magdalene wrote no gospel, but she becomes the subject of Origen's text and later Hadewijch's by virtue of the "great example" of her life. Hadewijch's rhetoric reminds the Beguines that, like Mary Magdalene, they may not write or preach the Word, but they can *be* the Word, indivisible from God's message and from each other based on their communal efforts.

Paradoxically, Hadewijch's embodied notion of rhetoric demands interpersonal communication that reinforces the corporeal form. Hadewijch advises them: "ask about the way from those who are close to you, and who you see are now going his ways in the manner most like his, and are obedient to him in all works of virtue. Thus follow him who himself is the way, and those who have gone this way and are now going it" (78; lt. 15, par. 45). While she includes herself as one who walks the path of godliness, she enjoins the other Beguines to advise each other and to serve as models. She encourages one addressee to "take care that God be honored by you and by all those whom you can help, with effort, with self-sacrifice, with counsel, and with all that you do" (121; lt. 31, par. 26). Hadewijch expects the Beguines under her direction to practice persuasion. They should combine words and action to ensure the spiritual success of their companions and of the community as a whole, as well as to defend their very way of life.

Hadewijch's Mystical Ethos

Hadewijch implicitly champions the spiritual calling embodied by the Beguines by extolling a mystical theology that Bernard McGinn deems "among the most daring of the medieval period" (*Flowering* 221-2). Although he finds nothing to suggest that her

works directly aroused suspicions of heresy, she nonetheless contended with challenges posed by her gender and non-ecclesiastical status. I argue that Hadewijch gained the power to compose her works and teach her Beguine pupils by constructing an authorial ethos, or rhetorical persona, that drew upon the intellectual weight inherent to theology and philosophy. At the center of her ethos is the figure of *Minne*, a topos that represents Hadewijch's desire and God's Love, thereby creating an ontological contiguity between God and the female mystic. Hadewijch describes *Minne* as approachable only through an exclusive relationship between Reason and Love, thus making the appropriation of philosophical apparatus necessary.

Hadewijch's ethos combines masculine intellectual authority with maternal concern for excluded others. She addresses men in positions of power at their level and using their language, so to speak, and her influence on Eckhart, Ruusbroec, and other male mystics indicates how long her commanding reputation remained intact.¹⁹ As Maaïke Meijer points out, "she never refers to herself as 'a mere woman,' never belittles her vocation, never shows any of the 'feminine' modesty or restraint we know so well from women writers of later times" (3). Hadewijch uses her commanding ethos to share with her female audience religious and scientific information that substantiates her mystical claims and facilitates their own learning. Emphasizing physical differences between the sexes, male writers of the Middle Ages extrapolated a "concomitant intellectual gap" (Glenn, *Rhetoric Retold* 77) that rendered women unable to understand,

¹⁹ According to Jessica Boon, Ruusbroec regarded Hadewijch "no differently than he might any male mystic or theologian whose works he knew intimately—as a person whose method of talking about God formed a part of the presuppositions that constantly underlay his growth as a mystic" (487).

let alone compose, philosophical or theological works. Hadewijch disproves these views by imparting her knowledge of these fields to her fellow Beguines, whom she deems capable of advanced insight, and by publicizing her impressive intellect in her letters to male readers.

In a letter to the head of a male monastery, a person Hart identifies as possibly Gilbertus of Saint James' Abbey in Brussels, Hadewijch explains that only by conquering Love can the soul be rightly conquered. She bases her model of mysticism on the biblical story of Jacob's wrestling with the Angel of God, an apt comparison since James is translated as "Jacob" in Dutch (Hart, Introduction 16). Although she claims to begin her exposition with "veritable humility," she flaunts her extensive knowledge of the Scriptures as she explains what his administrative responsibilities entail. "And you should also lead your brethren on the right way by fervent love and help them to love, so that they may love in God and in veritable works, for God and for veritable virtues. And always remember what Scripture says: *Sobrie, pie iuste viuamus in hoc seculo* (Tit. 2:12). This pertains to your function" (74; lt. 12, par. 214). Again, Hadewijch demonstrates knowledge of Origen's theology by echoing his interpretation of the Jacob account in *De Principiis* III.5, where he elucidates the difference between Jacob's wrestling "with" the angel from wrestling "against" the angel (333; ch. 2:5). That Jacob wrestled *with* the angel indicates that God's presence protected him during the encounter and helped him to emerge victorious. Hadewijch employs Origen's rationale to argue that while Love and the soul struggle for dominance, Love as God nonetheless provides the soul the strength to endure and to someday prevail; she adapts his exegetical model

to accommodate the aspect of *Minne* that represents God as a lady wanting to be found. Hadewijch's letter to Gilbertus attests to her status as authority figure during her lifetime. "Although you ask me to write to you about this," she informs him, "you yourself know well what one must do for the sake of perfection in God's sight" (70; It. 12, par. 3). She briefly engages the humility topos at the opening of her letter, but afterwards, Hadewijch gives no indication that she should apologize for engaging in a highly public, highly imposing form of rhetoric. The confident tone apparent in her writing is similar to the ethos asserted by Hildegard of Bingen, who did not shrink from correcting men of high position. Hadewijch cites biblical passages and alludes to exegesis of these passages by established authorities elegantly and with ease. While not denying her gender, she revises previous models to suit her *minnemystiek* and portrays herself as an expert in the theological tradition.

Hadewijch's rhetorical positioning as a doctrinal expert permits her to expound on the nature of the Trinity for the mystical benefit of her pupils while maintaining an air of orthodoxy. This is no small feat, for Beguines composed in the vernacular languages, which allowed them to write for wider audiences including those who lacked literacy in Latin. They also avoided ecclesiastical persecution by rhetorically denying their works the legitimacy that accompanied composition in the official language of the Church. Even now vernacular rhetorics tend to escape notice because their appearance "under the surface" of legitimized discourses grants them an "unremarkable character" that "makes the eye and ear detect what it is prepared to detect" (Hauser and McClellan 31). But, authorities did forbid the writing of Trinitarian works in languages other than Latin,

which they viewed as the sole tongue capable of successfully communicating the Trinity's theological complexities. By writing in the vernacular, Hadewijch addresses the interests of popular audiences judged by many Church authorities as too obtuse to fully understand the subtleties of Trinitarian thought. Therefore, she could easily be accused of placing her audience's souls at risk by conveying overly-lofty concepts and representing them as accessible to all.

Hadewijch's writing also challenged the clergy's *exclusive* right to teach and preach (Geybels 78). These issues do not stay Hadewijch's hand, as she represents herself as having the power of God's Word on her side. Asserting her mystical authority, she explains how the soul blessed with clarity by the Holy Spirit contemplates God in His Godhead and delights in its findings:

What have I except God (cf. Ps. 72:25)? God is disclosed to me as Presence; God is to me an Effusion; God is to me Totality. God is present to me with the Son, in sweetness; God with the Holy Spirit is an Effusion for me in richness; God is for me, with the Father, Totality with bliss. Thus God is to me in Three Persons one Lord, and one Lord in Three Persons, and in these Three Persons he is to my soul in the manifold of the divine riches. (109; lt. 28, par. 26)

She reiterates the orthodox position expressed by Augustine in *The Trinity* (bk. 15.7) that God in his totality is the Trinity, but she emphasizes the blessings each aspect bestows upon the loving soul. She discerns which person of the Trinity confers each gift by virtue of her own mystical experience. Staging her discussion as a conversation between her

own soul and God, she describes the relationship as one in which the blissful soul can become God with God, a notion that will find further expression in the works of Eckhart. Due to her personal acquaintance with God, she can profess a considerable understanding that eludes others: “In the considerations of all the Church’s scholars, / I say no scholar is able to consider / How fortunate will be the state / Of him who has wrought deeds of strength in Love” (192; *SG* 23:101-04). What soon becomes apparent, however, is that she lacks the words to capture the meaning of Love. Even as she cites the theological writings of others, Hadewijch’s mystical declarations suggest that their works cannot express the knowledge that God has granted her either.

To illustrate the experience of divine union, Hadewijch speaks in terms of a perfect kiss, a metaphor that signifies a state of being “united with him apart from all creatures” in which the soul “accepts no appeasement except what one receives in the delight of unity within him” (108; *lt.* 27, par. 38). Drawing on the language of the *Song of Songs* and William of St. Thierry’s exegetical treatment of the book’s imagery, she symbolizes with a kiss the moment that the soul “enters the divine life of the Trinity itself” (Duclow 210). Hadewijch selects unassuming terms like “sweetness” and “kisses” to clarify the substantial intricacies of the Trinity for her Beguine audience, and to teach them how to join their souls with God. Hers is a theology that “arises out of and is true to her distinctive experience and that of other women of her time and place” (Hart, Introduction 5). Her words reflect the emotional depth of everyday life and the theological expertise that inform the practical instruction of her Beguines. Hadewijch’s

rhetoric aims to reveal a reality that exists “deeper than the level of everyday existence”; it does not “deny the validity of that existence” (Guest 166).

Indeed, her rhetoric underscores the experience of daily living as a tool for deciphering profound truth. Hadewijch channels the sensual implications attached to her metaphors to advise her female readers and listeners that they should be prudent in their pursuit of God. While their spiritual labors may bring great pleasure, they should be wary not to confuse simple satisfaction with the delight of true union. She warns, “[W]hatever God bestows on you, however beautiful it is, do not give your kiss before the day when you know it will last eternally” (102; *It.* 23, par. 2). But just how are they to discern the difference between transient and eternal bliss? Hadewijch stresses the role of Reason in determining between the two. “Then Reason did me an injury. / I thought it a feud, / That she took from me the attire/Love had given me. / I thought it a feud; / Yet Reason taught me to live the truth” (214; *SG* 30:61-66). The eager soul wants to reach out to Love, but Reason reminds the soul that she is still human. As much as the soul is loath to hear the truth—that true union must wait until the next world—Reason’s counsel forces the soul to continue suffering in service to Love. By speaking through the persona of Reason, Hadewijch claims for her ethos an authority that joins rationality to the emotions.

Given Hadewijch’s emphasis on Reason as a spiritual guide, her rhetorical ethos draws also from the masculine discipline of philosophy, and it is this aspect of her writing that proves remarkable for the time. Medieval women’s writings tend to exhibit familiarity with prevalent religious themes because they could learn elements of

theology secondhand, by listening to Church sermons or texts recited aloud during group readings. The exclusive nature of philosophy, however, guaranteed that few women had direct access to current scientific information. Yet Hadewich's scientific knowledge proves extensive. In a vision wherein she describes the effects of an angel's clapping wings on two sets of the universal spheres, or "heavenly kingdoms," she makes use of the Ptolemaic astronomical model though the order of the moon and sun are typically reversed in the Bible (Hart, Introduction 25-6). She writes: "At the first clap, the moon stood motionless in her rotation, for this silence, which was commanded there. At the second clap, the sun stood motionless in its rotation, for this silence. At the third clap, all the stars . . . ceased their rotation" (273; V. 4, par. 9). Maintaining the order promoted by Ptolemaic cosmology, she lists the clapping's impact on the "dwellers in paradise," the celestial seat, the saints on earth, in purgatory, and in heaven, and finally on heaven itself. Each of these spheres stop spinning as she recognizes that one heavenly kingdom belongs to the "ideal Hadewijch"—her image in God—and the other to the divinity of Christ, with whom her soul is joined (380; n. 49, 50). Drawing upon complex philosophical notions, she ties the human condition to the cosmos as a whole.

Hadewijch's vision bolsters her learned ethos by exhibiting full awareness of this theme as a commonplace argument among medieval philosophers who sought to deliberate the nature of souls. This theme originates with the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15: 40-41, where Paul states, "There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory

of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory.” Hadewijch reveals her familiarity with the metaphysical implications attached to this model by medieval thinkers, who posited that the sublunary world contained the universal aspect disturbed by humanity’s Fall while everything beyond remained unaffected. Although in her vision the saints’ bodies inhabit different spheres, their harmonized responses occur as the angel’s wing-clapping reaches the perfect superlunary realm because their souls, purified through intense spiritual labor, exist beyond the sublunary world. Her reasoning can be compared to that of Hugh of St. Victor, who argues in the *Didascalicon* that souls are by nature intellectible but become intelligible through their contact with the body (63-64; bk. 2, ch. 3). That is, souls that come into contact with bodies cease to exist as pure form and assume a state that renders them capable of being perceived through the intellect. Hadewijch reiterates this idea rhetorically to substantiate her vision because while the saints’ “bodies” exist on earth and purgatory, their perfected souls nevertheless perceive the clapping of angel’s wings once the sound reaches the realm of pure form.²⁰ Writing for the Beguines under her direction, however, she also suggests the aspects of this philosophical theory that distinguish the life of the body from that of the soul so as to further their spiritual development rather than for the sake of pure speculation alone. The figure of Reason permeates Hadewijch’s rhetoric, and, in turn, Hadewijch frames Reason as a pragmatic feature of women’s religiosity.

²⁰ A further distinction can be drawn in Hadewijch’s vision between basic souls and those of the saints. According to David Gary Shaw, “a pre-Cartesian world couldn’t really think of the soul as fully immaterial.... Spirits were suffering for real and physically in the inferno, which is not only, as we might suppose, a psychic contradiction in terms. Souls were rather more like bodies than we would expect” (166). This would indicate that for Hadewijch, the souls of the saints have retained greater similitude to the divine essence as pure form than those of other individuals since the saints can hear the sound of the angel’s wings from the superlunary realm even as they suffer purification in purgatory.

Hadewijch makes this principle clear by making additional use of her knowledge of astronomy, this time in one of the stanzaic poems. In this context, scientific expertise serves as an indication of lesser understanding than that generated by mystical activity:

The course of the firmament and of the planets,
 And of the signs that stand in the firmament,
 We can know to some extent by a similitude,
 And count the number by calculation.
 But no master can presume this—
 That he can give understanding of Love to the minds
 Of all who ever knew and shall know Love,
 And shall run the course of Love. (245; *SG* 40:57-64)

Hadewijch alters the significance of academic capital to emphasize the ineffectiveness of intellectual pursuits in the quest for ultimate truth. Ironically, she suggests that the knowledge gained by philosophers is purely rhetorical, since it is mere “similitude.” According to medieval philosophers, similitudes allowed the mind to perceive the essence of a thing through a comparative relationship. Similitudes were necessary because “[i]ntellectual cognition, in the end, strictly requires the presence of mental representations within the mind of the cognizer” (Panacchio 199). However, while they may draw the mind closer to the truth of a thing, similitudes are not themselves true and can easily deceive the mind into believing that they are by the very fact that they resemble their objects of representation. That the nature of the material universe can still be determined through them indicates in comparison the complexity of the mystical

insight to which she is privy, although she admits that herself cannot convey this wisdom because it must be experienced personally.

Just as previously Hadewijch cautioned the Beguines that the emotional pleasure that accompanies spiritual growth could lead to confusion, she now contends that the intellect fails to accurately appreciate the truth of Love because “reason may err” (53; It. 4, par. 32). In a letter to the Beguines, she writes, “‘He who knows little can say little’: so says wise Augustine. This is my case, God knows. I believe and hope greatly in God, but my knowledge of him is small; I can guess only a little of the riddle of God; for men cannot interpret him with human notions. But one who was touched in his soul by God could interpret something of him for those who understood this with their soul” (94; It. 22, par. 8). Hadewijch repeatedly affirms her inability to teach others what she knows, although she can point the way toward the acquisition of such wisdom. Thus, she relies on the language of metaphor, which by its very nature acknowledges its signifying properties, and uses the personified topoi of Love and Reason to illustrate the process by which each soul draws closer to God. She must do so because words “adequately describe ‘things on earth’ but inevitably fail in expressing ‘heavenly wisdom’” (Duclow 224). “The fruition of Love is a game,” she says, “That no one can explain truly. / And although he who has felt it can truly explain something, / He who has never felt it could not understand it” (245; *SG* 40:49-52). In order for others to comprehend what she wishes to communicate, they, too, must suffer for Love; they must learn something of Love via their own passions. This stipulation reveals that Hadewijch’s rhetorical approach encourages readers to foster an emotional form of knowledge, one that each

person can bring to the spiritual table regardless of their individual backgrounds. This impression points to a notion of the audience as active participants in the creation of rhetorical and personal spiritual meaning.

Hadewijch informs her audience that they cannot remain passive while listening to her expound on Love. She cautions them using frank words, “you should wish to have God from creatures; but from no one should you receive him except from the plentitude of his simple Essence, to which you must lovingly devote yourself. For his sweet name makes him pleasing to all men, in the ears of the rational soul” (105; lt. 24, par. 99). They must fill in the gaps in meaning that ineffability imposes upon her instructive rhetoric. Each reader or listener must engage their emotions (Love) and intellect (Reason) to envision his or her soul as the nonspecific soul in Hadewich’s rhetorical linking of Reason and Love. Thus, drawing a clear distinction between the limits of the intellect and the expansive capacity of the emotions, Hadewijch establishes her *minnemystiek* as inhabiting the intersection of the capacity typically granted each notion. Although her writing reveals her philosophical and theological erudition, nonetheless her rhetoric demands a turning away from the rigid logic that these disciplines employ. Much like Augustine, who amended classical rhetoric to suit his religious aims, Hadewich is not above adapting philosophical concepts to promote a “rational” mystical activity. However, her rhetorical intent is to remind her audiences that Reason should lead to an illogical emotional quest for Love.

Minne, Reason, and the Tree

In guiding her readers and listeners toward Love, Hadewijch employs rhetorical models provided by many philosophical and theological predecessors. Her revision of an established philosophical apparatus—the arboreal architectonic—provides an examination of her adaptation of concepts typically regarded as beyond the ken of the female mind. For while theological insights filtered down to popular audiences via sermons and other texts, systematic scientific knowledge proved harder to come by for female readers and listeners of the Middle Ages. Medieval philosophy relied on the still-prevalent universalist assumption that “anyone with sound mental and sensual faculties enjoys a certain access to reality” (Compier 41). Yet discriminatory constructions of subjectivity worked to exclude persons deemed too emotional or sensual to fit the prevalent paradigm, mainly women, and as a result they were barred from public rhetorical and intellectual activity. Hadewijch and her fellow Beguines lived at a time characterized by stringent notions of women’s place in a well ordered society.

Addressing Western notions of civilization, Christopher E. Forth states that it is “implicitly patriarchal, for by insisting upon the domestication of women it [has] transformed mother and wives into the moralizing agents of society while refusing them access to the world of politics, the professions and ideas” (7). This proved especially true during the Christian Middle Ages. Associated primarily with the corporeality and its sinful implications, women could aspire to redirect their corporeal vitality towards godly things; as mystics, they could even serve as living exemplars to both men and women of humanity’s constant struggle to rein in the wayward flesh. But they could not typify

intellectual achievement, which remained a masculine trait. However, Forth adds, “civilization’s ... effects upon gender relations and representations defy easy categorization” (7). Forth’s words reveal the basic instability of gender categories, which medieval authorities sought to conceal behind rigid regulation of religious women’s public activities. By appropriating the tools of science and adapting them for her pupils, Hadewijch’s writing reveals that women could adapt masculine discourses to suit the gender restrictions that configured their everyday lives.

Hadewijch’s skillful rhetoric modifies the arboreal architectonic, transforming the philosophical schematic into a tool of *minnemystiek*. In an allegorical vision (V1), she is led by an angel to a meadow occupied by trees. Her depiction of the arbor begins with the description of an unhealthy tree and concludes with that of a glorious tree with roots in heaven; all together, they depict the soul’s passage across different stages of human understanding by means of the virtues it acquires along the way. Hadewijch’s use of tree imagery establishes her understanding of philosophical tradition, which aligns the Garden imagery of Genesis with Plato’s “organic image of the human soul rooted in the Divine” in the *Timaeus* and Philo’s “vision of the universe as vegetative and creation as planted” (Horowitz 67). Like Plato’s tree in the *Timaeus*, Hadewijch’s tree is upside-down, representing humanity as “rooted” in divinity. However, the tree images of her predecessors are *arbore scientiae*, intended to evaluate and organize the essence of nature, while Hadewijch’s vision depicts what can be termed an *arbor amoris*, meant to assist the prospective mystic in drawing closer to God’s essence. Hadewijch’s tree is not merely a classificatory scheme but a method, a theory for living and loving rather than

the product of conjecture. Critical opinion posits that Hadewijch herself arranged the order of her visions to arrange a “mystical itinerary” that begins with the tree vision as allegory, proceeds through the seer’s growth in mystical graces (V2-V12), and concludes in Visions 13 and 14 (*Flowering* 201). Thus, Hadewijch’s rhetorical presentation of the tree allegory at the start of her arrangement indicates the importance of the tree as a codicological key that enables the mystical journey.

The first tree has rotten roots but a solid trunk, and it is crowned with a beautiful flower that is nonetheless so frail that Hadewijch supposes any storm would destroy it. Hadewijch interprets the rotten root as humanity’s “brittle nature,” the trunk as “the eternal soul,” and the flower as the “beautiful human shape, which becomes corrupt so quickly, in an instant” (263; V. 1, par. 24). The next tree signifies humility; it bears low-hanging, multicolored foliage obscured by dried, withered leaves. This tree represents the soul that hides its virtues because it *feels* and *knows* that it lacks “fruition of its Beloved” (264; par. 42). Another tree, with wide leaves, represents “the power of perfect will.” Hadewijch realizes this after the angel states, “You have conquered the powerful and strong God, from the origin of his Being” (264; par. 60). The following tree is tall with branches that extend through those of another; this tree is discernment, which the angel attributes to the one “instructed by reason, even by the reason of the great God” (264; par. 71). Then the angel brings Hadewijch to a beautiful tree with three types of branches and three of each type so that one set adorns the top, one set the middle, and

one set the lower end of the tree.²¹ This tree is wisdom. Its lowest branches represent fears that inspire the soul to seek God faithfully, the middle branches signify chastity of body and soul, and the topmost branches are virtues (265-266; par. 124-163). After seeing this, Hadewijch is led by the angel to a chalice filled with blood. She drinks from the chalice of patience and vows “to content God steadfastly by patient fidelity” (266; par. 177-181).

Only then does the angel bring her to the tree at the center of the arbor, a tree rooted in heaven. Its lowest branches are faith and hope “by which persons begin” and it ends with Love. The angel informs Hadewijch, “O mistress, you climb this tree from the beginning to the end, all the way to the profound roots of the incomprehensible God! Understand that this is the way of beginners and of those who persevere to perfection!” (266; par, 185). Finally, Hadewijch understands this to be the tree of knowledge of God. Beside this central tree is another, which Hadewijch describes as having round leaves; strangely, she does not explain its meaning. Instead, the angel bids her remain a prisoner there until the one who called her appears to impart his “hidden counsel” (267; par. 199). Meanwhile, the angel will leave to guard her vacated body, but not before instructing her to turn away from him and all things on heaven and earth. Hadewijch does as she is told, then sees a cross whiter and clearer than crystal with a disk-like seat in the center supported by three pillars (267; par. 236). The pillars are the Persons of the Trinity, and

²¹ Gerhart B. Ladner explains some of the typological meanings behind Trinitarian-based models of medieval arboreal schematics: “In the thirteenth century, the trees of the human race in Joachim of Flora’s *Liber figurarum* symbolize the Joachimite three ages of sacred history and their correspondence to the three persons of the Trinity. This symbolism could be expressed by an ascending tree or by a tree which has grown in three circles” (276). While Hadewijch bases her trees on Trinitarian-based schematics, she does not have the branches represent the Trinity but the virtues that lead to union with God. I believe this shift reinforces the practical applications of Hadewijch’s tree.

the disk, eternity. Seated here is the one she has long sought, God, who directs Hadewijch to prepare to suffer physically and emotionally in order to “possess me wholly in my Divinity and Humanity” (268; par. 288). Hadewijch must be ready to be despised by all and to embrace sorrow. At last, God clarifies, “This is the tree described by the words I have now spoken to you: It is called the Knowledge of Love. For as so many things were preached to you that might incline you to lowness, I have shown you myself what I expect of you” (270; par. 404).

Mary Carruthers states that “trees are *cognitive* schematics, pictures whether in words or in paint that are made for the thinking mind” (212). These *picturae* may or may not be presented in the form of diagrams, but in the form of poems or narratives that allow the reader or listener to remember needful information.²² Hadewijch’s rhetorical intent in using the arboreal scheme is to convey a mystical methodology rather than organizational knowledge. Given the paradoxical nature of *Minne*, this knowledge cannot be communicated in a forthright manner. Such contradiction is expressed via the voices of the angel and God: the angel directs the soul to climb up towards God from the earthly to the divine realm, while God commands the soul to turn inward, away from the world and toward the emotional life that brings divine union. The soul must follow both directives at once. Likewise, the various trees the soul encounters are not located along a

²² Carruthers states that medieval images were “not just ‘aids’ to understanding, as we would say, implying their subservient role to language and that they are in some basic way unnecessary to knowing. They are exercises and examples to be studied and remembered as much as are words. Words and images together are two ‘ways’ of the same mental activity—invention. In addition to acquiring a repertory of words—*dicta et facta memorabilia*—children also gathered into their memories a repertory of images” (142). Hadewijch merges the two “ways” by creating mental images using words that point to their own inability to express certain truths, for which reason images are necessary. Thus, the paradox of *Minne* can be seen to infuse her rhetoric down to the structural level.

trajectory of increasing importance; the virtues signified by these trees must be engaged simultaneously. At the center of this rhizomatic scene, which depicts an equally diffuse mystical process, is the figure of the inverted tree. As the representation of Love, this tree becomes the rhetorical linchpin that keeps the unity of the garden intact. The tree itself is central to the mystical path that Hadewijch maps out, even though all of the virtues work together to ennoble the questing soul. Given the fluid rather than hierarchical relationship between the virtues that proves necessary to *minnemystiek*, the path between them cannot be charted in the same linear manner as are other forms while still retaining the vision of a linear progression from the earthly realm to spiritual perfection. Instead, Hadewijch paints in words an allegorical scene that provides a substitute for the diagrammatic delineation of knowledge most commonly used by philosophers and theologians. Because everything has already been arranged by God's hand, nature itself is a sign of divine order.

In addition, the paradox that *Minne* embodies distinguishes Hadewijch's use of trees from those of her predecessors because Hadewijch's vision goes against typical medieval depictions of gardens. According to Bridget Ann Henisch, the Garden of Paradise was depicted as the epitome of perfection "in terms of proportion and balance," just as "the known world was racked with dissension and disorder" (151). This tendency is exemplified in the arboreal *stemmata* of medieval philosophy since even though the fallen world proved chaotic, knowledge, being one of the gifts imparted by the Holy Spirit, allowed humanity to see God's hand at work in the world. Extending this notion to garden imagery as a whole, writers of the Middle Ages viewed gardens as symbols for

God's creation since "gardens have to be made" and are only transformed into artistic settings once the "hand of the master has been laid upon it" (Henisch 155). Hadewijch deliberately introduces elements of disarray into the garden that she rhetorically cultivates in her visionary tableau. She begins her description of her vision with the image of a tree with rotten roots and fragile flowers, symbolizing human nature, which for all its imperfections finds itself at home in this garden where God will deign to speak to Hadewijch. Furthermore, the tree that symbolizes humility deliberately hides its beautiful foliage under shriveled leaves so that, paradoxically, unsightliness works to reveal the beauty beneath.

Not only does Hadewijch establish the presence of aesthetic blemishes as metaphors for human defects in the Garden of Paradise; her rhetoric situates these flaws as crucial to the mystical journey both as impetus and encouragement, and also as proof of fruition, since Love will set all things right in the end. Once again, Hadewijch presents no hierarchical arrangement as she describes the flawed natural elements and their perfect counterparts in her vision. All things work in concert, serving a function that will guide the soul ever upward along the central tree. As is the case in her lyrics, Hadewijch's vision brings "nature to life as sign and symbol of the renewal that divine love promises. For her, nature serves as troth from the Lord" (Dreyer, *Passionate Spirituality* 126). The only hierarchy that exists is between God and the acolyte soul who has not yet attained union with God, and even the order of that relationship comes into question since *minnemystiek* entails that the soul conquer God so that God can conquer

the soul. Such is the passionate, illogical nature of the *Minne* which pervades Hadewijch's revelation.

Ironically, the evidence of *Minne*'s presence throughout the allegory is the fact that she is not visible at all. Although Hadewijch's vision depicts the tree of the Knowledge of Love as a discrete thing, God's words reveal that the Love at the core of *minnemystiek* suffuses the entire visionary *mise-en-scène*. This diffusive presence authorizes Hadewijch's visionary rhetoric. As Hans Geybels states fittingly, "Hadewijch's root-metaphor in her works is *minne*, which means 'God is Love'" (98). Yet God does not actually speak of a tree even metaphorically, but expounds on the suffering the soul must experience if she is to be truly united with Him. He also explains that when He lived as a man, He shared in the nature of man despite having the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Thus, He experienced the very same afflictions that the soul must bear, for which reason the soul should not complain but rejoice in hardship. The human soul must suffer out of love for God just as He suffered out of love for humanity.

Nonetheless, at the close of his declamation, God calls the message He has communicated "a tree," revealing that, like Hadewijch, He too has created a schematic by which the soul can decipher its true path. Thus, just as the gardener's occupation reflects the creative hand of God in nature, the roles that God and Hadewijch assume as rhetoricians mirror one another. Like the imperfect and perfect elements in Hadewijch's vision, Hadewijch and God work together to bring searching souls closer to their unitive goal. They create illustrations that illuminate the mystical path even if the nature of *Minne* itself can never be clarified in words or thought. Therefore, Hadewijch's

composition of her visionary works is presented as endorsed by God Himself since it frames God as a master that chooses her as His apprentice in the creation of allegorical gardens and epistemological tools. Moreover, because she appears to receive divine training in the construction of such cognitive apparatus free of human—particularly masculine—mediation, Hadewijch depicts herself as adapting the arboreal schematic and amending it following God's own model.

Conclusion

Hadewijch uses the conventions of chivalric literature to advance her account of *minnemystiek*, a mystical tradition that characterizes God as a courtly maiden and the soul seeking divine union as a devoted troubadour and stalwart knight. Like all mystics, she reminds her audiences that the core of the Christian faith is a mystical connection between God and humanity, a bond that transcends intellect and speech. While reason is necessary to the discernment of truth and language to the spiritual direction of others, she asserts that these faculties fail to adequately explain the impenetrable and unintelligible nature of Love; that each soul must learn through personal emotional experience of the divine. “What mind can say eludes me,” she confesses often (89; lt. 19, l. 26). Hadewijch's rhetoric expresses the futility of Love's delineation by making use of feminine topoi that signify but cannot fully denote the convergence of intellect and passion that occurs within the questing soul—Love and Queen Reason. Together these figures stage the cooperative but hierarchical relationship that she expounds. “May God grant to all who love / That they may win the favor of Reason,” she writes, “By which

they may know / How fruition of Love is attained. / In winning the favor of Reason / Lies for us the whole perfection of Love” (215; SG 30:85-90). Yet despite differences in their respective ranks, at times *Minne* and Queen Reason collaborate so closely that their personalities intermingle. They illustrate the truth imparted by *minnemystiek*: although the soul can never attain perfect union with God in this world, it must nonetheless strive to erase the boundaries that distinguish its identity as distinct from God.

The correlation between the feminine topoi of *Minne* and Queen Reason in Hadewijch’s rhetoric also illuminates how she revises the masculine project of philosophy. Reason is essential to mystical knowledge, permitting the soul to understand how best to proceed when engaging in the practices of everyday living and worship. Reason also pertains to members of either sex. To her Beguines she writes, “It is truly fitting that everyone contemplate God’s grace and goodness with wisdom and prudence: for God has given us our beautiful faculty of reason, which instructs man in all his ways and enlightens him in all works” (77; It. 14, par. 57). She enjoins a male reader to exercise reason in order to eschew the “emotional attraction of worldly joy” that impedes the “beautiful behavior, the gracious bearing, and the well-ordered service that belong to sublime Love” (72; It. 12, par. 103). Hadewijch’s concept of rationality varies from that of established notions because Reason must serve Love at all times. By thus privileging embodied knowledge, her paradigm incorporates the emotional needs of the women around her.

Consequently, her rhetoric provides an example of the views of contemporary feminist theologians who define societal reorganization as among a mystic’s main

motivations. According to Mary Potter Engel, a truly feminist mysticism strives “[n]ot to revel in an inner awareness of the One Who Enlivens All and one’s personal liberation *from* I-hood. But to bear fruit, use its freedom *for* a transformed life of action in the world” (154). In a time before feminism, Hadewijch accomplishes this by amending established philosophical and theological models. Her rhetoric bolsters mysticism’s status as the pursuit of truth and upholds the right of her Beguine pupils to practice their vocation out in the world, free from ecclesiastical oversight. Hadewijch’s process of rhetorical revision emerges most prominently in her vision of trees in Paradise; she modifies the purpose of *stemmata* used by philosophers to compartmentalize knowledge. Instead, her tree vision depicts Love as universally imminent and promotes a bold emotional investment over rumination, “[f]or reason cannot understand / How love, by Love, sees to the depths of the Beloved, / Perceiving how Love lives freely in all things” (89; lt. 19, l. 19-21). Using feminine topoi, Hadewijch illustrates how mystical insight emerges when reason and love are in a perfect but paradoxical agreement.

CHAPTER IV

CONSUMING THE TOPOS: LEPROUS EFFLUVIUM AND THE REINSCRIPTIVE
 FEMALE BODY IN THE *BOOK* OF ANGELA OF FOLIGNO

In this chapter, I examine the rhetorical implications of effluvial consumption in *The Book of Blessed Angela*, written by Angela of Foligno and her scribe, Brother A. Consumption of contaminated flesh and effluvia by holy women is a recurrent theme in medieval religious texts. Angela of Foligno (c. 1248 - 1309) tastes the Eucharist when she swallows a leper's scab; Catherine of Siena (1347 - 1380) drinks the water she uses to wash another woman's sores; and Catherine of Genoa (1447 - 1510) ingests the parasites that themselves feed on the patients in her care. Whether theorized as self-destructive methods by which medieval women established presence in a world over which they have little control, or as self-authorizing gestures toward sanctity, these depictions of consumption must be interrogated within a comprehensive economy of signs called for by the hagiographical and mystical genres. Critical interpretation has tended to focus on the pathological implications of such bizarre conduct, deeming these acts symptoms of "hysteria"²³ or side-effects of extreme inedia²⁴ despite considerable

²³ In "Hysterical Remembering," Michael S. Roth explains that in an effort to legitimize the practice of hypnosis, and to a wider extent, establish the incontrovertible truth and capacity of science, Jean-Martin Charcot and his followers "rewrote" the histories of witchcraft and sainthood in order to diagnose as hysterics women belonging to either category. He states, "As they did with hypnosis, the doctors were attempting to show the power of their new techniques over material once thought to lie beyond the borders of science. By bringing this material into the scientific domain, the doctors were claiming new territory for the empire of rational investigation and thereby increasing their own power within the contest of competing scientific disciplines." (12) Notably, both categories had empowered women via the

evidence that male hagiographers deliberately emphasized these strange behaviors in their works to regulate feminine religious activity. However, while we cannot confirm the somatic bases for these acts or that these women indeed engaged in such erratic behaviors outside of their respective hagiographies, we may determine how such astonishing depictions functioned symbolically in the everyday lives of their potential reading audiences.

Critics like Carolyn Walker Bynum and Elizabeth A. Petroff have argued, respectively, that the consumption of noxious substances permitted religious women to engage in *imitatio Christi* and claim a visibility commonly reserved for men.²⁵ They become, according to Petroff, “transgressors, rulebreakers, flouters of boundaries,” doubly so on account of being both holy persons and women (*Body and Soul* 161). Although I find these critics’ arguments regarding feminine religious expression more constructive than psychological approaches, I consider here the issue of medieval women’s consumption of waste products as a solely rhetorical phenomenon. Focusing on the writings of Angela of Foligno, I contend that the depiction of effluvial ingestion in her *Book* presents leprous discharge as a topos that signifies the many anxieties surrounding women’s social presence. This topos is, in turn, consumed and

transgressive verbal and corporeal opportunities available to those living outside social norms determined by religion. Such a view is articulated by Michel De Certeau in *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley, New York: Columbia UP, 1992.

²⁴ Rudolph Bell writes, “Their anorexia came to be seen as part of a wider pattern of heroic, ascetic masochism amply justified in the literature of radical Christian religiosity.” (21) I disagree with his approach in that he presupposes hagiographic depictions of women as factual descriptions laden with psychological weight rather than rhetorical commonplaces rooted in a generic tradition known for emphasizing deliberately unattainable sanctity.

²⁵ See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: U of California, 1988); *Jesus as Mother: Studies in Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: U of California, 1982); and Elizabeth A. Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994), 204-24.

circumscribed by Angela, rendering her body a “super-topos” that draws on the assumed alterity of female spirituality to frame feminine corporeality as an agent of divine order.

Constructing the Holy Woman: Social, Religious, and Political Factors

One of the foremost Franciscan holy women of the thirteenth century, the Italian tertiary and mystic Angela of Foligno is today known as the writer of *The Book of Blessed Angela*. Her *Book* is composed of the *Memorial*, an autohagiography written in conjunction with her confessor, scribe, and relative, Brother A., and the *Instructions*, letters and spiritual exposition written by her to her followers and collected after her death. The relationship between these two works explains the public process by which Angela acquired her spiritual authority. Angela’s quest to become like Christ is depicted in the *Memorial*, which Bernard McGinn describes as “one of the first and certainly the longest and most complex of the autohagiographies of the later Middle Ages,” while the *Instructions* explains how others came to acknowledge Angela as a figure worthy of obeisance, as “*mater et magistra*” (*Flowering* 150). Born just over twenty years after the death of Francis of Assisi, whose radical spiritual practices revolutionized the modes of religious expression available to men and women, Angela’s spiritual praxis emphasized extreme poverty as a way of growing closer to God. Franciscan spirituality attracted women like Angela because it provided them an access to public life by justifying a “‘secularizing’ tendency in late medieval mysticism—the insistence on the mystic’s presence in the public world, even if she or he wished to remain in the cell of contemplation” (McGinn, *Flowering* 140). As did Francis and his male mendicant

followers, Angela embodied a lifestyle that melded personal faith with a highly visible persona even as her spiritual identity blurred the distinction between the religious and secular realms.

The *Memorial* and the *Instructions* portray Angela as an extraordinary religious figure, but they reveal little about her personal life. In keeping with the conventions of mystical writing, Angela's works focus on her spiritual experiences rather than on the specifics of her "external" or material life. She does not even give her name. The *Book* refers to its author solely as "L.," possibly short for "Lelle," a nickname for Angela; she becomes "Angela" only in manuscripts composed after her death. Indeed, apart from a reference to Angela by Ubertino of Casale in 1305, a reference that makes no mention of her writings, the only close identification comes via Angela's obituary, where she is identified simply as "a. de f." (Mooney, "Changing Fortunes" 58). This much Angela does relate: she states that was a wife and mother until she experienced a profound spiritual conversion that inspired her to dedicate her life to God; this decision prompted constant abuse from those closest to her. Yet in the end, her pious existence seems to have been rewarded—she prayed to be free of familial constraints, and her husband, sons, and mother died (126; *Memorial* ch. 1).²⁶

Angela's prayers for freedom and their ostensible results may alienate contemporary readers, but medieval audiences would have recognized the cultural meanings attached to the death of her loved ones. The loss of family meant that a woman could pursue a somewhat autonomous lifestyle, having already fulfilled her social

²⁶ All quotations of Angela's *Memorial* and *Instructions* are taken from *Angela of Foligno: Complete Works*, trans. and intro. Paul Lachance, preface Romana Guarnieri (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1993).

obligations to marry and produce offspring. Holy women, particularly uncloistered holy women like Angela, retained some measure of freedom only by breaking away from their families, since they could not attend to husbands and children while serving others in hospitals or private homes. Moreover, religious life demanded absolute female chastity, a precondition that did not sit well with some husbands, a point suggested by Angela's allusions to spousal abuse. Furthermore, in religious texts the loss of one's family provides a potent analogy to the isolation experienced by Christ, particularly during His Passion. Angela's loss reads as a painful personal sacrifice, one made so that she might better serve God. And, because she has also lost the protection afforded by traditional domestic roles, she can be construed as a solitary and potentially victimized figure who resembles Christ all the more (Mooney, "Changing Fortunes" 60). She can be seen not just as a daughter to Christ or His Bride, but as Christ through personal identification. Thus, widowhood opened for Angela one of the few doors into public life available to medieval women.

The magnitude of Angela's spiritual authority is corroborated by her continuing status as the most renowned Franciscan holy woman after St. Clare of Assisi, Francis's personal friend and follower. While other contemporaneous women mystics faded from public memory soon after their deaths or remained locally-known figures recognized only within insular circles, Angela's renown has increased over the centuries via her extensively circulated works. "Douceline [of Digne] was forgotten; Margaret [of Cortona] became the object of a local cult; but the controversial Angela was widely read, especially in sixteenth-century Spain, seventeenth-century France, as well as in the

modern era” (McGinn, *Flowering* 141). That Angela’s writings have endured at all is a remarkable accomplishment, especially given the audacious Christ-like narration of a female life and Gospel-esque arrangement of her *Book*. Firstly, as Logan Dale Greene states, there is “a cultural tendency to overlook women who ma[k]e themselves visible in public life,” an inclination that leads often to the “erasure and marginalization of women’s rhetorical work” (16). Second, visibility and virginity are incompatible states in depictions of female saints and holy women, especially in the case of women like Angela who, having been wives and mothers, were clearly not virgins. Visibility exposed the female figure to the corrupting, sensual gaze of public scrutiny, a fact that led early Christian writers like Novatian and Tertullian to equate feminine visibility with sins like adultery and rape—offenses allegedly inspired by immodest women. “Virginity is the sine qua non of the female saint,” Petroff asserts, “but virginity is associated with hiddenness, being invisible. Visibility, then, is equivalent to the loss of virginity and cannot be part of female sanctity” (*Body and Soul* 164). Women had to guard their images and, by so doing, safeguard their virtue. In effect, only the obscure(d) woman could be a virtuous person. Thus, Angela’s writings come down to us having “miraculously” escaped the obliterating processes that have undoubtedly deprived us of innumerable female rhetorical predecessors, the marginalization that discounts women’s writing as unworthy of preservation compared to that of men, and hagiographical injunctions against female visibility and speech.

The extraordinary staying power of Angela’s writing can be partly attributed to the special relationship she maintained with Brother A., her kinsman who served as her

confessor and scribe. Initially, he did not believe Angela's mystical claims. He scorned her tendency to weep and howl upon entering the Basilica of Assisi, especially as this strong emotional response could easily be interpreted as a symptom of demonic possession. Eventually, he became convinced of her holy status and transcribed her visions. Brother A.'s association with Angela in composing the *Memorial* brought him acclaim as the one chosen to spread the word about her sanctity. Conversely, his editorial services ensured that Angela's words read as orthodox speech because they had been moderated through his legitimate, and legitimizing, affiliation with the Church. Both Angela and Brother A. gained in prominence through this mutually-beneficial textual process.

Throughout the *Memorial*, Brother A. informs the audience of the scribal practices that he employs in trying to document Angela's story in its totality. "For my part, I did not want to write down one single word which was not exactly as she had said it," he writes, but he admits, "I even omitted many things which were simply impossible for me to write down" (125; ch. 1). He translates into Latin the dictation taken in the Umbrian vernacular and attempts to change all of Angela's first-person references into third-person in accordance with hagiographic tradition. In the end, he is not completely successful in either effort. Rather than impressing the reader as clumsy or chaotic, however, Angela's *Memorial* reads as a "double dialogue" that alone can compensate for the ineffable experiences she tries to recall. "The friar stands finally *with* Angela in the text of the *Memorial*. He looks together with her toward God in a theological enterprise" (Coakley 111). That is, her conversations with God are rendered most fully only through

her exchange with Brother A., who must ask regularly for amplification and analysis from Angela so that he can fully grasp what he transcribes. His personal recorded journey toward understanding serves as a guide for other readers to follow as they endeavor to appreciate Angela's mystical model: "[H]e takes what would otherwise stand as a straightforward, if remarkable, piece of autohagiography from Angela and obliges the reader not to accept it at face value but rather to read it as a flawed product of his own efforts to mediate between her experience and the reader" (Coakley 115-6). Brother A. stresses throughout the *Memorial* that he is merely a conduit for the divine knowledge communicated by Angela, reinforcing both her centrality to the work and his own status as one of the first people to recognize her significance to Christian history. Furthermore, because the "mistakes" found in Angela's work are attributed to Brother A.'s scribal error, his deliberate interpolation sustains a view of heavenly wisdom as the inviolable source of Angela's speech.

Rhetorical exigence demanded that Angela's words be perceived as consummately accurate and divinely inspired, for she inhabited the latter half of the thirteenth century, a turbulent period in Italian history characterized by intense political struggle and social upheaval. And, and it was especially during such times that holy women needed to prove their allegiance to the Church. With the collapse of the European feudal system came a widespread reorganization of secular power that threatened the authoritative centrality of Rome. Indeed, the papal seat relocated to Avignon during Angela's own lifetime. In Italy "the birth pangs of the city and the nation state were witness to the cruel and constant wars taking place between towns

(communes), which often became mortal enemies in the struggle for economic and political position” (Lachance 24-25). Over several decades the pro-imperial Ghibellines of Foligno and the pro-papal Guelfs of Perugia battled for control of the Umbrian valley, which had become a significant center of trade. This same conflict had seen Francis of Assisi taken as a prisoner-of-war in Perugia, an ordeal credited with precipitating his conversion.

Commercial growth incited radical population shifts that brought ever-increasing numbers from the countryside into the rapidly expanding cities and communes. These individuals included many single women who could not join formal religious orders for lack of a dowry, or who wished to remain unattached in order to avoid enclosure and a renunciation of personal assets. As Michael Goodich explains, “The ideal of *imitatio Christi* and apostolic poverty which animated the newer orders usually demanded a lower initial investment for admission than the traditional Benedictine women’s houses, which had catered to the feudal aristocracy” (23). Life in the new informal communities like those of the Beguines even allowed women to retain their property, while tertiary status like Angela’s permitted their affiliation with formal orders without their having to follow a set rule. Women belonging to these “less conventional” groups enjoyed some degree of independence, but their social visibility also exposed them to greater scrutiny and criticism since they practiced their vocations out in the world. They did not need to take formal vows or answer directly to Church administration, and so, inquisitors and religious elites regarded these informal communities with suspicion, deeming them especially susceptible to unorthodox teachings because they lacked male oversight.

Women mystics from these communities were particularly vulnerable, as the examples of Mechthild of Magdeburg (c. 1210 - c. 1285) and Marguerite Porete (d. 1310) demonstrate. Drawing attention from local authorities for writings that stressed autonomously determined relationships with God, Mechthild managed to escape persecution only by seeking refuge at the prominent Cistercian convent of Helfta, while Marguerite was condemned as a lapsed heretic and burned at the stake in Paris.²⁷ Consequently, Angela and Brother A. needed to depict Angela not as a rebellious woman but as a reluctant orthodox figure speaking out against injustice only because God called her to do so.

Moreover, demographic transitions brought those in poor health to the cities, notably those suffering from leprosy whose running sores disease determined their viability in religious, communal, and economic terms. Even now, the word “leprosy” evokes a strong emotional response that mystifies the medical truth of the disease. “We know it is contagious, that it is slowly progressive. But behind what many of us might say in plain recall of what we know, some other images spring to mind: the rotted lumpy face, glazed eyeballs, hands without fingers, the leper’s touch, contagion” (Lewis 595). In Angela’s day, these images were not the stuff of imagined horrors; they were common, everyday sights that evoked very real fears concerning moral defilement and social exclusion. Traditionally, lepers had been banished to the outskirts of towns and beyond, but as economic expansion altered urban geographies during the later Middle

²⁷ See Frank Tobin’s introduction to *Mechthild of Magdeburg: The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1998): 1-24; and Ellen L. Babinsky’s introduction to *Marguerite Porete: The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. Ellen L. Babinsky, preface Robert E. Lerner (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1993): 5-48.

Ages, the distance between the healthy and the sick must have seemed to shrink. In the early Middle Ages, when newly centralized power structures began extending their reach over the estates of smaller, localized hierarchies, leprosy signified the interruption of the familiar by strangers to the community. The charge of leprosy also granted local officials an excuse from an objectionable situation by guaranteeing that the strange images evoked by the term could substitute for the unfamiliarity of an outsider. In the same manner, allegations of leprosy denoted strangers during the later Middle Ages, as rural droves flocked into towns searching for a life beyond the feudal farm. As more and more diverse populations inhabited the same narrow geographies, the true citizen could be defined as such only by promoting the notion of the outcast. It is precisely on these terms that we encounter the lepers that Angela visits in the hospital in her *Book*, “the poor, the suffering, and the afflicted” that she feeds, and that, in turn, feed Angela.

Consuming and Becoming the Topos

Freed from familial obligations, ostensibly by her prayers, Angela follows in Francis of Assisi’s footsteps and gives away her lands and possessions to pursue a life of chastity, humility and privation. She also lives the Franciscan principle of charity in the face of extreme poverty, a tenet that informs the following passage from the *Memorial*:

On Maundy Thursday, I suggested to my companion that we go out to find Christ: “Let’s go,” I told her, “to the hospital and perhaps we will be able to find Christ there among the poor, the suffering, and the afflicted.” We brought with us all the head veils we could carry, for we had nothing

else. We told Giliola, the servant at that hospital, to sell them and from the sale to buy some food from those in the hospital to eat. And, although initially she strongly resisted our request, and said we were trying to shame her, nonetheless, because of our repeated insistence, she went ahead and sold our small head veils and from the sale bought some fish. We had also brought with us all the bread which had been given to us to live on. And after we had distributed all that we had, we washed the feet of the women and the hands of the men, and especially those of one of the lepers which were festering and in an advanced stage of decomposition. Then we drank the very water with which we had washed him. And the drink was so sweet that, all the way home, we tasted its sweetness and it was as though we had received Holy Communion. As a small scale of the leper's sores was stuck in my throat, I tried to swallow it. My conscience would not let me spit it out, just as if I had received Holy Communion. I really did not want to spit it out but simply to detach it from my throat.

(162-163; ch. 5)

While scenes such as this one may prove shocking to contemporary readers, medieval audiences would have recognized depictions of bodily effluvia and/or its consumption as a commonplace of hagiography and miracle stories. According to Patrick J. Nugent, effluvium signifies divine healing in these narratives, sometimes divine retribution, but always it is “a privileged sign,” a marker for “divine irruption into, and disruption of, human experience” (54). To be sure, the frequency with which medieval religious

writers represented effluvial emanations does not confirm that they were indeed a standard aspect of healing in medieval churches and shrines; rather, their appearance underscores the hagiographic and miracle-story formula that posits narrated events as secondary to the meanings that they bear and the hidden truths they convey.

Beyond straightforward descriptions of an all-too-prevalent disease or considerations of its suggested treatments, writings by medieval authorities served to structure public knowledge about leprosy and its origins. They promoted a code of appropriate behaviors to ward off infection, spiritual and/or bodily, and advance a method of self-regulation capable of promoting an ideal body politic. In so doing, they framed social rhetorics as highly visible, embodied actions that nonetheless transcend traditional sites of public speaking and civic deliberation. Such framing resonates with an alternative definition of rhetoric: “the use of language, either speech or writing, as a deployment of culture ... [that] may be affirming or disruptive of dominant culture ... may affirm the status quo or generate a disruptive signifier” (Greene 22). In the case of medieval leprosy, religious and philosophical authorities managed to accomplish both of these aims. From symbol of sin to penalty for debauched behavior to justification for the reorganization of a rapidly growing populace, leprosy emerges in the discourse of the Middle Ages as a major theme that reveals the reciprocal relationship between notions of social stability and of disruption.

The designation of leprosy as a moral and spiritual disorder rather than a medical issue helps to explain how leprosy came to be deployed rhetorically during the Middle Ages. Dyan Elliott explains, “Pollution prohibitions in the Christian tradition were of

sufficient antiquity to provide the kind of illusory stability essential to religious belief structures” (61). Early Christian writers like Justin Martyr, Origen, Chrysostom and Tertullian established the belief that leprosy was both the sign and manifestation of internal sinfulness, whether characterized by wrath, lust, or greed. A leper’s wounds revealed her sins before the entire community, enabling local religious officials, as representatives of that community, to expel her from society and effectively pronounce her “dead to the world” (Lewis 598, 601). Basing their reasoning in the Levitical law of the Old Testament, patristic authors adopted the view that lepers should be ostracized for religious rather than health-related reasons. Individuals classified as “unclean,” such as lepers and menstruants, could not enter the holy spaces that formed the ideological centers of Jewish civilization, nor interact with ritually pure priests, the leper of the early Middle Ages found herself barred from society as a spiritual hazard. This notion is further supported by Scriptural commentary identifying leprosy as a symbol for heresy in morality stories of the Old Testament. For Gregory the Great (c. 540 - 604), for example, Job’s three friends signified heretics that could be reintegrated into the community, having been shown the errors of their ways through the wisdom of the Church; and Isidore of Seville (c. 560 – 636) interpreted the ten lepers healed by Jesus in Luke 17:12-19 as forms of schism. One popular biblical handbook, commonly attributed to Hrabanus Maurus (c. 780 - 856), made the connection more explicit, defining leprosy as “sin, or indeed false teaching, as in Leviticus,” and lepers as “heretics, as in the Gospel” (Brody 125, 127).

Mary Douglas finds that during the earlier Middle Ages “legitimate” cases of leprosy were seemingly rare and always involved charges being brought against powerful people. As medieval societies developed, more and more localized power structures gave way to larger governing entities, shifting power away from resident authorities into the hands of outsiders. In this milieu, the stigma of leprosy tended to be used within social hierarchies as a means to eliminate dissatisfactory superiors: “Monks complaining of the harsh and arbitrary rule of their abbot, priests complaining of the peculation of their bishop, knights dissatisfied with their lord, would charge the unpopular holder of office with leprosy” (Douglas 731). The mere accusation of leprosy could so sufficiently ruin a reputation that the physical presence of the disease became irrelevant. However, by the latter half of the twelfth century, the target demographic of leprosy accusations changed so that now the weak and the vulnerable became those most likely to be accused on record. Unlike the defendants of old, the “new lepers” were people with literally nothing to lose; they had no land, no property, no office. Crumbling feudal structures drove the poor, landless masses into the towns—and into view.

Lepers now emerged as a major source of fear in public discourse, so much so that until recently, historians believed that the end of the twelfth century witnessed an unparalleled epidemic of leprosy (Douglas 732-733).²⁸ Michael Dols clarifies the extent to which lepers became marginalized, and hence, “feminized” by a loss of power: “Because leprosy is considered a mortal illness, the leper is limited in his legal rights and

²⁸ Citing Foucault and Bryan S. Turner, among others, Douglas argues for the implausibility of the disease changing its target demographic with such precision, from elites to the poor. She questions whether greater access to soap permitted the privileged classes to escape the ravages of the disease before concluding instead that the addressees of charges changed.

obligations—along with the minor, the bankrupt, the insane, and the slave. The leper's status seems to be particularly close to that of the mentally ill in most legal matters, especially with regard to marriage and divorce" (897). Lepers could not participate in the economic exchange that differentiated the later Middle Ages from its feudalistic past. They lost the rights to inherit or bequeath property or to take legal action. In the ever-more-secular milieu of the later medieval period, the leper's status represented a loss of citizenship rather than the denial of religious fellowship. They were shuffled into leprosaria "as part of the successful attempt to create order that resulted in the highly structured society of the thirteenth century" (Douglas 732) rather than to keep them from disseminating sin. Social order entailed not just the relocation of individuals, but the strict regulation of gender expressions and sexuality. Efforts to contain the threat of infection coincided with an increased focus on sexuality by the Church and attempts to exert control over people's private lives. Elliott establishes a clerical anxiety over ritualistic integrity as an underlying link between these issues. She states, "The clergy, who had struggled so hard to attain its new level of ritual purity, continued to be particularly sensitive to external sources of defilement. Clerics now defined themselves and rationalized their superiority to the laity in the distance they maintained from women" (Elliott 66). The actions of women, seen as more corrupt by nature, needed to be restricted so that their obscenity did not contaminate holy places. Because they deliberately shunned interaction with women, male religious maintained their greater purity as a means of authority over layfolk, whose behavior they regulated so that they would not, like women, desecrate sacred space.

Hence, marriage laws and the terms of celibacy grew more stringent—as did the segregation of lepers. For as widespread attention turned toward concerns about the body, leprosy became a medical issue that underscored embodiment because now the disease was thought to result from physical proximity to contaminated bodies and from partaking in unhealthy behaviors. Though a corrupt spirit might drive a person to sin, the body reflected hidden sin not as a passive, markable canvas, but as the main vehicle of its expression. Writers claimed that the disease spread through sexual contact, and lepers were denounced as lechers and rapists whose desire it was to infect others through sexual force. Indeed, leprosy was so connected with sexuality that by the end of the fifteenth century leprosy and syphilis were spoken of as though they were the same thing, and Job, the medieval patron saint of lepers, became the patron saint of syphilis (Brody 56). Women, having always been socially vulnerable and having always been regarded as weak flesh, gained a special place in the lore of leprosy as key sources and carriers of the disease.

The female body came to be viewed as a vessel of infection via the most expected of feminine activities. Breastfeeding and intercourse became topics of serious concern because women were said to transmit leprosy to their children while breastfeeding and to their partners through intercourse. Hoping to encourage sexual restraint even among married couples, writers like Isidore of Seville (c. 560- 636) promoted the demonization of menstruation by arguing that menses produced leprosy in men who lay with women during her “womanlies,” and that the disease would infect any resultant offspring (Koren 41). These authorities also wrote that menstrual discharge

could cause male muteness and penile cancer, “ailments that strike directly at those things—authoritative speech, sexual performance, ability to produce heirs—valorized as integral to secular masculinity” (Jose 160). Bartholomaeus Anglicus’s *De Proprietatibus Rerum* provides one of the most pointed examples of male writers’ association of leprosy and the female body when he likens lying with a menstruating woman to lying with a woman who has recently lain with a leper, and in either cases he equates intercourse to breathing in polluted air, consuming rotten or overly spiced meat and tainted wine, and suffering the bite of a “venomous worm” in that all are causes of leprosy (Brody 55-56). Through association with the disease and with other, destructive forces that caused it, the gendered activities and bodily functions that marked women as viable in medieval society became the reasons they were now deemed suspect in medical terms. By the time that Angela and her sisters found it acceptable practice to nurse the ill consigned to leprosaria, women had held intimate symbolic and rhetorical connections with leprosy for quite some time.

Therefore, the depiction of effluvial consumption in the *Memorial* functions not only to present her as a wondrous figure. I argue that it serves as a dramatic disruptor that creates a narrative gap, one that demands an interrogation of the social and religious implications pervading the striking spectacle. The effluvium that Angela eats is a socially charged topos, a recurring theme, image, or pattern that contains “that location or space in an art where a speaker [or writer] can look for ‘available means of persuasion’” (Cherchi 285; Aristotle 45).²⁹ Its presence is persuasive because it

²⁹ See also Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R.

symbolizes the potent, all-too-real concerns about social stability that affected medieval audiences on a daily basis and allows those anxieties to be contained within a holy body—just as the body politic’s ethical behavior might work to inhibit social dis-ease, according to ecclesiastical authorities. The effluvium draws attention to connections between the female body and corruption as well. However, by virtue of its status as topos, it also evokes those instances where its threat has similarly been contained. The situation of effluvium in Angela’s *Book* signifies fully only in relation to other textual manifestations, including miracle stories and the *Lives* of other holy women, along with Gospel accounts in which Christ cures lepers through direct touch (Matt. 8:2-3; Mark 1:41; Luke 5:13) and hagiography that features Francis of Assisi kissing a leper’s hand as though the leper is a priest. Thus, in the *Memorial*, effluvium functions to disrupt notion of gender because in its depiction the female body, Angela’s body, suppresses the threat of leprosy as do male authorities like Jesus and Francis, even as it evokes the feminine aspect of those male figures. This flexible impression of gender facilitates Angela’s composition of her works while allowing her to remain an orthodox figure.

The tales that feature Christ and Francis echo Chapters 13 and 14 of Leviticus, a scriptural and literary pedigree that establishes association with lepers as transgressive and feminine and that establishes laws concerning the social status of lepers (and menstruating women). Yet in a rhetorical manner reminiscent of the way in which Cistercian monks claim feminine humility as a masculine trait, Christ and Francis use their “feminine” flesh to redeem those afflicted with leprosy. Christ’s maternal concern

Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

derives literally from the body of his mother; his physical presence in the world is permitted by the flesh she provides unmediated by physical male involvement. He defies the law by touching lepers although there is no physical need for him to do so, offering a motherly hand to those who have probably not experienced human contact in a very long time. Likewise, Francis's close association with his mother imbues him with a feminine quality that reflects her own maternal role in his *Life*: his mother, Pica, protects Francis from his father's wrath as he goes through his conversion and prays for him. He transgresses religio-social norms by kissing lepers while cultivating a more compassionate Christianity. Moreover, his aforementioned exhibition of the stigmata instigates a corporeal renovation that links Francis's body with femaleness, as evidenced by visions in which he breastfeeds.³⁰

Still, theirs remain male bodies imbued with the masculine authority to approach the feminized victims. In contrast, Angela must depict herself as a woman who bears a similar authority in spite of her female corporeality, relying on a self-identification with Christ through the body of his mother. The notion that Christ's humanity derived solely from that of his mother had led Hildegard to argue that "it is exactly *female* flesh—the very weakness of woman—that restores the world" (Bynum, *Holy Feast* 265). Along these lines, Angela situates herself as a direct successor to traditional figures like Francis, and even Christ, teacher who associated with lepers and revived the presence of outcasts in the social discourse as human beings worthy of empathy and concern.

³⁰ Francis's eminence as a stigmatic also underscores the possibility for a corporeal connection with and imitation of Christ, despite Francis's own struggles against the flesh. See Marion A. Habig, ed., *St. Francis of Assisi, Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, 3rd ed., trans. Raphael Brown, et al. (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973).

I argue that it is this capacity for simultaneous sacred and profane identification on the part of holy women that allows Angela to depict her body as a “super-topos,” one capable of identifying with and containing the threat represented by the topos of leprosy. In religious texts, the disruptive presence of effluvia calls attention to itself by prompting feminine gestures (kisses, touches, eating) that are nothing more than signs, albeit signs meant to provoke compassion for the afflicted. Lepers become more than nameless contagion or discursive concerns. Nonetheless, these healing narratives present the female and/or feminized body in an ambivalent light—as both producer of disruption and stabilizing agent. What begins to emerge is a textual record of public anxieties over issues like corporeality, gender, orthodoxy, and community. These matters materialize in every leper story that precedes Angela’s narrative, from those of Francis’s conversion to those present in the Gospels. Authors halfheartedly conceal these anxieties within patterns of containment, that is, within the gestures of their protagonists and within the rhetorical structures of their narratives.

In this manner, the amorphous substances known collectively as leprous effluvia become a rhetorical material text, one that reveals ecclesiastical anxiety over the proper delineation and essential instability of all-too-fluid social categories that Church authorities hoped to delimit. Angela’s imbibing of polluted water, Francis’s kisses, Christ’s touches become feminine signs that serve to underscore a disruption of the social and religious protocols governing the presence of leprous effluvia and that reinforce the association of womanhood with social, spiritual, and corporeal disorder. However, Angela’s self-representation as effluvial consumer evokes those associations

only to subvert them rhetorically by circumscribing the very threats posed by femininity through feminine action redeemed by textual tradition. Angela's consumption of effluvia becomes a miracle rather than a religious offense.

In addition, for those feminized by medieval society Angela's rhetorical self-depiction points also to potential avenues for social viability in everyday terms. Symbolically, her charity creates a correlation between the water polluted by effluvia from the lepers' sores and the fish and bread that Angela and her companion bring to the hospital. Neither Angela nor the lepers have much to give, but Angela's kindness in feeding the lepers incites a miracle, and the lepers are permitted to feed her in turn so that both parties are permitted to perform an act of Christ-like compassion. As further reward, Angela experiences the sweetness of the Eucharist: "all the way home, we tasted its sweetness and it was as though we had received Holy Communion." Both Angela and the lepers are depicted as consumers, not only as eaters of "food," but as participants in an economic exchange.³¹ The lepers' secretions are posited as having an equal exchange value with actual comestibles. Indeed, in this exchange leprous discharge may carry the greater value as Angela and her companion not only indirectly exchange the polluted water for the items purchased by the sale of the veils, but they also throw in the bread that has been given to them personally.

This textual value mirrors the power that a woman might have derived from leprosy's presence in everyday life since effluvia could be "exchanged" for some

³¹ Economic factors also played a role in the problem of corporeality that became a major concern during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries because, as churches began to exhibit saints' relics more prominently, these artifacts problematized the dichotomy between matter and spirit by presenting human remains as "loci of divine power" (Bynum, *Holy Feast* 255).

measure of freedom in the lives of religious women. Late medieval *Lives* reveal a “secularizing” tendency that insists on women’s public presence (McGinn, *Flowering* 140). Increasingly, the more secular religious communities like those of the Beguines and the tertiaries to which Angela belonged began to attract large numbers of women who preferred the relative autonomy that membership in these groups provided, particularly in comparison to the formal, highly regulated orders. They could practice their vocation in hospitals or convents, even as private nurses, unbound by locale or rule because their efforts reflected the Christ-like humility and compassion deemed appropriate markers for female religiosity. The incidence of leprosy that could provide a legitimizing factor for their work in ways that protected women from accusations of heresy, indolence, or wanderlust by situating them in economies of exchange based in public works.

Corporeality, Orthodoxy, and Feminine Agency

These opportunities for religious women to gain greater independence troubled Church authorities, who sought to use notions regarding Christ’s humanity in ways that circumscribed feminine agency. Male writers drew on deliberations over Christ’s corporeality to reason that divinity was to humanity as spirit was to flesh and male was to female. This rigid analogy served as the basis for their censure of women who did not adhere to traditional feminine roles (Bynum, *Holy Feast* 263). The “rediscovery” of ancient Greco-Latin philosophical texts further influenced, even exacerbated, such views as Western writers found their gender biases substantiated in scientific terms. Fears over

the polluting nature of women's bodies re-emerged, exemplified by such beliefs as that menstruating women could, among other things, cause mirrors to rust (Koren 35).

However, women transformed the negative implications associated with corporeality by practicing intense Eucharistic devotion that emphasized the materiality of Christ's presence and the use of gustatory imagery that related Christ's body—and those of women—to food (Bynum, *Holy Feast* 258). Both of these rhetorical expressions of feminine faith feature prominently in Angela's *Memorial*, particularly in the case of her effluvial consumption. A positive reinscription of corporeality posited women and Othered beings as especially devoted and ontologically closer to Christ, conditions that facilitated women's rhetorical expression.

Angela's actions in the *Memorial* reflect a contemporaneous fascination with Christ's humanity that inspired a view of outcasts as "replicas of the suffering Christ" that "to a certain extent shared with him a salvific function," a view that led Francis to refer to the poor as "vicars of Christ" (Lachance 26). This notion is bolstered by a proximate passage that features Angela imbibing another fluid, Christ's blood:

In the fourteenth step, while I was standing in prayer, Christ on the cross appeared more clearly to me while I was awake, that is to say, he gave me an even greater awareness of himself than before. He then called me to place my mouth to the wound in his side. It seemed to me that I saw and drank the blood, which was freshly flowing from his side. His intention was to make me understand that by this blood he would cleanse me. And

at this I began to experience a great joy, although when I thought about the passion I was still filled with sadness. (128; ch. 1)

Her great empathy for the crucified Christ imparts the vision that allows her to drink from his flowing wound and place her mouth on Christ's side so that He and Angela become one body. She drinks the cherished blood directly so that her connection to Christ is personal, rendering her relationship with Him transgressively intimate since no priestly intercession is necessary.

Likewise, the lepers elicit a Christ-like response from Angela when she drinks their discharge and becomes united with them. Like Christ, they "cleanse" Angela by evoking a compassion that grants her the power to transform a human waste product into the essence of salvation: the polluted water used to wash the wounds that symbolize human imperfection tastes sweet, and the scab that seals the sore becomes substantive as the Eucharist. She describes her customary ingestion of the host in the following passage: "The host ... goes down so smoothly that if I had not been told that one must swallow it right away, I would willingly hold it in my mouth for a great while. But at that moment, I also suddenly remember that I must swallow it right away. And as I do so, the body of Christ goes down with this unknown taste of meat" (186; ch. 7). Though the scene enacted at the leprosarium proves disgusting, even perverse, Angela's description of her experience re-inscribes the incident as unquestionably orthodox by working in conjunction with the above passage to draw attention to the Eucharist. During the Middle Ages, "the Eucharist and the sacrament of penance were the only sacraments accorded serious significance," especially after the Fourth Lateran Council

(1215) obliged the sacraments of penance and Holy Communion be undertaken at least once a year (Lachance 27). In her recollection of her consumption of the Eucharistic host, she describes the host as having a meaty taste so that the bread really is the body of Christ; she swallows it because she must, though she would prefer to savor it given its enjoyable flavor.

Still, it should be noted that Angela's sensory experience of consumed effluvium renders the water sweet rather than meaty like the true body of Christ, and the leper's scab does not go down smoothly, but sticks in her throat so that she must work to swallow it. Even as she describes the Eucharist's capacity to convert the detritus of the human condition into the holiness of Christ's body through metonymic comparison, she emphasizes that nothing is quite like the Eucharist. In this manner Angela draws attention to the centrality of Holy Communion to true Christian belief and emphasizes that no other entity than the Catholic Church may lay claim to the genuine body of Christ. This acknowledgement proves key to Angela's depiction of herself as an orthodox mystic rather than a crazed or even possessed woman: "women's reverence for the sacraments, and the clergy who administered them, made them useful as living exempla for the faithful—if not in their actual devotional acts, which were often excessive, then certainly in the nature of the devotion implicit in those acts" (Elliott 118). By identifying key differences between the earthly symbol of leprous effluvia and the hallowed substance of the Eucharist, Angela illustrates a pious epistemology that allows the orthodox individual to find its commonplace analogues in the gritty world beyond consecrated locations. For Angela as well as her readers, Christ's constant

sacrifice renders the entire world a holy site, opportunities for redemption for those who listen to Christ's call. But, that call must be heeded through the observance of Eucharistic ceremony within the Church.

Not surprisingly, ecclesiastical authorities often turned to holy women to draw other women away from heterodox movements, notably those that attracted women by advocating their right to preach and administer the sacraments (Goodich 26). As the Church contended with the spread of various Gnostic heterodoxies like Catharism, Albigensianism, Quietism, and Antinomianism that disparaged the body's role in the narrative of salvation, either by condemning physicality as completely evil or by denying its impact on morality (Bynum, *Holy Feast* 252-253), ecclesiastical writers stressed the humanity of Christ and, by correlation, the significance of the body. Hyper-embodied representatives of corporeality, women like Angela validated orthodoxy's viewpoint that the flesh tamed by the soul could offer additional opportunities for serving God. Unlike earlier *vitae*, women saints' lives of the period emphasize their involvement in the major political and religious struggles waged by the Church against their various ideological adversaries, as an epilogue in the *Instructions* reveals:

And you, eternal God, through Angela, have raised up against men, a woman; against the proud, someone humble; against the clever, someone simple; against the lettered, someone unschooled; against religious hypocrisy, the holiness of someone who condemned and despised herself; against empty talkers and idle hands, a marvelous zeal in deed and silence in words; and against the prudence of the flesh, the prudence of the spirit,

which is the science of the cross of Christ. Thus, a strong woman brought to light what was buried under by blind men and their worldly speculations. (317)

Ironically, the informal power available to women mystics and saints could be deployed rhetorically to withhold religious authority from other women.

Male writers attempted to regulate the activities of holy women by emphasizing certain gendered behaviors in hagiographical texts. Saints' lives were some of the most popular texts among those who could not read or could read only in the vernacular languages. They were "among the most widely disseminated of all manuscript books, and even those lives written with attention to historical accuracy to prove the existence of a long-standing cult and for use as evidence in the process of canonization were quickly copied and read by everyone" (Petroff, *Body and Soul* 162). Hagiographers composed their lives for various audiences with divergent reading agendas: ecclesiastical authorities with the power to beatify or canonize; monastic audiences in need of encouragement along the spiritual path; and popular audiences seeking excitement and adventure in saints' lives that offset the commonplace quality of everyday life. *Vitae* were intended to move audiences toward admiring and emulating the Christian behaviors embodied by the saints by satisfying rigorous generic and aesthetic requirements. Since traditional hagiography permitted the (usually male) author to represent a holy woman in any light that suited his particular rhetorical purpose, the saint's life became one of the main ways by which the Church could promote among women the virtues of chastity, humility, and in-visibility.

Nonetheless, the models provided by these texts permitted those individuals who did champion orthodoxy to claim rhetorical visibility and influence as defenders of the faith. Mystics like Angela who attained sainthood or beatification belonged to orders that overtly recognized and proclaimed the singular authority of the Church. Another Franciscan mystic, Clare of Montefalco, denounced Bentivenga of Gubbio (d. ca. 1331), one of the Italian leaders of the Brethren of the Free Spirit, an antinomian lay group. Initially, Clare addressed him with respect due to his reputation as a wise man, but after receiving a vision of his heretic status, she debated him furiously and eventually accused him before the Inquisition. He received a life sentence by Cardinal Napoleone Orsini and his chaplain, Ubertino da Casale, who, ironically, was himself a leader of the near-heretical Spiritual Franciscans (Goodich 28). The Spiritual Franciscans, themselves declared unorthodox, ran afoul of the Church due to their zeal for extreme poverty.³² They criticized wealthy religious authorities—including several popes—for which many of them were exiled or condemned to death. Notably, in an effort to locate the “historical” Angela about whom little information is available, some have speculated whether she may not have been a simple fiction through which the Spiritual Franciscans expounded their notion of “the ideal lover of God” (McGinn, *Flowering* 143).

That the later-beatified Angela’s views might be confused with those of a heretical sect indicates the unconventionality of Angela’s writings, as well as the way that recognition of the Church’s absolute authority shielded her from persecution. Her doubly rhetorical works foreshadow the writings of the fourteenth-century English

³² For more on this, see David Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans: From Protest to Persecution in the Century after Saint Francis* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2003).

mystic Julian of Norwich, who spoke out against the heretical Lollards even as she strove to distinguish her beliefs from theirs. Women like Angela and Julian put their overt faith to good use, using their influence to promote conventional religiosity and to stress the importance of the Eucharist, which heretical sects tended to discount. They also practiced confession with gusto, a rhetorically charged act that balanced their claims to a personal relationship with God by reaffirming the incontrovertible status of the Church as the sole purveyor of intercession. They challenged heretics and defended the faith, modeling orthodox behavior. Paul Lachance explains, “In spite of the prevailing negative view of women, which saw them as inferiors and the principal agents of sin, one of the most characteristic features of the religious life in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is the active presence of women who did not limit themselves to domestic chores but operated and manifested themselves in public with great energy and vitality” (36). Increasingly, women asserted themselves as consumers of hagiographical texts and featured as subjects of hagiography.

This seeming upsurge in women’s rhetorical activity may be attributable to scholars’ recent interest in medieval women’s reading practices rather than to an actual proliferation of feminine literacy during this time, given that many women habitually engaged texts while attending to household matters or teaching their children the rudiments of religious doctrine. Therefore, rather than assume that women were simply reading more or more often, I contend that portrayals of women readers may have grown more common, intended as a means to delineate feminine activity in a time characterized by previously unparalleled levels of female social mobility. Paradoxically, this

circumscriptive strategy bolstered the public standing of women rhetors like Angela. Hagiography and religious imagery more regularly depicted women as readers, and spontaneously learning to read became an important miracle in the *vitae* of holy women, a wonder that seemed to bolster their ability to debate knowledgeable men seeking to silence God's chosen speakers. What matter most in these depictions of feminine literacy are what women read (orthodox texts), why they can be seen to engage in public disputation (to counter heresy), and what forms of religiosity they inspire among their readers (gendered behaviors sanctioned by the Church).

Even as ecclesiastical officials persecuted those like the Spiritual Franciscans who claimed to maintain Francis's vision of the holy life, Angela's text provided a path for those who wished to imitate Francis while maintaining their orthodox status. She raises the lepers from the dead metaphorically in the sense that while they have been consigned to life outside public view; the recounting of her experience reminds her audiences that they—the lepers—are still alive and in need of compassion, very much in keeping with Francis's aspirations for a popular Christianity. Angela does not necessarily promote the imbibing of noxious fluids in a realistic way, as the performance of miracles is reserved for holy persons alone, but she does remind her readers that true spiritual rewards come from remembering those that have been forgotten because they are assumed to have nothing to give. Like Francis's compassionate kiss, Angela's consumption of effluvium conveys an understanding that "God ... is present in every creature and in everything that has being ... in all things, finally, which exist or have some degree of being, whether beautiful or ugly" (212; *Memorial* ch. 9). This insight

extends spiritual value to lepers as well as women because Angela's textual image echoes that of the lepers; like them Angela is a liminal figure capable of revealing truth both as woman and as hagiographical subject. Brother A.'s transcription grants her the opportunity and legitimacy to tell her story, but in the process Angela becomes an outsider to her own narrative as her experiences are transformed into the *Memorial*, a stranger to her own life as a holy woman who has eschewed conventional gender by making herself visible. Consequently, Brother A's constant interruptions remind us that Angela remains on the periphery of the textual Angela's story, that is, that the Blessed Angela is "composed" not only through her words and his but God's, as well as via the social implications of her mystical body. She is a polyvocal figure, one whose public rhetorics are based in the masculine authorial voices contained by her ethos. At the same time, the impression of kenosis, or emptying of the self, that typifies mysticism implies that the "real," living Angela remains submissive and humble—therefore feminine.³³

In order to do create this multivalent identity, Angela (with Brother A.) must employ a verbo-physical rhetoric that intrinsically ties the use of language to feminine corporeality. Angela's words conjure a body not materially present by drawing from prevalent rhetorics of embodiment delineated by male authors and reinscribing them as embodied rhetorics that portray Angela as a godly material "book." As Jennifer Judge suggests, because "mystical experience is necessarily ineffable, it is communicated more effectively through the responses of the mystic's body. Hence, Angela's body, though

³³ In *Philippians* 2: 6-7, the Apostle Paul introduces the notion of kenosis to Christianity when he writes that Christ "emptied himself" in order to redeem humanity. Since mystical speech obtains authority by appearing to originate solely in God rather than the mystic's limited language, the mystic must emulate Christ and rhetorically deny her sense of self just as Christ renounced his divine qualities to serve God.

inscribed by A.'s words, becomes her most effective text" (10). Angela's female corporeality should be hidden, according to gender norms that insist on "hidden" chastity. Yet her body's presence is necessary if she is to model and motivate an appropriate emotional response in her readers—a response that, in turn, allows readers to transform their own bodies into feminine entities capable of a Christ-like, and Angela-like, compassion. Audiences "see" her consume polluted water and a leper's scab in the mind's eye via a startlingly meticulous depiction.

Whether Angela elaborated on her actions deliberately or Brother A. chose to portray the act in graphic detail, one cannot help but be affected by the vivid quality of the ekphrastic description. Angela's mystical works concentrate on the internal life of its subject, but her rhetoric nonetheless produces a sensory response. Angela's readers engage in "affective literacy," reading that dislocates "literate ideology in performative practice, through the construction of interactive textualities, textuality beyond the page" (Amsler 84). Affective literacy enables the construction of textual communities of readers, groups that "arise somewhere in the interstices between the imposition of the written word and the articulation of a certain type of social organization" (Stock, *Listening* 150). These communities have both social and interpretive functions that require the participation of sensual bodies. Bodies must interact with material texts or, in their absence, with other bodies to construct communally-held meaning.

Like other medieval religious texts, the *Memorial* works to inspire emotional responses in its audiences, responses that provoke a sensorial union between Angela and her audience. That is, readers who are situated outside the time and place of the event

nonetheless share with Angela an intimate moment that she, in turn, shares with those typically hidden from the rest of society. When Angela ingests the leprous effluvia, so do her audiences by consuming the content of the text. Mark Amsler clarifies how medieval audiences interacted physically with texts—touching pages, kissing images, and placing fingers on books to point at specific words or passages—though he explains that that readers wouldn't even have to read or point to respond emotionally to a text (98). Given that medieval reading cultures tended toward orality anchored by proximity to a material work, many readers formulated mental images that facilitated emotive religiosity.³⁴ In a sense, Angela's readers internalize the lepers and their effluvium just as she does; they, too, can enter "into Christ's side" and experience for themselves that "it is indeed such a joyful experience to move into Christ's side that in no way can I express it and put words to it" (176; *Memorial* Ch. 6). By imagining themselves in Angela's place and so partaking of the leprous effluvia that she imbibes, they may grow closer to placing their own lips on Christ's wound and consuming the Holy Communion that provided the locus of orthodox Christian faith.

Angela's readers are invited to experience a compassion for the lepers in order to model their behavior on her holy exemplar, and in doing so, they participate also in *imitatio Christi*. Readers are united in affective empathy and create a popular Christian community in which readers form one contiguous body with Angela and Christ. Subsequently, by extending the imitation of Christ into everyday life, readers are

³⁴ See Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400 - 1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998); Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983); and Brian Stock, *Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past* (Philadelphia: U Penn, 1996).

encouraged to practice good works among the populations that need the most care. Citing Elaine Pagels' view that "men form the legitimate body of the community, while women will be allowed to participate only insofar as their own identity is denied and assimilated to that of men," Cheryl Glenn notes that the three monotheistic religions "have gendered speech and silence, rendering feminine, or weaker, all women and many men" (qtd. in Glenn, *Unspoken* 21). Angela's body complicates this view, serving as the locus of a community of readers that includes men and women, religious devotees and secular benefactors. Women like Angela may not have enjoyed the same overt authority as did male authors, but they provided textual and embodied models available to all, confirming that in some ways feminine religiosity could prove more popular or pervasive. By means of her verbo-physical rhetorics, Angela's readers bear her knowledge within their own hearts and minds, themselves becoming part of the embodied text of the *Book*. This internalization of Angela's exemplar leads her audiences to "resurrect" the discursively marginalized and grant them a distinctive place in medieval society as symbols of Christ that elicit a feminine, affective communion with Christ. Thus, like Angela, readers create an affective connection between Angela, the lepers, and Christ that links divinity to the squalor of a fallen humanity.

Angela's compositions exploit the correlation between femininity and flesh in a manner that allows her and her audiences to engage in *imitatio Christi*, although she and her women readers could more readily epitomize fallen humanity as a whole. Angela's rhetoric reveals that women's bodies, defective by virtue of being hyper-material, could be symbols of redemption rather of social disintegration. Public works and

demonstrations of faith allowed holy women like Angela to further their associations with Christ's corporeality on the symbolic and material levels, as members of the Church body and via devotion to the Eucharist. Ontologically, they could be seen to merge human and divine manifestations of corporeality within their bodies and unite Christ's hyper-corporeality with that of those outcasts who inhabited the most contemptible of human spaces. The rhetorical Angela, like the effluvium she ingests, shows how chaotic elements may be circumscribed and remade into symbols of stability by godly compassion.

Her rhetorical corporeality does not ruin mirrors as male medieval authors asserted, but instead proves "a mirror without blemish of God's majesty, and an image of his goodness" (*Instructions* 318). She establishes her personal connections to Christ and to the disparaged and abused leper through their shared hyper-corporeality, a state that could be claimed by male writers metaphorically but embodied only by women. Much of her works' rhetorical efficacy stems from this ability to blur the line between "the life of the writer outside the text as well as the writer constructed within the text" (Dietrich 28), all the while illuminating the spiritual bond between sacred divinity and a corrupt body. Indeed, it is by undermining boundaries—between textuality and materiality, masculinity and femininity, God and humanity—that Angela presents herself as an agent of divine order who helps to impose stability on the chaos of her time.

Conclusion

In writing about alternative paradigms of communication, Sally Miller Gearhart writes, “Communication can be a deliberate creation or co-creation of an atmosphere in which people or things, if and only if they have the internal basis for change, may change themselves; it can be a milieu in which those who are ready to be persuaded may persuade themselves, may choose to hear or choose to learn” (244). She advocates a new model, one in which different parties speak from experience in order to move those prepared to change without resorting to the aggression endorsed by traditional agonistic rhetoric. Gearhart’s words are substantiated by Angela’s *Memorial*, which tells the tale of her conversion and provides a textual and textually embodied model guaranteed to move audiences without the use of antagonistic argument, which gender restrictions denied medieval women. Certainly, as Dietrich notes, we cannot “know how much of the rhetorical work [by women] of making the radical acceptable was done to convince themselves and how much was consciously chosen for another audience” (26). We may never discern to what degree Angela sought to exert her personal religious standpoint on others, but we do know that through her writing and the impression of her body created by her text she moved others to strive for a Christ-like existence. Her ekphrastic self-representation in the *Memorial* as a consumer of leprous discharge renders Angela a champion of orthodoxy even as she engages in behavior that seems to challenge the necessity of legitimate priestly intervention.

Using her verbal and corporeal rhetorics, Angela grapples with issues of language and agency as she struggles not only to transcend ineffability’s impediments to

tell her story, but also to convey the essence of her transformation into a holy figure despite the mediated delivery of her “auto-hagiography.” Laura R. Micciche writes, “For feminists, writing is always political because language reflects and deflects power relations. It is freighted with a long history of inequality—gendered, raced, classed, and more—which bears down during the act of putting words together” (179). We would impose unfairly anachronistic requirements on Angela and other women writers of the time to assume that they maintained any inkling of a feminist agenda. However, in the sense of discerning language to understand how power imbues words and how that power is distributed among those who use language, Angela’s *Memorial* indicates that she recognized how rhetorical speech might transform those whose physical circumstance had already turned them into social outcasts. By evoking the images of lepers in her writing, Angela situates the suffering masses that inhabited the periphery of the world beyond the text. Furthermore, by reminding her audiences of those that remained by law out of sight and out of mind in leprosaria, she works a textual miracle—resurrecting those that were dead to the world. If, as Nugent suggests, “the restoration of purity (or cleanness) permitted reintegration into the body social” (65), Angela bypasses ecclesiastical authority to bring lepers back into the community, if not physically, then into that affective space that permits readers to relate to the lepers, to Angela, and even to Christ.

CHAPTER V

OF LADDERS AND THE QUEEN OF HEAVEN: THE MOTHER TOPOS IN THE
REVELATIONS OF BIRGITTA OF SWEDEN

In this chapter I demonstrate that Birgitta of Sweden's uses of the Mother topos in her *Revelations* authorize her worldly activities because they permit her to build Burkean consubstantiality with the Virgin Mary through a display of shared maternal traits. This likeness encourages audiences to identify Birgitta as an authoritative mystic with an intimate relationship to God. During her lifetime, Birgitta traveled extensively and engaged in political matters, working to restore the papacy to Rome and to end the strife that would result in the Hundred Years War. She also established a new monastic order based on visions she professed to have received since childhood. She declared that divine inspiration guided her to compose works that denounce the evils of her day so as to exhort lapsed Christians to repent. Rhetorically, her visions support her claims, for *Revelations* teaches that true contrition leads to spiritual dialogue with God, just as meditation on the Passion weakens the hardness of the human heart.

Often, critics consider Birgitta a highly conventional mystic because she submitted her visions for examination by her confessor and other masters of theology, but during her lifetime and for some time following her canonization, detractors of women visionaries questioned her orthodox status. Despite their public skepticism, Birgitta obtained a broad audience by invoking the commanding figure of the Virgin

Mary. In her visions, the Virgin Mary stands in for Christ by demonstrating many of the signs of His Passion, so that when the Virgin induces Birgitta to action, those commands derive metonymically from Christ Himself. That the orders come from the Virgin Mary instead of Christ, however, reveals a distinctive place for women in Birgitta's cosmology. The Virgin Mary's dynamic role in heaven reflects Birgitta's own active lifestyle on earth and grants her the authority to participate in "masculine" activities. Since Birgitta identifies with the Virgin through their shared status as mothers, through her Birgitta can identify with Christ. Thus, Birgitta gains the right to speak, write, and act as a public figure.

Birgitta's Rhetorical Contexts

Birgitta was born circa 1303, as a member of the aristocracy. Her cousin was King Magnus IV, at whose court she resided for several years as a young woman. Despite her high-ranking status, her personal life reads like that of many medieval women: married at the young age of thirteen, she bore eight children, not all of whom survived. Her public life, however, set her apart from most of her contemporaries. Like Hildegard of Bingen and Catherine of Siena, she claimed that her visions began when she was a child. According to the *Life* written by her two Swedish confessors, Birgitta was seven when a radiant woman sitting above an altar appeared in her bedroom and placed a crown upon her head (73; par. 9).³⁵ Birgitta spent the subsequent years fulfilling

³⁵ This and subsequent references to—and quotations from—Birgitta's *Life* and *Revelations* are taken from *Birgitta of Sweden: Life and Selected Revelations*, ed. and preface Marguerite Tjader Harris, trans., notes, and fwd. Albert Ryle Kezel, intro. Tore Nyberg (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1990).

her duties as wife and mother, but following her husband Ulf's death, Birgitta dedicated her life to the service of God, assuming the roles of mystic, prophet, reformer, and monastic founder of a double order. According to her *Life*, God spoke to her, saying "you shall be my bride and my channel, and you shall hear and see spiritual things, and my Spirit shall remain with you even to your death" (78; par. 26). Thus authorized, Birgitta did not shrink from public activity in times of great administrative and moral crisis. She tried to negotiate peace between Philip VI of France and Edward III of England at the outbreak of the Hundred Years' War. She spoke out against her cousin after he waged failed campaigns in the Baltic region and levied heavy taxes on his subjects to repay his debts. The *vita* explains that Birgitta offered her own sons to Magnus to "pawn" as hostages until he could fulfill his financial obligations, so long as he did not "put the burden on the community of the realm in contrary to the statutes and his oaths" (86; par. 51). She even composed a proclamation critical of Magnus that verifies the Swedish aristocracy's growing resentment, which would eventually lead to his removal from power (Morris 4).

Birgitta also spent time in Rome attempting to recall the papacy from Avignon. She exhorted three subsequent popes to return to their rightful residence: Innocent VI (1352-62), who remained in France; Urban V (1362-1370), who visited Rome only to return to Avignon; and finally, Gregory XI (1370-1378), who would end Avignon papal rule by returning to Rome in 1377. Birgitta did not live to see the Pope's homecoming. However, before her death she said she had faith he would return to Rome because Christ had assured her of the fact in a vision (Harris 12).

Over the course of her life, Birgitta claimed that Christ and Mary revealed information to her that was intended for public consumption, and so, to accomplish her obligations to God, she engaged in highly visible rhetorical activities. For this reason, Birgitta roused the suspicions of male clergy who disparaged her revelations and the civic agency that they earned her. Thus, although she was canonized in 1391, the decision had to be reaffirmed in 1415. At the Council of Constance (1414-1418), where Church officials adjudicated the orthodoxy of various persons, Jean Gerson criticized the informal nature of Birgitta's alleged relationships with Christ and the Virgin Mary.³⁶ Such claims of intimacy proved too impressive for Gerson, who questioned Birgitta's rhetorical intent. His charges indicate that he disapproved of Birgitta's mystical status precisely because her visions had led her to seek a public platform. Several years later, he would level these same charges against Catherine of Siena, whom he deemed "a lunatic," and whose "notorious revelations" he ridiculed after her death (Caciola 277). Gerson often argued that women like Birgitta did not wish to honor God, who would be better served by silent adoration, but instead sought to glorify themselves via mystical assertions. At all times Gerson sought to determine rhetorical intent in matters of faith because a need for recognition so great that it led a woman to lie about God's favor was at best an indication of madness and at worst proof of Antichrist's influence. He warns in "On Distinguishing True from False Revelations" that ecclesiastical authorities have an obligation to determine "whether the miracle is performed in order to bear witness to

³⁶ Gerson's treatises on women's visionary activity—which he deemed too faddish to be genuine—establish "antifeminist themes," railing against "women whose ardor is excessive, greedy, changeable, unbridled, and therefore suspect" and who squander their confessors' time relating their dubious revelations (Newman, *God and the Goddesses* 288).

the true faith or to show the sanctity of a person” (342).³⁷ Given that Birgitta had been canonized by the time he argued his case before the Council, Gerson could not call Birgitta a heretic outright. However, his painstaking application of hierarchical methods of discernment to Birgitta’s works attests to his skepticism over her mystical claims.

In spite of detractors like Gerson, Birgitta spoke out about sensitive religious and political issues of her day, and she did so with an authority that many others could not claim. Bridget Morris explains that “people systematically searched her prophecies for the message to reform society, which they used in varied contexts...to address the uncertainties of their own time” (5). Morris’s words confirm that Birgitta’s rhetoric met with strong public approval, and point to the ethical weight borne by her speech.

Widespread support permitted Birgitta to use her visions as a means to address authority figures who seemed to forget their main obligations, namely, to represent God on earth and model the spiritual life for their subordinates. Birgitta accomplished these aims by employing the rhetorical scheme of kenosis, the perceived emptying of the self to make room for God’s essence. Hence, in the *Revelations*, Birgitta portrays Christ as telling her, “My words—which you hear from me frequently in spiritual vision—like the good drink, satisfy those who thirst for true charity” (148; par. 10); the satiating quality of Christ’s words suggest the image of the soul being (ful)filled. Birgitta’s use of kenosis allowed her to contradict even those to whom belonged the social prerogative to speak for God. When Pope Gregory planned to launch a Crusade so as to reunite a fractured

³⁷ In this treatise, Gerson cites Elizabeth and Zechariah as decent role models for “taking the royal road with a simple heart in all the just works of God” (343). Rhetorically, his example reinforces the import of silence by highlighting Zechariah’s muteness after questioning the Word of God, although Zechariah regains his speech when he defies religious convention by naming his son John (Luke 1:59-66).

Christendom, Birgitta interpreted his proposal as a deliberate distraction from troubles at home and an excuse to pillage on a wide scale (Scheelar 65). Kenosis served Birgitta well as she reminded the powerful that abandoning their duties could imperil their souls and those of their followers. Along these doctrinal lines, she counseled ecclesiastics on spiritual matters and issues of leadership. Her works reveal that she was fully aware of her status among male audiences as a religious authority, and that she crafted her instruction so as to remind her addressees of her qualifications by depicting herself as the recipient of divine orders.

Birgitta also used a variety of embodied rhetorics to build a public ethos, one marked by the highly public performance of direct and indirect religious license. Like many other women mystics, she exemplified the tenet that the “continuous prayer that God advocates possesses an active component” (Fleckenstein, “Blood of the Word” 291). Although her revelations would not be transcribed or copied until several years before her death, she provided individual guidance to many high ranking authorities via letter writing. This genre of composition allowed Birgitta to “converse personally” with her correspondents in a manner simultaneously private and public, and using a rhetoric in which her disembodied speech emphasized her embodied persona. Medieval *ars dictaminis* regarded the letter as “half of a conversation, intended to represent the spoken word and the character of the writer” so that the letter itself provided a “substitute for one’s physical presence” (Lanham 110, 111). At the same time, the artifact allowed the writer to address her correspondent from afar and via an incorporeal object. In Birgitta’s case, this may have reinforced the impression that she channeled the Word of God rather

than “spoke” her own, since she addressed private and political matters through this medium. Her work in the epistolary genre sternly addressed various monarchs and their corteges; the rhetorical Birgitta addressed important men “in person” even as the corporeal Birgitta remained silent, and often, unseen.

Medieval prohibition of preaching by women guaranteed that Birgitta could not address wide audiences in the same manner as could a priest, but that did not prevent her revelations from being circulated orally or being used to great persuasive effect. As Claire L. Sahlin points out, male ecclesiastical supporters communicated her words to their parishioners so that through their sanctioned positions she preached and acted in the world indirectly: “These men, who were invested by the church with the authority to preach, frequently functioned as her mouthpieces, using her revelations to exorcise demons and to proclaim the imminent judgment of God from church pulpits” (Sahlin 70). Male speakers like her Spanish confessor Alfonso Pecha of Jaén translated her speech before audiences that could not understand her Swedish-inflected Latin, reducing the impression that she transgressed against preaching proscriptions (Sahlin 82).

Above all, Birgitta employed an invitational rhetoric modeled on that of Christ. In her many letters to supplicants, she uses parables and carefully arranged lists of options to lead questioning souls toward correct moral choices via their own reasoning. For example, Book Seven of her *Revelations* shows that she counseled a bishop who worried that his duties as ruler of the March of Ancona drew him too far and too frequently from his diocese (214-15; ch. 29). Birgitta urges him to heed his own conscience. Although she draws on the rhetorical power of kenosis, stating that Christ

appeared and told her what to say, Birgitta begins with the obligatory apology: “My Lord, most reverend Father, first of all I humbly recommend myself to you. You have written to me with humility that I, a woman unknown to you, should humbly pray to God for you” (214; ch. 29, par. 1). However, the apology, too, emphasizes her clout, for her diffidence in this passage is not attributable to her gender, but to her recognition of the bishop’s high position within the Church hierarchy. Subtly, Birgitta’s choice of words highlights that, in spite of his rank and their lack of acquaintance, the bishop has written to her for advice in addition to or rather than consulting another member of the clergy. In reaching out to Birgitta, he has plainly acknowledged her status as a true mystic. The epistolary relationship between Birgitta and the bishop positions them as a God-sent but humble *female* teacher and a righteous member of the elite who recognizes her import. Furthermore, his appreciation for Birgitta’s wisdom casts the bishop as an equally wise figure, one who recognizes the Word of God when it manifests through a simple woman.

Birgitta’s response develops this identification of the bishop’s sagacity into a device that reinforces her indirect recommendation—that he choose his ecclesiastical duties over his lay responsibilities. A strategic parable casts neglected churchgoers as lost sheep and the churchmen who neglect them as pigs “dressed in pontifical or sacerdotal ornaments” (214; ch. 29, par. 6). In this story, a great lord invites the pigs to supper and offers them exquisite provisions, but the pigs cry out for common slop; their vile ignorance enrages the lord, and he expels them from his palace. Despite her use of this pointed parable, Birgitta presents the bishop’s decision as a matter of free will.

Whether or not he decides to forgo his marquisate, she advises, he must at all times heed his own conscience; he should retain his secular position only if he truly believes he does more good for people's souls as ruler of the March than as bishop. Birgitta concludes her letter with another apology: "Be forbearing with me, my Lord, in that I, although an ignorant woman and an unworthy sinner, write such things to you. I ask of him, our true and good Shepherd, who deigned to die for his sheep, that he may bestow on you the Holy Spirit's grace, by which you may worthily rule his sheep and always do his glorious and most holy will, even till death" (215; ch. 29, par. 15). Even as she appeals to the bishop's judgment, the implication of her discourse is clear. The bishop's soul depends on his making the right decision. She imparts serious advice indeed, advice that could potentially affect all members of her addressee's bishopric.

This second appeal to the humility topos highlights her words as those of Christ himself. Birgitta's rhetorical setup stresses that Christ the Good Shepherd has entrusted the bishop with a portion of his flock. He should attend to his secular responsibilities only "if...you see that by ruling the march you can do God greater honor and be more useful to souls than in your bishopric" (215; ch. 29, par. 11). By appealing to his qualms of his conscience and defending the wellbeing of his endangered "sheep," Birgitta's words imply strongly that the bishop already knows what he must do, though she refuses to say outright what that is, just as he himself has done. Instead, having achieved rhetorical consubstantiality with Christ through kenosis, Birgitta trusts in Christ's preferred method of instruction, the parable, to illuminate the bishop's understanding so that he will proceed to make the right choice of his own volition. Moreover, her use of

parable encourages the bishop to identify with Christ as well by invoking Christ's role as the Good Shepherd. Thus, Birgitta persuades the bishop in a diplomatic manner to renounce his worldly position and aspire to a life of righteous poverty—or, at least, a life less prone to sheer materialism. Birgitta's rhetoric recalls Christ's words to the rich man seeking eternal life, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven" (Matt. 19:21). Given their difference in earthly status, however, Birgitta counsels the bishop by indirect means using Christ's invitational rhetoric rather than his direct commands.

Nonetheless, like many a biblical prophet Birgitta does not shrink from engaging more direct forms of rhetoric whenever necessary, especially when she must voice accusations against those guilty of acts she deems heretical. Then she uses forceful rhetoric intended to shame her listeners and readers into making drastic life changes. While on her way back from Jerusalem Birgitta censures the reprehensible people of Naples in front of Bernard the archbishop, three masters of theology, two doctors of canon and civil law, as well as several knights and citizens (207-11; ch. 27). Birgitta claims that Christ has asked her to stop in Naples and pray for the city's sinful inhabitants, whose behavior proves so wicked that a circuitous rhetoric will not do. Christ promises, "If anyone, therefore, amends his life...at once I will run out to meet him as a loving father runs to meet his wayward son; and I will receive him into my grace more gladly than he himself could have asked or thought. And then I will be in him, and he in me; and he shall live with me and rejoice forever" (211; ch. 27, par. 36-37). But, for the unrepentant soul he augurs a terrible fate: "But upon him who

perseveres in his sins and malice, my justice shall indubitably come” (211; ch. 27, par. 36-37). Birgitta explains that only a short time before, she has visited the manger of Christ’s birth and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher with the Virgin Mary and Christ as her virtual tour guides. Hence, her newly re-authorized rhetoric resounds with righteous fury that is depicted as not hers alone.

Taken aback by the vanity on blatant display in Naples, Birgitta’s admonition highlights two sins that “draw after them other sins that all seem as if venial”: the painting of people’s faces “with the various colors with which insensible images and statues of idols are colored,” and the donning of “unseemly” clothing that alters the appearance of their bodies in their “natural state” (209; ch. 27, par. 18-19).³⁸ Exerting divine authority by means of prosopopoeia (wherein the words of an absent person are presented as one’s own), Birgitta channels divine anger over the collective pride of the Neapolitans. Their vanity has led them to pretend that their faces are “more beautiful than I made them,” that their bodies are “more beautiful and more lascivious than I, God, created them” (209; ch. 27, par. 18-21). These sartorial and cosmetic practices, Birgitta pronounces, are done so as to incite carnal desire. They “deform” the natural figure of the human body, diminish “the adornment of [the] souls” these bodies house, and increase “the devil’s power” by serving as a means of temptation to themselves and to each other. Birgitta’s words evoke Christ’s invective against the Pharisees, to whom he says, “You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean” (Matt. 23:27). Her

³⁸ Around this time, medieval fashions were changing. The looser, draping garments of the early Middle Ages were being replaced with tight breeches for men and tapered-waisted dresses for women.

warning recalls the one that Gerson will later level against women mystics like her, namely, that conceit has satanic origins because it seeks to redirect glory that rightfully belongs to God.

Birgitta's uses of kenosis and prosopopoeia also preserve her reputation as a respectable mystic by allowing her to depict any questionable instruction as Christ's revision of his own Word. Concerning the dangers posed by face-painting and inappropriate clothing, Birgitta depicts Christ as stating that "a venial sin is made mortal if a human being delights in it with the intention of persevering" (209; ch. 27, par. 16). This rhetorical move exposes her to accusations of heresy because, for a sin to be considered mortal, it must be committed knowingly and willfully, and must be of such a grave nature that it defies eternal law. Indeed, Birgitta's logic would cause later controversy at the Council of Basel (1431), where Cardinal Juan de Torquemada defended Birgitta's orthodoxy by drawing on Thomas Aquinas's treatment of the difference between mortal and venial sins. Torquemada summed up two main interpretations of Birgitta's reasoning that cast her rhetoric as heretical: either her Christ said that a sin could be both venial and mortal, or he said that repeated venial sins add up to a mortal sin. Torquemada countered by arguing that Birgitta had spoken two truths: that a soul might be in mortal peril if pleasure usurped the place of God as the soul's "true end" or if repetition of the venial sin led the soul to commit a mortal sin (*Birgitta* 311; n. 840). The controversy surrounding Birgitta's claims was not unwarranted, since her association of seemingly venial sins with mortal sins could easily be construed as a personal amendment of canon law, an ideological shift that verges on heterodoxy.

However, the rhetorical presentation of Birgitta's vision as contiguous with a subsequent revelation, wherein the Virgin Mary directs Birgitta to upbraid the clergymen of Naples who do not instruct their servants properly, and to denounce the city's fortune-tellers (211-13; ch. 28), suggests Birgitta's grasp of sophisticated theology. I contend that Birgitta's use of complex rhetorical schemes in her charge against the people of Naples permits her to reframe her possible rhetorical misstep as proof of her legitimacy as a mystic and prophet. Rhetorical arrangement presents her condemnation of face-painting and risqué clothing as bound to the Virgin's denunciation of seers and incompetent clergy and because they can all be seen to fall under the category of idolatry. Birgitta unifies the narcissistic dressers, irresponsible churchmen, and false seers by highlighting the condition they have in common: all of them impart only the appearance of legitimacy in defiance of eternal law. The impressions they convey are self-serving signs rather than humble testaments to God's grace. "No one is good of himself except me, God alone," Christ states in another of her visions, "and everyone who is good has received that goodness from me. If then you, who are nothing, seek your own praise and not the praise of me, to whom belongs every perfect gift, false is your praise and you do an injustice to me, your Creator" (111; Interrogation 7, par. 22-23). Hence, Birgitta's Christ declares what Torquemada would later clarify for Church authorities: that these venial sins could in fact be mortal if they arrogated the attention due only to God.

Birgitta's use of rhetorical schemes that position her words as those of Christ and His mother solidify her reputation as a divine vessel. And, her standing is sustained

against the temperament of those who would signify their own worth rather than God's, whether these are people who adorn their bodies, inhabit the Church hierarchy undeservedly, or practice demonic forms of prophesy. Furthermore, their blindness to their collective sins is tied to their possible inability to recognize Birgitta's godliness. Birgitta bears the solemn responsibility of recalling them all from their heretical ways. Her rhetoric demands of the laity and clergy alike absolute *metanoia*, a complete turning away from old ways. It is not enough that each person turn away from sin—he or she must reconstruct his or her very epistemological view of sin so as to train each desire, each action, towards the glorification of God.

Birgitta's Ethos and Her Use of the Mother Topos

From a rhetorical standpoint, that Birgitta's rebuke of the Neapolitans mirrors fiery, Old Testament-style speeches is significant. For, as she explains in the *Revelations*, it is while she is in Naples that she first receives a revelation that will come to her in segments throughout her travels to the Holy Land, and brought to a close when she visits the Holy Sepulcher (181-87; ch. 13). Prior to his death, Birgitta's son Charles had been involved in a love affair with Joanna, Queen of Naples, a fact that caused Birgitta to worry about Charles's eternal soul, as she expresses through the Virgin Mary (*Birgitta* 288; n. 585). In this vision, stretched out over time and compiled so as to suggest an account of Birgitta's own coming to terms with Charles's death, the Virgin Mary explains that she personally interceded on behalf of Charles, and that he has been saved through Grace. "Indeed I stood near your same son Charles, shortly before he sent

forth his spirit, in order that he might not have such thoughts of carnal love in his memory that, for the sake of love, he would think or say anything against God or will to omit anything pleasing to God or will to perform, to his soul's harm, those things that could be in any way contrary to the divine will" (181; ch. 13, par. 3). The continual vision is one of Birgitta's best known texts, certainly one of the most poignant. However, this revelation also buttresses Birgitta's claims to public speech by allowing her to identify the characteristics that she shares with the Virgin Mary as an adaptable topos, one whose indeterminate boundaries overlap the salvific characteristics of Christ and whose rhetorical breadth expands to contain her own prophetic ethos.

In this important vision, Birgitta presents a tribunal composed of Christ-as-Emperor, as well as various angels and saints. Before this distinguished group, a rhetorically savvy Mary disputes a demon's claim on Charles's soul. Due to Charles' great reverence for Mary during his lifetime, Mary has obtained special dispensation from her Son, ensuring that "wherever [Charles] was and even where he is now, no evil spirit might approach his body" (183; ch. 13, par. 29). When the demon argues that Charles has died in mortal sin because his own will "drew [him] to live in worldly pride and carnal pleasure," Mary debates the demon with enthusiasm. Her arguments diminish the terms of the demon's claim until, at last, an angel counters by stating that through the intercession of Charles' own mother, Birgitta, Charles "finally obtained a godly fear" that made him seek confession whenever he fell into sin (184; ch. 13, par. 34). Moved by Birgitta's many tears and petitions, God has sympathized with the grieving human mother and granted Charles the contrition necessary to receive Grace. In the end, the

demon's claim is revoked and his tongue cannot even speak Charles' name, for Charles has received a new name thanks to his mother's devotion: "Son of Tears" (187; ch. 13, par. 71). The angel explains that Birgitta's tears have robbed the demon of his "sack of sins" in which he keeps records of the soul's transgressions. "His mother's tears have plundered you and have burst the sack and have destroyed the writing. So greatly did her tears please God!" (184; ch. 13, par. 43). The revelation concludes as the angel addresses Birgitta and tells her that God showed mercy on Charles not only in response to her prayers, but also so that "God's friends may be able to understand how much he deigns to do in answer to the prayers, tears, and labors of his friends who charitably pray and labor for others with perseverance and good will" (187; ch. 13, par. 77). Birgitta depicts herself as a person that is meant to share firsthand knowledge of the intercessory process with others so that they, too, may be moved to prayer and good works. According to her vision, Christ and his Mother not only grant her permission to speak openly—essentially, they command her to do so.

Nonetheless, in the earthly realm with its clearly delineated gender roles, Birgitta must fashion a rhetorical ethos that, combined with the claim of mystical understanding, bolsters her public authority as an orator and writer. Her rhetoric accomplishes this objective by drawing on medieval notions of motherhood, which sanction her assertion of an embodied knowledge of God's compassionate, maternal aspects. These notions also permit her to build a rhetorical consubstantiality with the Mother of Christ, an identification that culminates in the interpolation of her persona into the process of Double Intercession that is depicted in Birgitta's vision, even into the Trinity itself. In

one of four prayers which she professes to have received through divine revelation, Birgitta points to the Virgin Mary's function as intercessory in praxis: "For wretched souls you obtain prompt pardon, and for all sinners you stand forth as a most faithful advocate and proxy" (225; prayer 1, par. 32). This observation is remarkable in light of Mary's gender, but not in light of her position as Christ's mother. Typically, medieval women's spiritual advocacy for the souls of the deceased, including the often suspect apostolate to the dead, was restricted to devout prayer, penance, and even emotional outpouring.³⁹ But Mary's corporeal connection to Christ empowers her to assume the role of arbiter in heaven because they share a single flesh.⁴⁰ And, by identifying with Mary Birgitta obtains the social and religious agency necessary to address large audiences without going against the maternal qualities that audiences expect Birgitta to exhibit as a widow and mother.

During the Middle Ages the Virgin Mary's image underwent extensive revision. From an earthly vessel that facilitated the salvation of humanity by giving birth to Christ, she became known as the Queen of Heaven who could actively salvage souls in her own right, either by appealing to her beloved Son or by confronting demons that threatened the souls of her devotees. In Birgitta's own time, the Virgin Mary often represented the third Person of the Trinity, and like her Son, she reflected aspects of the human and the divine. She was both a holy sovereign as well as a "meek worshipper who had first earned her own crown" (Newman, *God and the Goddesses* 261). Since ecclesiastical

³⁹ Some Church authorities denounced women mystics' fervent apostolate to the dead because this allowed certain mystics to claim that they had received a promise from God that their tears and prayers alone could release souls from Purgatory.

⁴⁰ Medieval physiology assumed that mothers alone contributed matter at conception.

authorities used the Virgin Mary as a symbol that embodied the characteristics they deemed appropriate to women, critics have tended to overemphasize the degree to which the figure of Mary undermines feminine agency. However, if medieval authorities deployed the Virgin Mary topos in order to circumscribe feminine activity, the works of women writers and mystics like Birgitta reveal that the topos could also be developed in ways that justified women's composition and their dedication to public works. After all, as Christ's first teacher, Mary was responsible for teaching her Son how to read and write, and her basic instruction sustained his earthly mission by granting him entrance to the exegetical culture of his day; and as Christ's closest associate in heaven, Mary played an active role in shepherding souls back into her Son's flock. Indeed, like Christ, Mary also displays male and female characteristics. She emerges as an androgynous personality, given her combination of maternal qualities with a dynamic intercessory function. Thus, in Birgitta's vision of Charles's trial, Mary's boldness astonishes the demon that demands Charles' soul. It complains to Christ, "And behold, O just Judge: that woman, your mother, seized this soul with her own hands, almost before it exited from the man's mouth; and in her powerful ward she has brought it to your judgment" (182; ch. 13, par. 16). There is no indication that Mary's forthright manner is unbecoming to her station, especially as she proceeds to debate the demon herself and causes it to verbally concede her point.

The mother topos reflects the Virgin Mary's capacity to encompass different facets of divinity and humanity, masculinity and femininity, because mothers create and nurture children, then work to protect and preserve their lives. Mothers reflect God's

productive aspect via the only means permitted them by gender circumscription, by giving birth, and in a sense they create life “out of nothing.” Therefore, maternity finds an intimate connection to a God that “transcends the gender attached to mutable bodies” (Tinkle 59). Mary can argue with demons and yank souls from their corporeal homes, just as her Son is “pregnant with souls” of righteous individuals whose souls, in turn, are “pregnant with Christ” (Bynum, *Holy Feast* 257). Medieval women could never expect to achieve the level of perfection that Mary personified, particularly since living women had to contend with the bodies they inhabited and the ideological connotations that they bore. Yet even as a rigid dichotomy between the sexes was asserted, a clear-cut distinction proved impossible to delineate.

Male social and religious authorities stressed set notions of femininity using Mary’s image, but medieval women reconciled the masculine aspects of Mary’s persona with her maternity, just as they could envisage a glorious male God who was with child. Thus, Mother and Son alike performed the reproductive function that proved medieval women’s access to masculine power in the real world, and, consequently, women’s identification with Mary entailed identification with Christ as well. Therefore, the mother topos could be adapted to suit the needs of real-world women because women did not necessarily aspire to the ultimate superiority that she embodied. Rather, they could appeal to her example to justify their own earthly endeavors. By emphasizing that they followed Mary’s example—and by extension, that of Christ—just as religious officials demanded, women like Birgitta created a space in which they could perform the

public rhetorical functions enabled by the genderless state that Christ spoke of in the Gospels (Matt. 19:12).

Birgitta puts a personal spin on the mother topos by depicting a state of hypermaternity that calls for a reconfiguration of rhetorical expressions that distinguish the virginal body from the maternal. Cheryl Glenn writes, “Uncontaminated virgins were considered golden vessels, totally committed to a spiritual life.... And the fertile matrons who were fulfilling their bodily obligation to procreate were, according to medieval custom, wooden vessels. Therefore, virgins were three times as likely to be saved as wives” (*Rhetoric Retold* 85). However, these kinds of distinctions between virgins, widows, and mothers were not set in stone during the Middle Ages, as is clear given Birgitta’s canonization despite the years she spent in Sweden as a wife and mother. Theologically, Mary’s virginal status set her apart from other mothers because the boundaries of her body had never been breached except by the diffusive power of the Holy Spirit. Even Birgitta’s Christ describes his Mother as “a vessel closed and not closed: closed to the devil but not to God” (155; bk. 5, par. 10). In the medieval mind, this affirmation connoted certain manifestly physical conditions. The Holy Spirit could enter the body through the heart and, through the heart, reach the soul. Demons, however, could not affect the soul via the heart, so they often inhabited people’s digestive tracts; at home in ‘the guts where impurities are contained,’ demons could nonetheless pass into any “open spaces” within the body where they sought to do the greatest harm (Caciola 283). Notably, Birgitta’s figuration of the Virgin Mary’s body as closed and not closed situates the Holy Spirit as an external force that does not

intrinsically belong inside a human female body, even if that body belongs to Mary herself. Furthermore, the notion of a “closed but not closed body” reinforces the paradoxical treatment that medieval discourses grant the female body.

In Birgitta’s vision, the Virgin Mary’s description of how she separated Charles’ soul from his body is tied to the notion of a porous female body. “I acted like a woman standing by another woman who is giving birth, in order that she might help the infant, lest it die in the flow of blood or suffocate in that narrow place through which an infant exits and so that, by her watchful care, the infant’s enemies, who are in the same house, might not be able to kill it” (181; ch. 13, par. 2). For all the expectant joy that accompanied childbirth, people risked many misfortunes by procreating. Thus, the parturient female body occupied a rhetorical space wherein social and religious anxieties intersected; the rhetorically “open”—and physiologically opening—boundaries of the female body proved at once a site of promise and peril, a conflation of the sacred and the profane. In addition to noting the blood, amniotic fluid, sweat, and tears that attend all births, medieval popular lore found correlations between the notion of childbirth and the expulsion of excrement.⁴¹ The associations between giving birth and unclean bodily functions, as well as the potential dangers that childbirth posed, facilitated the belief that demons could enter the body, as this belief helped explain the senselessness of infant mortality or the female body’s weakness that seemingly engendered death. Mothers could die from infection or blood loss, or be plagued by childbirth’s emotional and psychological aftereffects, as was Margery Kempe; infants died during everyday births.

⁴¹ As the mother’s body worked hard to expel the child, she risked the development of painful fistulae that might cause her to eject waste from regions other than the one that nature intended (Morrison 51).

Mary's account equates the wrenching of Charles' soul from the demon's grasp with a drawing out of an infant during a breach birth. Paradoxically, the closed anatomy that signifies a virgin's virtue becomes the manifestation of maternal hazards.

Although Birgitta contrasts the Virgin's parturition to that of the common woman (202-04; ch. 21), Birgitta's depiction builds consubstantiality between her and Mary by indicating Mary's physical manifestation of a safe "openness" that distinguishes the mother or the widow from the earthly virgin. Birgitta states that while she is in Bethlehem, Mary reveals the circumstances of Christ's birth. She kneels, raises her hands and eyes to heaven, and enters a state of ecstasy. Then, as Mary prays, Christ stirs within her and, "in a moment and the twinkling of an eye," He is born (203; ch. 21, par. 8). Even as Birgitta's rhetoric portrays Mary's uncomplicated and painless experience of childbirth as a miracle, her description of the event nonetheless suggests that Mary's body opened considerably to enable so quick a delivery. This effect is furthered by Birgitta's modest postscript: "And so sudden and momentary was that manner of giving birth that I was unable to notice or discern how or in what member she was giving birth" (203; ch. 21, par. 10). In deflecting audience attention from Mary's most private—and by all accounts, sealed—parts, Birgitta employs *paralepsis* (the accentuation of a topic through ostensible omission) to expose Mary's physical boundaries at their most porous. Birgitta's stylistic stratagem parallels the substance of her message, since the lack of reference intrinsic to *paralepsis* and the lack of boundaries seen as representative of femininity are both revealed rhetorically as ideological gains. Birgitta's presentation reveals the Virgin at her most human and at her most sublime, depicting her at the

precise moment when the most powerful woman who ever lived gained the capacity to empathize with all other mothers, including Birgitta. And, Birgitta's rhetoric does this by highlighting that humanity owes its salvation to feminine efforts that are often relegated to discursive spaces outside of the mainstream.

It is also in this moment, which Birgitta envisions in mystical retrospect, that Birgitta's identification with the Virgin is depicted as complete because they both suffer for their sons. Their shared physical and emotional experiences render the two women "*comadres*," as Barbara Newman delightfully affirms, because they share "the kind of sisterly bond that is still potent in some Latin American cultures" (*God and the Goddesses* 277). *Comadres* are not only friends, but godmothers to each other's children through the highly social ritual of Church baptism. They are surrogate mothers in an extended familial context; if a mishap should befall one woman, her *comadre* will step in to raise her children in the true faith. It is via this unique friendship that Birgitta's ethos becomes most intimately tied to the sacred family that is the Trinity. Being now, in a sense, a doubly maternal figure to Charles, the Virgin is compassionate and personally delivers his soul into the next world "so that in his dying he would not endure pain so hard as to cause him to become at all inconstant through despair, and so that in dying he might not forget God" (181; ch. 13, par. 4). Through her intervention, Charles's death seems to be less painful than the moment of his birth. Mary's sisterly sympathy for Birgitta ensures that Charles' day of death is indeed better than the day of his birth (Eccl. 7:10). Conversely, Birgitta's rhetoric secures her position as Mary's *comadre* because

she can be seen as drawing closer to Christ. If she is a surrogate mother to Mary's Son, it is only because she has given birth to Christ within her soul.

Birgitta's revelations address the issue of the open and/or closed female human body in order to reinscribe the maternal body's social and religious rhetorical value. Her rhetoric reframes the issue categorically by drawing attention to Birgitta's own body and its capacity to contain evidence of sanctity whether its boundaries seem open or closed in the public's estimation. Evoking the topos of the soul that is pregnant with Christ, Birgitta exchanges the natural phenomena associated with childbirth for the visual evidence of her own personal Passion. After the safety of Charles's soul has been secured, the angry demon lashed out at Birgitta. "The devil cried out loudly and answered: 'Oh, what a cursed sow his mother, that she-pig, is, who had a belly so expansive that so much water poured into her that her belly's every space was filled with liquid for tears. Cursed be she by me and by all of my company!'" (187; ch. 13, par 72). As the demon dares not insult the Virgin Mary herself, instead he verbally attacks Mary's substitute. Birgitta inhabits a human body, and the body of a widow at that, a body that has borne eight children; yet she is able to provide a stand-in for Mary. What matters most in this revelation is not what might enter the female body, but what its inhabitant allows inside, in this case, the blessings of tears. This rhetorical revision of the embodied condition replaces the prevalent view of the female body as passively susceptible to invasion with the notion of feminine spiritual agency, as each individual is responsible for choosing what she permits inside her own body.

Ironically, Birgitta ventriloquizes this rhetorical transformation via the miserable demon, echoing the charges of mysticism's detractors that demons fooled women into believing that their visions are gifts from God.⁴² The tricky demon refers to Birgitta's ever "so expansive" belly, re-presenting the standard view that defines Birgitta's physical body as permeable and therefore vulnerable to supernatural attack. The vision alludes to, then subverts, feminine corporeality's suspect character by portraying demons as ready to simulate God's (and women's) creative faculty—only to be thwarted. Birgitta's rhetorical arrangement executes this reversal through the figure of the Virgin Mary, who explains how she "took custody" of Charles's soul upon his death: "This action quickly routed and dispersed that whole throng of demons who, in their malice, yearned to swallow it and torture it for eternity" (181; ch. 13, par. 6). Her maternal enveloping of Charles precludes his ingestion by demons. Conspicuously, had the demons succeeded in their ghastly enterprise, Charles's soul would have ended up in their foul intestines rather than a benevolent womb. This rhetorical flourish adds a revolting dimension to the demon's perversion since, just as demons were thought to invade people's bowels, Charles might have found himself in similar circumstances. The Virgin has saved Charles from literally and metaphorically becoming nothing more than filth. Moreover, the "container" of the demon's own heart is ransacked by the Virgin's earthly counterpart: "I still have one thing carefully stored in my heart, and no one can

⁴² According to Nancy Caciola: "Lingering doubts about the good and evil nature of some women's spirit possessions, even after their deaths, occasionally prompted book-length treatises by supporters defending their divine illumination. It is startling to be reminded that some of the best-known inspired women of this period elicited hundreds of pages arguing against the possibility of demonic fraud in their careers. Such texts include Alphonse of Jaén's anxious apologetic for Brigit of Sweden, insisting upon her orthodoxy and docility..." (279).

abolish it,” the demon argues, only to find that “[Charles’s] mother made satisfaction for such things with her alms, her prayers, and her works of mercy so that the rigor of justice inclined toward the mildness of mercy” (185; ch. 13, par. 52-53). The demon’s loss of his claim denotes Birgitta’s absolute achievement of spiritual and physical consubstantiality with the Virgin.

Then, the luckless devil is forced to invert the impression of Birgitta’s empty body that it itself evokes rhetorically by advancing the porous quality of Birgitta’s physique as a feminine strength. Through its voice, Birgitta emphasizes that, due to her many pregnancies, her body epitomizes open space where once she contained the amniotic fluid essential to life. The residual gap is revealed not as plain emptiness, but as a holy container, miraculously filled once more by the tears that are the sign of Birgitta’s piety. Her experience of kenosis is so absolute that it encompasses her soul as well as her body, and her condition forces the demon to praise her—albeit snidely—by comparing her to the Virgin Mary. In turn, Birgitta’s resemblance to Mary allows her identification with Christ through the flesh that He shares with his mother, a flesh marked by maternal attributes. “And when you paint and anoint your face, why do you not look at my face and see how it was full of blood?” her Christ admonishes the vain Neapolitans. “You are not even attentive to my eyes and how they grew dark and were covered with blood and tears and how my eyelids turned blue. . . . You do not look at the rest of my limbs, monstrously wounded by various punishments, and see how I hung black and blue on the cross and dead for your sake” (209-10; ch. 27, par. 23-24). The rhetorical implications of the tears, amniotic fluid, and blood that the bodies of Mary and

Birgitta contain and have contained attain metonymic affinity with Christ's life-giving blood and the water discharged from his spear wound because Christ, like Mary and all mothers, empties his own body of vital fluids in order to cultivate life.

As a rhetorical indication of her thorough achievement of kenosis, Birgitta's ekphrastic depiction of maternal bodies in her visions links her corporeality to that of Mary and of Christ through their shared function of sustaining human existence. According to Birgitta's representation of her own body through the voice of a forlorn devil, her amniotic fluid nurtured the bodies of her children before they entered the world, but her tears have the power to usher their souls into heaven, as is the case with Charles. Consequently, Birgitta uses the mother topos to depict herself as one having intercessory influence, much like the Virgin Mary herself, and even like Christ. It is the mother topos that allows her to be present at her son's trial, so to speak, and that guarantees her ability to lead the world's lost sheep back to Christ. Contrary to the interpretation that women mystics tend to authorize their "textual bodies" through the undoing of their "physical bodies," a view leveled against Birgitta's contemporary Catherine of Siena (Fleckenstein, "Blood of the Word" 294), Birgitta does not appear compelled to choose between the two forms. Instead, her mysticism leads her to embrace the authority of her maternal female body in all of its corporeal glory, for hers is a body that inscribes and (pro)creates corporeally and textually so as to convey God's truth.

Corporeal and Textual Bodies

I propose that Birgitta's use of the mother topos permits her to develop a material connection between her own body and her texts, a rhetorical arrangement that comes to the fore in her *Book of Questions* (also known as Book Five of the *Revelations*). This lengthy exposition assumes the form of a ladder vision that Birgitta presents as received while on the road to her castle in Vadstena. Birgitta's amanuensis notes that while Birgitta transcribed the vision's contents in the vernacular soon after the event, he translated her writing into the "literary tongue" just as he had the rest of her visions. The interjection of his voice into Birgitta's text introduces the material connection between body and text, for it is he who remarks that Birgitta's *Book of Questions* "remained fixed in her heart and her memory as effectively as if it had been carved on a marble tablet" (102; par. 13). His words suggest the conflation of body and text that readers and listeners should experience by contemplating Birgitta's *Book*, a transformation that she has already accomplished. And, it is Birgitta's embodiment of the truth found in her vision that authorizes the translation of her *Book* into Latin, the official language of Church doctrine.

In the *Book of Questions*, Birgitta deploys the mother topos as a means to contend with human uncertainty that stems from the presence of evil in the world. The text opens by describing a rhetorical situation in which

the Lord Jesus Christ [was] seated on a wonderful throne like a judge judging. At his feet stood the Virgin Mary; and round about the throne, there was an infinite army of angels and a teeming multitude of saints.

And, in the middle of that same ladder, the aforesaid Lady Birgitta saw a certain religious, known to her at that time still alive in the body—a man of great erudition in the science of theology but full of guile and diabolic malice. Because of his extremely impatient and restless gestures, this man looked more like a devil than a humble religious. And then the said lady saw the thoughts and all the internal affections of the heart of that religious and how he manifested them with inordinate and restless gestures, by means of questions, to Christ the Judge seated on the throne—as follows below. (101; par. 5-10)

Scholars have tended to regard this vision as evidence of her great emotional turmoil in the time following her husband Ulf's death, when Birgitta says she deliberated whether to remain in Sweden or fulfill her mission to reestablish the roman papacy. During this time, the Black Plague also killed upwards of 100 million of Europe's inhabitants, a point that has led critics to view the monk as an externalized personification of Birgitta's grave doubts. Whether Birgitta's vision can be directly attributed to either of these causes remains unclear. Certainly, the rhetorical arrangement of the vision points to a wide-ranging concern over the presence of suffering in a world created by a wise and loving God, whether or not this concern speaks directly to Birgitta's personal psychic distress or the collective anxiety of her potential readers. In either case, Birgitta sets out to champion God's benevolence by couching the resolution of human doubt in terms of maternal guidance.

Birgitta frames the vision primarily as a dialogue between the monk and Christ. The presumptuous monk presents Christ with sixteen interrogations composed of five questions each. The first four interrogations concern the “individual doubts of a single person only,” but eventually they touch on questions of creation, salvation, and sanctification (Nyberg 24-25). At certain points in the vision, either Christ or his Mother pauses to reveal to Birgitta insights that do not necessarily engage the themes introduced by the interrogations. These breaks do, however, create sets of questions linked by their attention to ever loftier concerns since the order of their exposition—from creation to sanctification—shifts the reader’s attention from issues manifested in the natural world to those present in the unseen world of pure spirit. Notably, the interrogations do not lead to a discussion of contrition, by which the soul obtains divine grace, since the monk symbolizes the exact opposite of the good sense engendered by a close relationship with God that makes true contrition possible (Nyberg 42). Indeed, when Christ asks the monk why he persists in cleaving to decadent things when he understands the difference between right and wrong, the monk replies, “Because I act against reason, and I make the senses of the flesh prevail over reason” (151; Interrogation 16, par. 34). Subsequently, Christ tells Birgitta, “Behold, daughter, how greatly there prevails in man not only the devil’s malice but also a depraved conscience!” Birgitta emphasizes that the soul must exercise faith and trust that she will be saved despite the occurrence of sin. The monk, however, displays only a sin-inducing doubt. Ironically, it is his contrived skepticism that enables the vision to accomplish its rhetorical objective of explaining God’s ways to humanity.

The purpose of elevating the reader's thoughts corresponds to the rhetorical purpose of the ladder vision genre, situating Birgitta's *Book of Questions* within the tradition exemplified by the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* composed by St. John Climacus sometime around the seventh century. Climacus wrote the *Ladder* as a guide for cenobites, although its instruction proves amenable to the spiritual needs of lay people also. Reflecting on his own experience as a desert hermit for many years, nonetheless he avoids a detailed discussion of the rules of monastic life, offering instead what John Chryssavgis terms "a path of initiation, a way of life consisting ultimately of erotic ascent towards God," one based on "humility and purity of heart" (25). Climacus structures his guidebooks around the biblical image of Jacob's Ladder, dividing the ascending path into a series of thirty steps designed to illustrate how ascetic virtues enable a "re-creation of the flesh" by returning the flesh to its original state as created by God (Chryssavgis 71).⁴³ Birgitta's vision amends this traditional genre by emphasizing charity and love rather than asceticism. Although these themes tie her text to that of Climacus, her rhetorical approach reinscribes these qualities so that they achieve full expression only through the performance of good works out in the everyday world.

"Friend, I gave you a mouth that you might speak rationally about things that are useful for your body and your soul and about things that belong to my honor," Christ informs

⁴³ Birgitta's revelation can also be compared to the vision that St. Perpetua receives prior to her death in the arena at Carthage, another instance in which a female "author" revises the ladder vision genre in order to suit her particular rhetorical interest. Aviad Kleinberg affirms this view: "Christian exegetes have been quick to find a series of biblical symbols in the vision (which probably took the form of a dream): the ladder rising to heaven is Jacob's ladder; the woman who places her foot on the serpent's head is the Virgin Mary; and any shepherd is Jesus, the Good Shepherd. . . . In Jacob's dream the ladder symbolizes a passage between heaven and earth used by the heavenly retinue, not by humans. Jacob does not climb the ladder. He remains a passive spectator. Perpetua's ladder is very different. Perpetua must climb the ladder herself—it is *her* ladder. She is a heroine on the path toward the treasure of eternal life" (64-65).

the monk (102; Interrogation 1, par. 8). In this manner, Birgitta underscores that she must demonstrate her spiritual advancement by performing public acts of faith, including composition that brings honor and glorify to God.

Furthermore, while the process delineated in Climacus's *Ladder* attempts to bring the individual soul closer to God through the spiritual climbing of the thirty steps, Birgitta's arrangement of the rhetorical situation within her text suggests that the soul should not seek to ascend toward God so much as reach within itself, a vector suggested by Birgitta's emphasis on maternal imagery throughout her visions. Caroline Walker Bynum reasons that the "theme of God's motherhood is a minor one of in all writers of the high Middle Ages except Julian of Norwich," a theme "long neglected or even repressed by editors and translators... [that] is perhaps now in danger of receiving more emphasis than it deserves" (*Jesus as Mother* 168). Yet identification with a maternal God, made possible through the imagery of embodied motherhood present in works of the women mystics, should not be minimized. Birgitta's vision illustrates that motherhood provided a capacious topos for addressing issues related to feminine spiritual practice.

In the case of Birgitta's *Book of Questions*, the topos indicates that if one's soul is to become pregnant with Christ, one must turn attention inward to the cultivation of affective understanding that enables said pregnancy. Accordingly, Birgitta attempts to shift her audience's interest inward by offering herself as a model in material form that demonstrates the process of impregnation that they should seek. The *Book of Questions* does not initiate a leaving behind of the body, but a deliberate embrace of its emblematic

sensuality. This rhetorical objective is facilitated by the common understanding of the female body's hyper-corporeality, since it is the female body that suffers pain to transform agony into an expression of vitalizing love. The prominence given their ostensibly similar ontologies allows Birgitta to portray herself as a person whose rhetorical presence mirrors that of Christ so that, like Him, she may exist as body and as text, both an accomplished rhetorician and the subject of religious rhetoric. And so, Birgitta's ladder vision reinforces her self-figuration as an intimate member of the Holy Family, effecting her identification with the Virgin Mary and with Christ via the mother topos on several ideological levels.

Though at times Birgitta has Christ judge virginity as the utmost path toward God, in this section of the *Book of Questions*, she speaks through the figure of Christ to accommodate the spiritual route taken by persons like herself, who are dedicated to charity but whose bodies do not meet certain physical criteria. In this vision, the monk inquires as to why Christ so favors the Virgin Mary above all others, and Christ replies by expounding on his mother's many virtues, a statement that leads Christ to use a fascinating metaphor. He celebrates his mother's womb, comparing his "original home" on earth to a beautiful house. Then, he explains that Mary's womb symbolizes her immense faith. He states:

Your womb was as perfectly clean as ivory and shone like a place built of exquisite stones; for your constancy of conscience and of faith never cooled and could not be spoiled by tribulation. Of this womb—i.e., of your faith—the walls were like the brightest gold; and on them was

inscribed the fortitude of your virtues and your prudence and justice and temperance and your perfect perseverance; for all these virtues of yours were perfected by divine charity. (120; Interrogation 9, par. 18-19)

Christ's praise suggests the religious views elucidated by Glenn wherein virgins were compared to gold vessels and mothers to wooden ones. Yet by deliberately drawing attention to the metaphorical attributes of his description, Birgitta's Christ reworks these circumscribing discourses by emphasizing purity as a spiritual rather than solely physical state.

The rhetorical adaptation of the virgin-as-golden-receptacle motif bears later fruit when Christ informs Birgitta that she has been saved by her great faith and works of charity. "You are she who was nurtured in a house of poverty and then came into the society of the great. In a house of poverty, there are three things, namely, stained walls, harmful smoke, and pervasive soot. But you have been led into a house where there is beauty without stain, warmth without smoke, and sweetness that fills without cloying" (139; par. 1-2). The significance of Birgitta's human birth is supplanted by that of her spiritual re-birth in Christ. Yet this substitution would not be possible had Birgitta not borne Christ within her own soul. He tells her, "From these things, therefore, you were drawn away; and you were led into the mansion of the Holy Spirit. He is in me, and I am in him, and he encloses you in himself" (139; par. 5). The loving relationship between Christ and Birgitta allows her to become spiritually pregnant with Christ even as she herself finds refuge in Christ's own womb. As their mystical identities become

rhetorically intertwined within a circular process of pregnancy and birth, Birgitta claims the authority that derives from their shared spiritual qualities.

Initially, Christ's constant admiration of his Mother's virginal body seems at odds with Birgitta's status as a widowed mother of eight children. However, as we have seen previously in Birgitta's description of the Virgin Mary's parturition, Birgitta uses paralepsis to great effect, highlighting things because they are conspicuously absent. In the *Book of Questions*, Birgitta's Christ excludes the masculine component of the Holy family, preferring to glorify his close relationship with his mother. "Although I was not of Abraham's lineage through a father," he explains, "nevertheless I was of that lineage through my Mother, although without sin" (122-123; Interrogation 10, par. 29). His statement illustrates the depiction of Mary by medieval authors as the sole source of Christ's humanity. This is only possible because the physiology of the Middle Ages posited the fetus as "formed from maternal uterine blood, animated by the blood or seed of the father ... fed by blood, both in the womb and from the breast" (Bynum, *Wonderful Blood* 158). According to medieval medicine, all bodily fluids derived from the primary fluid, blood, and since each person's flesh originated in the female blood, all bodies could be perceived as female. In Birgitta's depiction, the Virgin Mary's delivery is distinctly unnatural (203; ch. 21, par. 6-13). Not only is Christ born in the "twinkling of an eye," his entire body is spotless. No trace of his mother's blood stains his flesh. While this lack of blood is indicative of Mary's immaculate status, it can also be interpreted another way. Conventional childbirth entails the loss of blood as the erstwhile entity composed of mother and child in a single body violently parts ways. Mary endures no

violent parturition because she and her Son are eternally united, given that her blood alone imbues him with corporeality. No blood is spilled during his birth because Mary's entire store of uterine blood is necessary to providing Christ with the body that will one day redeem the world. He is born of her "in all purity," for no other blood dilutes their bond (206; ch. 25, par. 9).

Birgitta's Christ appears as a largely feminine figure whose identity physically and symbolically overlaps that of his Mother—and that of Birgitta. He embodies three "stereotypes" that Bynum identifies as central to works by writers from Anselm to Julian: "the female is generative (the foetus is made of her very matter) and sacrificial in her generation (birth pangs); the female is loving and tender (a mother cannot help loving her own child); the female is nurturing (she feeds the child with her own bodily fluid)" (*Jesus as Mother* 131). Drawing on the imagery of Christ's pregnancy, maternity becomes associated with divine charity because the two conditions are presented as two sides of the same coin, expressions of love that demand absolute selflessness. Hence, Birgitta's ekphrastic depictions of Christ suffering for the sake of humanity depend heavily on the images of childbirth. After the monk questions Christ's motives in allowing himself to be abused and executed, Christ turns to Birgitta and ventriloquizes the voices of several sinful men so as to singlehandedly perform a dialogue between himself and them. Reminding these hypothetical individuals of the pain he has suffered, he describes his Passion in terms that evoke the "opened" body of the parturient woman. "In a threefold state, I stood there for your sake: first, as a man whose eye was penetrated by a knife; second, as a man whose heart was perforated by a sword; third, as

a man whose every limb trembled with the pain of pressing tribulation. Indeed, my passion was to me more bitter than a puncture in the eye; yet I suffered it out of charity” (133; par. 13-14). The pain of childbirth permeates Christ’s body as he is torn asunder on multiple levels. Nonetheless, he states that his “Mother’s sorrow moved my heart more than my own” (133; par.15). These words remind the reader that it is Mary’s flesh that bears the agony of Christ’s Passion since it is Mary’s flesh that makes her Son’s human existence possible.

Birgitta’s bodily identification of Christ with his Mother (and with herself) does not end here. Once again she depicts motherhood as a form of physical kenosis in a description that highlights the monstrous inverse image of the pregnant soul. “For a long time, all my inner and outer parts trembled out of pressing pain and suffering,” Christ declares before the sinful men, “and yet I did not dismiss it or draw back. Thus I stood before you, but all this you forget and neglect and despise. Therefore you shall be cast forth as an abortion; and, like the napkin of a menstruous woman, you shall be cast out” (133; par. 16). In this one shocking moment, the angry Christ becomes as a woman who deliberately induces an abortion, and the willful sinner as the expelled fetus with no more inherent value than a sanitary napkin. Yet for all the outrage and revulsion that this image inspires, Birgitta’s rhetoric posits the sinner’s rejection of Christ all the more offensive and horrific. Intentional acts of sin, mortal sins, have rendered the sinner’s soul nonviable; it can no longer reside within the divine womb that will deliver it into eternal life. Christ as mother has no choice but to expel the fetus because it is, in effect, dead. Analogously, “[t]he fact that the dirty cloth is ‘cast away’ implies that the woman herself

is thereby rendered clean (*Birgitta* 264; n. 306), Christ must expel what is sinful in order to protect his children. Birgitta's description presents her readers and listeners with is the impression of "our participation in [Christ's] own Godforsakenness, his total kenosis, an impossible gazing at the absolutely sacred, the absolutely profane" (Jasper 32). Just as Christ must empty himself during the Passion so that he may take on the sins of humanity, he empties himself so that he may receive the souls of the blessed. Birgitta highlights this image to shock people into contrition.

Birgitta forges the connection between motherhood and kenosis in a manner that authorizes her rhetorical activities because she, too, empties herself for others. She does not speak and write her own words but those of God, and she shares them out of charity to ensure that people's souls will receive God's grace. This lack of charity inspires her to accuse the clergy of Naples of ignoring the souls of their congregations. Similarly, Christ calls those "physicians" murderers who knowingly prescribe incorrect remedies and the masters of medicine who seek to cure people according to their own "guesswork" arrogant fools. Only the physician who correctly practices his craft will receive due recompense. The true physician, Christ explains, must think and act wisely: "These people are sick and need medicine. Therefore, although to them my remedy may seem bitter, nevertheless—because it is healthful—I will give it to them in order that they may not die a hard death" (115; par. 10). Christ Himself is described as the divine physician, so he calls upon his followers to model themselves after his example, spreading his Word especially among those who do not wish to take note. Rhetorically, Birgitta depicts herself as taking on the role of spiritual physician by drawing on the "medicinal

aspects” with which the bodies of Mary and Christ imbue female corporeality. After all, because Mary alone provides Christ with humanity, “[t]he *pretium* of redemption ... is the uterine blood Mary offers. And this gushing forth from a female body is not just future promise but also medicinal cure” (Bynum, *Wonderful Blood* 159).

By extension, Birgitta can use the natural functions of her own female body to emulate the salvific roles of Mary and Christ. As Newman explains, “If the Savior offered his blood and the Mother her milk, a third bodily fluid remained as the aspirant saint’s gift. To women who watered heaven with their tears, the heavenly Father promised the same sisterhood with Christ that Mary models in the Double Intercession” (Newman, *God and the Goddesses* 263). Birgitta’s speaking and writing can be seen as direct correlates to the weeping and praying that medieval religious discourses call upon her to provide as a pious woman. Birgitta must constantly empty herself of God’s Word by sharing charitably with her audiences so that she, in turn, may receive more wisdom that she can convey back to them. Using the corporeal authority that she finds in the mother topos, Birgitta initiates an unremitting process of emptying and filling, giving birth and being begotten, that serves as proof of God’s plan and that confirms her mystical authority.

Conclusion

The works of medieval women mystics like Birgitta of Sweden called for a reevaluation of prevailing rhetorical practices by demonstrating for popular audiences how they, too, might attempt to engage the significant civic and religious issues of the

day. Rhetoric allows human beings to re-envision the world in ways that accommodate their needs and those of others, including those who have been Othered by the status quo. Traditionally, the identities of disenfranchised groups have been construed by dominant discourses as intrinsically tied to notions of corporeality and ignorance; this has proven especially true for women throughout history. In response, the women mystics created amalgamations of oral, written, and embodied rhetorics that allowed them to address people at all levels of the social spectrum, from the Pope to the most humble layfolk seeking spiritual advice. Many of them composed religious works, spoke publicly, and performed their roles out in the world to ensure that everyone received the grace that accompanied the faithful reception of God's Word. As Ilene Whitney Crawford states, "[l]iteracy can be a means of connecting: it can also be a means of disconnecting, of making one's self distinct from the hoi polloi: look what I can do that you can't" (79). In works by the women mystics, the dichotomy between connection and disconnection breaks down: their mysticism sets them apart from most of the populace; yet these authors invite their audiences to pursue the same intimacy with God that they themselves enjoy. They called upon others to pursue God through connections formed by their bodies, to experience fully Christ's pain and Mary's suffering. In this manner, the mystics' readers and listeners could rhetorically conflate the two figures and perceive how a pregnant Christ could conceive the soul that, in turn, swelled with Christ's essence.

Such an emphasis on Christ's feminine aspect runs as a topos throughout Birgitta's visions and throughout her own rhetorical repositioning as an intimate friend

to the Holy Family. Because Mary shares in the salvific functions exemplified by her Son's sacrifice, she experiences his Passion as her own by reason of the empathetic identification between mother and child. Until recently, feminist critics have largely dismissed the Virgin Mary as a mono-dimensional figure deployed by ecclesiastical authors to circumscribe feminine agency. However, Birgitta's rhetorical inscription of herself within the mother topos attests to the figure's highly adaptable quality, particularly when rhetorical modifications allow for a consubstantiality based in the maternal body. Furthermore, the complexity of the topos is substantiated by the Virgin Mary's prominence as "an exemplum of female virtue" even in the non-mystical works of authors like Christine de Pizan, women who view Mary "not as standing 'alone of all her sex,' but as supremely imitable" (Newman, *God and the Goddesses* 271). The utility of the mother topos derives from its ability to imbue women's speech with agency in spite of the passive characteristics that the figure ostensibly embodies. This problematic conclusion calls for a reevaluation of medieval women's diverse views of motherhood, which was seen alternately as an oppressive ideal or as a source of feminine rhetorical license.

CHAPTER VI

“[T]HE MOTHERHOOD OF GRACE”: GOD AS MOTHER IN THE *SHOWINGS* OF
JULIAN OF NORWICH

In this chapter I argue that Julian of Norwich (c. 1342-c. 1416) employs the feminine topos of the Mother to frame her “textually embodied” rhetoric as sanctioned by a maternal God and to counter theological views ascribed to “Lollards.” An ambiguous term leveled initially against those who denied various fundamental tenets of Catholicism—such as transubstantiation, the centrality of the Sacraments, the honoring of Christ’s humanity, and veneration of the Virgin Mary—“Lollard” came to signify those who preached without authorization both within and outside of the Church hierarchy. Julian not only highlights human aspects of the divine, but genders these aspects to reflect gentle, compassionate qualities usually embodied by the Mother of Christ. In so doing, she upholds the orthodoxy of Marian Church doctrine during a tumultuous period in religious history typified by the rise of nonconformist proto-Protestant sects that devalued the image of the Virgin Mary. Julian’s rhetorical defense also allows her to fashion a novel theology based on her own experience without being deemed a Lollard or a heretic.

Anchoritic literature and dissenting texts provide ideological contexts for Julian of Norwich’s strategic use of female imagery in her *Showings*, a set of texts composed in response to visions that she claims to have received while suffering a deathly illness. The

14th century anchorite composed the Short Text (ST) of *Showings* soon after her visionary experience; then, following a period of two decades during which she contemplated the meaning of her visions, she authored the Long Text (LT), a systematic work that expounds her renowned theology of love. In both works, Julian engages in theological interpretation, an activity reserved solely for male authorities, and she defends herself from accusations of heresy by using humility topoi and by describing herself as uneducated. She is also careful to declare her orthodoxy by stating that the hearers of her book should rely on reason, Church doctrine, and the Holy Spirit for guidance. Nonetheless, the theology she espouses is radical, for she asks how a loving God permits the existence of hell, and declares that God should be viewed as father and mother equally. This assertion allows Julian to identify with the figure of the maternal God that she constructs, and so, to authorize her own speech and that of other women mystics like Margery Kempe.

Julian's Rhetorical Contexts

One of the most renowned English mystics, the anchorite Julian is known for espousing a theology of love and for having lived as an anchorite; beyond that, few biographical details can be confirmed. The anonymous author's pseudonym derives from a church dedicated to St. Julian, to which her cell was attached. She is thought to have lived well into her seventies, based on four wills that name her as the recipient of monetary bequests ("Bequests to Julian of Norwich, 1393-1416," *Writings of Julian* 431-435). She composed two versions of her visions known as the Long and Short Texts,

works that she claims are inspired by revelations she received at the age of thirty as she lay ill and close to death. The impersonal nature of medieval religious writing, which directs reader interest toward God rather than the author,⁴⁴ ensures a dearth of personal information. In contrast, the authorial ethos created by her works creates a rhetorical impression of Julian as a woman of intense faith. She states that, seeking to better understand God, she asked God to grant her three miracles: to share in Christ's Passion first-hand, to suffer an illness almost to the point of death, and to receive His wounds. "I conseyvede a mighty desire," she writes, "prayande our Lord God that he wolde graunt me thre woundes in my life time: that es to saye, the wounde of contrition, the wounde of compassion, and the wounde of wilfulle langinge to God" (65; *Vision* sec. 1).⁴⁵ Her rhetoric establishes Julian as a mystic seeking consubstantiality with her Lord. This process of rhetorical identification transpired over the course of several decades. Critics suggest that the first version, the Short Text, may have been finished soon after Julian experienced her illness in 1373, according on her own record. However, it remains unclear whether she composed the Short Text before or after entering the anchoritic enclosure at St. Julian's church ("Julian of Norwich" 78). A precise date for the completion of the expanded and revised version, or Long Text, remains all the more elusive, though Julian states that she spent almost twenty years contemplating Her

⁴⁴ This tendency shifts in the work of Julian's contemporary, Margery Kempe. Margery sets out to prove her mystical status by composing an auto-hagiography, but her lack of rhetorical training as a laywoman leads her instead to write the first autobiography in the English language.

⁴⁵ This and all quotations of Julian's works are taken from *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Divine Love*, ed. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2006). *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* corresponds to the Short Text, *A Revelation of Divine Love* the Long Text.

revelations before attempting the second text: “[F]ifteen yere after and mor, I was answered in gostly understanding” (379; *Revelation* ch. 86).

Her approach to composition has also been cause for debate. Scholars remain uncertain whether Julian’s declaration that she is “simple and unlettered” indicates illiteracy by modern standards, that is, a complete inability to read and write, or her limited knowledge of Latin. However, given her rhetorical expertise, we may believe that her claim constitutes a use of the humility topos, especially as the later Long Text unfolds via a highly methodical hermeneutical approach usually reserved for examination of the Holy Scriptures. Cheryl Glenn points out that, like Jesus, Julian “analyzed her audience and presented her information accordingly ... reaching an unlettered audience that had theretofore been neglected” (Glenn, *Rhetoric Retold* 95) by the prevalent *ars praedicandi* models that favored the authoritative Latin. Julian’s choice to write in the vernacular would have framed her revelations as divine knowledge intended for widespread consumption outside of the rhetorical spaces reserved for the Church. Furthermore, writing in the vernacular allowed Julian to avoid charges of heresy associated with the unlicensed use of Latin to promote popular discursive modes like mysticism, which were often regarded with suspicion by ecclesiastical officials.

Anchoritic life also afforded Julian the opportunity to write and to speak more openly about matters of faith than most women. Julian’s pious appeals, filtered through the apparent fulfillment of her three requests, has secured her status among contemporary critics as a genuine mystic, particularly in comparison to that other notorious 15th-century woman writer and visionary, Margery Kempe (1373-c. 1438).

However, more likely, their divergent standings among critics derive from the fact that, as a woman religious, Julian would have had more rhetorical training in religious genres than did Margery. In addition, Julian's social standing as an anchorite permitted her an embodied rhetoric that allowed audiences to situate her within patterns of tolerated feminine piety even as she extolled a novel form of devotion. Unlike Margery, who traveled extensively and proclaimed herself a mystic to all she encountered, Julian lived her life as an anchorite, a woman whose vocation entailed permanent enclosure. Her cell may not have been cramped and she probably had at least one servant, but the anchoritic lifestyle nonetheless remained an arduous option. The anchorite's cell contained an opening that looked out onto the Eucharist within the adjacent church, and such proximity to the transubstantiated body of Christ meant that she was immersed in its blessedness at all times. Julian's position as a highly respected member of the Christian community and her obtaining of the miracles she prayed for functioned together to grant her the authority needed not just to transcribe her *Showings*, but to utilize them to devise a theology more in line with her personal views on God than those of some of her contemporaries.

Paradoxically, even as an anchorite made the choice of absolute withdrawal from the world, vowing to remain in her cell for the remainder of her life, she was expected to assume a more public role than she might have maintained had she chosen the nun's life of enclosure. She provided counsel to those seeking her advice on spiritual and even practical matters. Often, pilgrims undertook extensive journeys to consult anchorites and other enclosed male and female religious recognized for their wisdom, and it is along

these lines that Julian made Kempe's acquaintance, a connection that Julian does not mention but which Kempe discusses in her autobiographical *Book*. That Julian omits mention of their encounter is not surprising, given that Julian's writings are meant to publicize a personal journey of theological discovery rather than recall her everyday activities, for which reason critics have turned to Kempe's verbose text to flesh out the details of late 14th - and early 15th -century women's roles in the social, political, and religious spheres.

As an anchorite, Julian inhabited a paradoxical liminal space situated within the overlap of what are may be considered the private and public spheres, revealing a breakdown of this dichotomy in medieval religiosity and everyday life. "Within the heterotropic [outside of all place, though locatable geographically] space," Carmel Bendon Davis writes, "the mystics may well have been visible to the public, though their mystical endeavors remained private until they were revealed via the text" (64-5). The modes of religious expression available to denizens of the Middle Ages could be used to render the pious woman a highly visible person, even when overarching ecclesiastical discourses argued for her rejection of the world. This visibility facilitated lay women's entrance into rhetorical prominence. Julian's "rhetorical praxis paved the way for Margery Kempe, a bourgeois woman some thirty years her junior, who gave voice to the visionary religious laywoman" (Glenn, *Rhetoric Retold* 102). In turn, laywomen's rhetorical practices illustrate the influence and authority they found in the work of writers like Julian.

The contradictory striving for abandonment of worldly ideals within the world evident in Julian's writing is reflected in much of the lay religious activity of the period, and I argue that it is this paradox that authorizes Julian's highly public rhetorics. As Kempe's autobiographical writings reveal, laypeople performed highly social pilgrimages to shrines and the Holy Land as a means of internalizing the passions of martyred saint, but also as a way of identifying themselves publicly as members of the Christian community. A general trend in the fourteenth century was for laypersons to take a more active role in expressing their religious identities, a tendency signified by a "move away from Latin" as the main language of spiritual expression (Beer 73-74). This transition from Latin to the vernacular proves especially revolutionary when one considers the authorial milieu which Julian enters with her *Showings*. The great male English mystics, Richard Rolle (c. 1300-1349) and Walter Hilton (d. 1396), composed works in English, and many of the themes prevalent in their works are reflected in the writings of Julian and Kempe.

What these matters of language and action seem to point to is a late medieval tendency to emphasize withdrawal from the world as a mental or spiritual attitude rather than a physical situation, especially as cities grew and isolation proved more a privilege than a penance. Sitting in their cells in the midst of the hustle and bustle of the town, advising laypeople in the vernacular tongue, anchorites like Julian proved living symbols of the decision to remove oneself from the world even as they remain symbols, too, of their social obligations to others of the Christian faith. In this manner, Julian's words and actions functioned together as a hybrid form of preaching, one based in corporeal

modeling and indirect exhortation. She “rendered seemingly intractable matter, the process of her visions and locutions, into a beautifully balanced and cogent rhetoric of theology” (Glenn, *Rhetoric Retold* 102) that she circulated through her written works and using her living example. Julian did not have the physical and geographical mobility associated with *ars praedicandi*, but she exerted a socially-viable sacred authority that derived from her corporeal and textual modes of expression.

Nevertheless, as a woman Julian had to frame her expert rhetorical expression as a humble endeavor to obey God’s will. Her Short Text contains a conventional apology for speaking out of turn, since she is but a woman: “Botte God forbede that ye shulde say or take it so that I am a techere. For I meene nought so, no I mente nevere so. For I am a woman, lewed, febille, and freylle. Botte I wate wele, this that I saye I hafe it of the shewing of him that es soverayne techare. Botte sothelye charite stirres me to telle yowe it” (75; *Vision* sec. 6). As in the writings of other women mystics, Julian’s appeal for forgiveness from her audience reads as a rhetorical formality because her work is bolstered by the authority of rhetorical sophistication and sacred inspiration. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh argue that Julian accentuated the lack of compositional skills that marked her level of instruction at the time that she received her visions, even as her rhetorical expertise proves comparable with that of Geoffrey Chaucer, whose translation of Boethius’ *The Consolation of Philosophy* Julian may have known (Colledge and Walsh 19-20). Although Julian’s intentions for stressing her “illiteracy” cannot be determined, this explanation by Colledge and Walsh would set Julian in line with a host of established Christian prophets known to have been blessed with remarkable rhetorical

abilities in order to spread God's word. Rhetorically, the narrative of her transformation from simple woman to dexterous author bears the mark of divine inspiration, recalling the legends of Moses, Paul, and even the English poet Caedmon. These figures were all known in Julian's time as individuals personally selected by God as His mouthpieces, rhetors to whom He granted the power of commanding speech. Julian's use of the humility topos would protect her from charges of feminine unruliness and situate her within a long line of male prophets despite her sex.

Julian's literary competence and self-assurance in her role as holy spokesperson help explain why she omits the humility topos in her Long Text. However, even in the Short Text, Julian employs prolepsis to offset possible censure: "Botte for I am a woman shulde I therefore leve that I shulde nought telle yowe the goodenes of God, sine that I saw in that same time that it is his wille that it be knawen?" (75; *Vision* sec. 6). Even as she claims to impart wisdom bestowed upon her by God Himself, she persuades her audience to accept her teachings using carefully constructed arguments. She embellishes her writing with rhetorical devices familiar to readers and writers of medieval religious texts, including alliteration, antithesis, and repetition (Beer 4). She alludes to ideas expressed by established male religious writers of the period, including Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (14th century). Her works also reveal the influence of the Patristic writers and of early medieval exegetes. Julian brings together the literary and rhetorical resources at her disposal, and then revitalizes this accumulated knowledge by writing in the vernacular English of the late Middle Ages. Thus, she renders her works directly accessible to large audiences

unfamiliar with Latin, ensuring as wide a readership—and listenership—as possible. She also inspires the formation of new, informal textual communities, “microsocieties organized around the common understanding of a script” (Stock, *Listening* 23).

Julian’s use of the vernacular underscores the widespread tendency to view English as an increasingly legitimate language, one capable of communicating poetry and truth. Despite the enduring association of women with the treacherous flesh, and the subsequent desire of male ecclesiastics to highly regulate women’s activities, the rise of the European vernacular languages and their increased use in religious writings allowed women greater direct access to the works of other women and men. In medieval England, where the Norman Conquest secured the dominance of French as the vehicle of the law, English had long remained the language of the landless and the powerless. However, use of the vernacular also became a means to assert a distinctly English identity. Glenn notes that Julian’s “masterful prose” became, like the *Ancrene Wisse* and the Katherine Group, a work that lent English a fresh vivacity at a time when French and Latin might have blotted out its popularity as a literary language completely (Glenn, *Rhetoric Retold* 95). As the group most likely to be deprived of political agency and educational opportunity, women shared a unique relationship with the mother tongue, since vernacular language not only proved their ability to communicate with others on a personal basis, but also signified their abject situation in post-Conquest England. Julian’s use of English to convey her visions indicates not only her own social status, but that of the audience she wishes to address.

As a “simple” woman, Julian would have been forbidden to write in Latin and use the complex rhetoric that it allows. As an astute rhetorician, she employs instead the language of everyday commerce to reach those who, much like herself, have been taught to recognize their inferior place. The religious significance of Julian’s use of English as the instrument of mystical revelation was two-fold, since “instruction was conveyed in what had been regarded as the deficient speech of laypeople and moreover by the sex debarred from theological education and largely non-Latinate” (Green 39). Such people are precisely those on whose behalf Julian claims to intercede by proclaiming the revelations she has received. According to Julian, God rewards the “patience and ... sufferance” she demonstrates in tolerating earthly existence by promising that “whate man or woman wilfully cheses God in this life, he may be sekere that he is chosen” (106, 107; *Vision* sec. 20). All they must do is have faith in God’s promise, the promise which Julian communicates via kenosis in her vernacular text.

Paul introduces the notion of kenosis in Philippians 2:6-7, as an essential emptying of the ego so as to accommodate God’s spirit. Paul states that Christ “emptied himself” in order to fulfill the will of God. Julian distinguishes between the kenotic and human conditions by associating them with bliss and pain, respectively. “And in the time of joy, I might have saide with Saint Paule: ‘Nothing shalle departe me fro the charite of Crist.’ And in the paine, I might have said with Saint Peter: ‘Lord, save me, I perish’” (177; *Revelation* ch. 15). Emptied and refilled by God’s spirit, nothing stands between the soul and God, and so intimately tied to divinity, the individual can be seen to function as a conduit between the spiritual and earthly realms. Hence, the kenotic claim

is a compelling rhetorical tactic, one that permits a speaker to claim his or her words as solely those of God. Julian's "combination of *sermo humilis* [the "low style"] with kenosis turn[s] things upside down, making her, like the unlearned at large, more accessible to God" (Green 39). However, this transformation of the speaker and her diverse audiences into the epitome of the popular Christian Church is possible only through Julian's use of the vernacular, juxtaposed against the official Latin of the clergy. By claiming that her work derives directly from divine wisdom, Julian transcends the social codes that constrain feminine composition and vernacular theology. She also signifies a personal rejection of internalized limits imposed by these codes since the ontological self-emptying that allows her to serve as God's vessel includes the evacuation of self-doubt. Similarly, Julian transforms English into the premier holy channel by which the English people may be reached. Lacking the rhetorical charge and official cogency of Latin, the vernacular emerges analogously as the linguistic medium more appropriate to a claim of kenosis.

The view of Julian's rhetoric as a highly strategic one that works to invert the established order is corroborated by her use of plain style. Christian writers developed the *sermo humilis*, or "low style," as a means to address the uneducated masses in simple terms that might allow them to comprehend moral lessons from the Bible. While the stress resides in the concept of simplicity, nonetheless the low style is highly artificial, constructed specifically to imitate the language of the unlearned. Working from Classical models, early Christian exegetes regarded this style as the acceptable mode by which the proper Christian speaker could communicate complex ideas. In revising

Classical rhetoric for Christian preachers, Augustine advises in *Christian Doctrine* that the elucidation of truth “demands, not beauty of diction, nor the swaying of the mind by the stir of emotion, but facts and proofs” (591; ch. 21.46). Like other mystics, Julian uses plain speech to draw attention to language’s role as a practical link between heaven and earth, emphasizing its usefulness as a medium by which to reconcile human beings with the divine order. For example, in a vision wherein Christ’s crown of thorn causes him to bleed profusely, she compares Christ’s salvific blood to “the scale of herring” and “the droppes of water that falle from the evesing of an house after a grete shower of raine” (147; *Revelation* ch 7). She refers to Christ as the “flower of earth” (159; *Revelation* ch. 10) and to the Eucharist as “precious fode” (313; *Revelation* ch. 60). Julian draws on the rhetorical efficacy of mundane imagery to reason that these details are more than metaphors for divine phenomena. Because God’s creation embodies His kindness and the precision of His plan, the fish scales and bread can be seen to reflect rather than resemble the majesty of Christ’s sacrifice, which redeemed all worldly substance. The plain style stipulates that the erudite speaker un-learn the elevated styles gained through years of rhetorical training—or create the impression of having done so. In the case of Julian’s rhetoric, plain language casts her writing as truth that requires no embellishment.

The low style also underscores Julian’s eschewal of seemingly skilled rhetorics deemed appropriate by ecclesiastical authorities in favor of a plainness that emphasizes God’s choice to impart His message through common people using common modes of discourse. Julian’s simple metaphors rely on the imagery of everyday life and reinforce

the notion that “alle thinge is goode botte sinne” (101; *Vision* sec. 18) because everything has been created by God. Julian advances even basic bodily functions like digestion and evacuation as material illustrations of divine compassion:

A man goeth upperight, and the soule of his body is sparede as a purse fulle fair. And whan it is time of his necessary, it is openede and sparede ayen fulle honestly.... For [God] hath no dispite of that he made, ne he hath no disdaine to serve us at the simpilest office that to our body longeth in kinde, for love of the soule that he hath made to his awne liknesse. (144-145; *Revelation* ch. 6)

Through the principle of inversion espoused in Matthew 20:16, wherein Jesus states that the “last shall be first,” Julian’s plain style elevates crude bodily processes as proof of God’s universal design. At the same time, she speaks to the ordinary experience of the common folk deemed the symbolic heart of the Christian community but forbidden direct access to power in the everyday world. Drawing attention to the drastic divergence between positive textual representation and detrimental reality, she reclaims the power inherent to language as a link to divinity and relocates said power within the populace that often found itself excluded and spoken for by earthy authorities. Carol Lee Flinders writes that “Julian was above all else a visionary,” that she “simply *saw*, and, realizing that what she had seen was not intended for her alone, she reported it back to the rest of us” (79). Julian’s rhetoric frames her as someone who indeed “saw” the reality of her material circumstances, whose visions could illuminate the conditions that constrained

the social subaltern—a term easily applied to women like Julian and others in her community.

That her writings function to invert conventional earthly hierarchies emerges more clearly via comparison with texts composed by her contemporaries, in particular, the Augustinian mystic Walter Hilton and the anonymous neo-Platonic author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Hilton's *The Scale of Perfection*, a guidebook for anchoresses, may have inspired Julian's choice of religious vocation (Beer 8), although this association remains unclear.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, comparisons between the two writers' works clarify the innovative rhetorical model that Julian offers. Hilton's *Scale* suggests the recognition afforded the anchoritic lifestyle in Julian's day, as well as the tendency for male authors to compose for female audiences. Unlike the *Cloud* author who writes for male religious, Hilton addresses the woman anchorite, asserting that "women in religious life can proceed beyond the ascetic and affective stages to experience the highest degree of perfection, contemplative union with God" (Baker 427). Hilton provides a comprehensive method through which the individual can reconcile her soul with God's will by detecting the intrinsic *imago dei*, described by St. Augustine in *On Order* as the imprint of the Creator on the created.

Like other medieval guidebooks written for women, Hilton's *Scale* emphasizes the contemplative lifestyle and private devotion that functioned to keep religious women hidden from the world. Not surprisingly, Hilton's *Scale* stresses corporeality's ever

⁴⁶ Denise N. Baker disagrees. She states that Hilton and Julian probably composed their respective works at about the same time, so that apparent similarities are instead attributable to the religious milieu shared by the two (430).

looming intrusion upon female piety. He cautions that visions and strange sensations may cause religious women to stop praying so as to “keep it and delight” in these experiences, but women should not be fooled, for such phenomena are often false impressions by which they may “fall into bodily and ghostly mischiefs” (22; bk. 1.11). Urging the anchorite to remain attentive to bodily issues, but not too attentive, Hilton argues against allowing daily concerns to become obstacles to meditation. For that reason, the anchorite must make sure that she has neither “eaten too mickle or too little,” that she “strive not too mickle” to acknowledge her wretchedness (187; bk. 1.76). Such blunders not only distract the unwary; they instill a perilous pride in those who take pleasure in their ascetic accomplishments. Consequently, Hilton’s emphasis on contemplative union sets up a self-circumscribing process that diminishes the body’s capacity to exemplify the spiritual life.

In contrast, while Julian shares with Hilton a focus on repentance and on meditation on Christ’s sufferings, she does not share his blatant anxiety about the body. She describes her illness as her personal access point to revelation, but she offers her audience no method for appraising the impact of corporeality on spiritual activity (Davis, *Mysticism and Space* 51).⁴⁷ Instead, she stresses the importance of prayer as the primary means by which the soul encounters God. Heartfelt prayer creates the emotional bridge between God and humanity that permits contrition, for the penitent heart invites God to enter and extend Grace. Feelings are not to be overcome but trained on Christ’s Passion

⁴⁷ Carmel Bendon Davis suggests that Julian, much like the *Cloud* Author, may have preferred to draw minimal attention to human bodies—either hers or those of her audience—thereby directing all focus onto the sacred body of Christ (51).

so that love rather than anxiety becomes the motivation for turning away from sin. Julian depicts herself as meditating on a crucifix while suffering near death on account of the illness she has prayed for when, before her eyes, Christ's body begins to bleed. "I saw the red bloud trekile downe from under the garlande, hote and freshely, plentuously and lively, right as it was in the time that the garland of thornes was pressed on his blessed head" (135; *Revelation* ch. 4). She represents her answered prayers as a means to draw closer to Christ emotionally, a connection that permits her to transcend time and witness the Crucifixion.

The vast empathy evoked by the sight inhibits any tendency toward sin she may harbor, and the power of such self-corrective compassion becomes a motivating factor in the theology of love she extols. She reveals a view that Barbara Newman attributes to religious women, whose writings often regard sin "not a juridical problem, but a way of talking about human pain, estrangement, and lack of love," an outlook that bespeaks women's clear understanding of their exclusion from mainstream society (*Virile Woman* 135). Although the visionary experience is said to transpire in an unseen space, Julian reinscribes her personal relationship with God as the ultimate expression of public acceptance: "And full greatly was I astonned, for wonder and marvayle that I had, that he that is so reverent and so dreadful will be so homely with a sinful creature liveing in this wretched flesh" (135, 137; *Revelation* ch. 4). God's reaching out to a lowly creature proves that she, too, is a valid member of his flock. Furthermore, any reluctance on the part of ecclesiastical officials to acknowledge her rhetorical standing within the spiritual community situates Julian as a human analogue to Christ, the quintessential outsider.

Joined in love and a shared state of misunderstanding, Julian the woman and Christ maintain an undeniable and intimate relationship. Indeed, it is Julian's profound identification with her Lord that allows her to theorize sin as a breach in unifying compassion.

Julian portrays herself and her beloved Christ as suffering together, their experiences merging so that the two occupy the same rhetorical space of hypercorporeality. The female body, like that of Christ, is especially burdened by corporeality's sinful implications. Christ chose to assume the sins of humanity, using his material body as a salvific vehicle that expiated the sins of the faithful. As the permanent reminder of humanity's failings, the female body could also be transformed into a vehicle of salvation through sacrifice in a way that the male body, once removed from the corruptness of the human condition, could not. Julian emphasizes this connection via her ekphrastic depiction of her and Christ's mutual physical torment and of her profound concentration on Christ's copiously bleeding body in the midst of her pain. "My most paine was shortnes of winde and failing of life," she writes, adding that she wished "that my body might be fulfilled with mind and feeling of [Christ's] blessed passion, as I had before prayed. For I would that his paines were my paines, with compassion and afterward langing to God" (133; *Revelation* 3). By stressing her empathy for Christ's suffering, Julian accomplishes two things: she joins their two bodies rhetorically within a shared rhetorical function, and underscores that joint function by indicating the spectatorial role that readers should assume. She invites readers to perceive her, like Christ, as one who willingly embraces suffering to bring others closer to God; and, in

order to do so, she must become an ekphrastic spectacle open to scrutiny by readers who aspire to follow her example. Therefore, whereas Hilton's *Scale* conjures an abstract model of the female body in order to regulate the bodies of real women that remain unseen within the anchoritic enclosure, Julian draws upon the power of *energía* to recreate her concrete body as a living—and literal—form of *demonstratio* that transcends its own humanity. Like Christ's bleeding body upon the crucifix, she depicts herself as a corporeal model that encourages Christian compassion and virtue. She evokes the compelling sight of her body for her readers so that they may join her in contemplative activity even as they read her work.

Due to her use of ekphrastic demonstration to depict a sacred embodiment, Julian's rhetoric also diverges from that found in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The anonymous *Cloud* author calls for an abandonment of mental activity and the training the body to the will of the spirit: "Nevertheles it is needful to lifte up oure ighen and oure hondes bodely, as it were unto yone bodely heven, in the whiche the elementes ben fastnid. I mene yif we ben sterid of the werk of oure spirit, and alles nought. For alle bodely thing is sogette unto goostly thing and is reulid thereafter, and not agensward" (89; ch. 61.2124-2127). Like Hilton, he urges moderation. However, while Hilton views self-control as a means to approach God, the *Cloud* author does not; an advocate of the *via negativa* path, he encourages moderation because it will keep distractions to a minimum, allowing the contemplative soul to expel all thoughts that hinder union with God.

And thou schalt understonde that thou schalt not only in this werke
forgete alle other creatures then thiself, or their dedes or thine, bot also

thou schalt in this werke forgete bothe thiself and also thi dedes for God,
 as wel as alle other creatures and their dedes. ... Thus schalt thou do with
 thiself: thou schalt lothe and be wery with alle that thing that worcheth in
 thi witte and in thi wil, bot yif if be only God. (70; ch. 43.1521-1528)

Conversely, Julian does not advise her audience to quiet their emotions so as to engage in contemplation. Instead, for Julian emotional identification proves the contemplative bridge by which the soul may draw nearer to God, and this reliance on identification as a contemplative tool is mirrored in her rhetoric. She writes from a personal perspective rather than the prescriptive standpoint employed by both the *Cloud* author and Hilton.

Thus, Julian frames her mystical pedagogy as one that does not rely on straightforward instruction but on an embodied model of spiritual dedication that will reach receptive audiences by heavenly means. In turn, Julian's personal rhetoric requires that audiences identify with her so that they may comprehend a contradiction inherent to mysticism. That is, Julian renders verbally a spiritual condition that entails a withdrawal from the self and the processes that typify the self: thinking one's own thoughts, speaking one's own words, and embodying one's own potentiality. Yet she shares this knowledge—that her actions and desire to educate are enacted by her for another, God—using her own body and speech. Her personalization of the impersonal mystical impulse highlights the paradoxical rhetorical demands that mysticism places on its audience: that they embark on a personal internal journey by identifying metonymically with an external other through a mutual bodily suffering.

By rendering her private, embodied experience for communal consumption, Julian challenges the inward-turning meditation espoused by Hilton and the *Cloud* author. She depicts herself as compelled to share her visions as vividly as possible so that her audience may share in the contemplative process and draw closer to God through her image. However, she claims a distinctive primacy that derives from personal communication with God over a period of nearly twenty years. During this time she has embodied the anchoritic lifestyle, and the textual result of such dedicated practice is not an increased emphasis on the private life but on her transformation into a public figure. Consequently, through her life and her works Julian demonstrates that God renders even the paradoxical consistent, a principle that underlies the epistemological view of the mystic who maintains that “alle maner of thing shalle be wele” (225; *Revelation* ch. 32). This same tenet provides religious confirmation for Julian’s composition of her works in English though Latin remains the official language of the Church, reflecting God’s choice of a “simple woman” as His instrument because His plan incorporates even the humble abilities of the unlearned. Julian’s self-representation as an unlikely spokesperson selected by God reminds the erudite that everyone has a place in the grand design and reassures the unschooled that they, too, can be wise. Furthermore, the eminence and wisdom that Julian attributes to common persons such as herself extend even unto their very bodies, which her rhetoric redeems as evidence of God’s benevolent organization.

Reframing the Feminine Flesh

Julian emphasizes corporeality's potential for good by using feminine imagery to reinscribe the Mother topos so that it includes a capacity for Christ-like redemption predicated on immeasurable tenderness. Her rhetorics accomplish this by stressing the importance of sacrifice in the context of emotional relationships between mothers and their children. In the Short Text, Julian describes how her mother cared for her when she is near death. "My modere, that stode emanges othere and behelde me, lifted uppe hir hande before me face to lokke min eyen. For she wened I had bene dede or els I hadde diede. And this encresed my sorowe. For noughtwithstandinge alle my paines, I wolde nought hafe been letted for love that I hadde in him" (83; *Vision* sec 10). Julian portrays herself as having to make a choice between alleviating her mother's grief or venturing deeper into the deeply personal, otherworldly space where she may join Christ in "a bizarre mixture of roles, genders and body parts unresponsive to any singular framework of understanding," an amalgamation that "allow[s] Julian to communicate a metaphysical as well as affective message" (Mills 31). Within this imaginary space, Julian illustrates the symbolic significance of the material world because she recognizes that her "paines passed any bodilye dede" (83; *Vision* sec. 10). The ontological substance of the unseen supplants the "reality" of the people and things around her as she realizes that physical pain cannot compare to the spiritual pain that accompanies the spectacle of Christ's suffering. Julian represents her *imitatio Christi* as more than mere performance; she and Christ are linked via an experience that pervades the body, the emotions, and the soul. Yet as transfixed as she is by the suffering of Christ, her own experience of His

pain is but a pale simulation. Instead, her account suggests, her material substance is joined with Christ in transcendent agony that mirrors the essential fusion of love and suffering that infuses the world. Her empathy makes her privy to the Christ's passion and pain, the sources of universal salvation and order.

Furthermore, as she describes her mystical union with Christ, she establishes her acquaintance with Mary. "Herein I sawe in partye the compassion of oure ladye, Sainte Marye. For Criste and sho ware so anede in love that the gretnesse of hir love was the cause of the mekillhede of her paine. For so mekille as sho loved him mare than alle othere, her paine passed alle othere" (85; *Vision* sec. 10). In this revelation, Julian depicts Mary as proximate to her sickbed—Mary, who embodies maternal care and whose corporeality alone composes Christ's salvific humanity. Mary reflects the role assumed by Julian's own mother in this vision. Her presence completes the tableau, for if Julian can be compared to Christ through imitation, Julian's depiction of her own mother frames the elder woman as "*Mater Dolorosa*" (McAvoy, "Moders Service" 186).⁴⁸ Julian casts her as Mary the Sorrowful Mother who remains steadfastly by her son's side despite her own pain.

Julian's chiasmatic depiction of loving relationships between mothers and their children, between an earthly dyad and a heavenly one, reinforces Christ's feminine aspects. For Christ forms the locus of this physical, textual, and imaginary feminine space. Julian's rhetoric depicts her experience as one of complete identification with

⁴⁸ The popular image recalls the opening of "*Stabat Mater dolorosa* [The Sorrowful Mother Stood]." The hymn describes Mary's grief at her son's crucifixion, and mirrors another hymn, "*Stabat Mater speciosa* [The Beautiful Mother Stood]," which expresses Mary's elation at his birth. For more on the doctrinal correlations between these hymns, see Jacopone da Todi, *The Stabat Mater speciosa and the Stabat Mater dolorosa*, trans. Franklin Johnson (Boston: D. Lothrop, 1886).

Christ, albeit one that demands she rend her attachment to her biological mother in favor of the divine essence that contains the very template of maternal ardor. Julian's discourse emphasizes that she seeks and finds herself face-to-face with the original source of all-encompassing, absolute love, only a single facet of which her mother can embody. Julian's devotion is rewarded when Christ's appearance changes suddenly to reflect His joy. This change makes her "alle gladde and mery as it was possible" (87; *Vision* sec 11). The metonymic relationship between maternal figures—Julian's mother and Mary, mother of Christ—bridges the gap between human and divine suffering and love, and it is this bond that allows Julian to identify with her rhetorical construction of Christ as the ultimate maternal figure.

Moreover, because Julian portrays herself, her mother, and the Virgin Mary as paragons of suffering, the physical and emotional experience that ties women to Christ essentially, she also frames herself and the other women figures as embodied examples of the maternal love she ascribes to God. This impression furthers women's capacity to identify corporeally with Christ by highlighting the female body's capacity to imitate Christ on the most elemental level. That is, the same feminine flesh denounced by male authors as making women more prone to the caprice of base emotion, now becomes the source of a constant love that transcends the body that feels it. Love as the impetus for maternal suffering proves an empathic and corporeal experience. Love also proves the means to transcend personal torment in order to foster another's well-being. Julian depicts her mother's proximity to her own dying body as parallel to Mary's as she witnesses her son's anguish. Mary, who loves her son above all things and who loves

Him more than anyone else can, suffers as her son suffers. Analogously, Julian depicts her own mother as witness to her, Julian's, pain; like Mary, Julian's mother is unable to console Julian as she is racked with unearthly pain. "The moders service is nerest, rediest and sekerest: nerest, for it is most of kind; rediest, for it is most of love; and sekerest, for it is most of trewth" (313; *Revelation* ch. 60). The care with which Julian depicts maternal love has led some scholars to argue that Julian herself may have been a wife and mother prior to becoming an anchorite, although little proof exists to support this view (McAvoy, "Moders Service" 183).⁴⁹

Julian's mother's concern for her daughter and Mary's sorrow during Christ's crucifixion underscore synecdotally Christ's great love for the world. He suffers not only in dying to rescue humanity from certain death but also to behold humanity's constant turning toward sin. These forms of love exemplify the fundamental love that God demonstrates through his custody of the world. Julian's discourse emphasizes that only through maternal love can one comprehend the agony involved in watching the death of one's child, the social and teleological center of one's world. Like Mary at Jesus' side, Julian's mother is the person present at the beginning and end of a child's life, a child who is the embodiment of shared material potential. Her vision suggests that only a mother can fully appreciate the significance of a child's survival in physical and emotional terms, the same terms that male authors demeaned.

⁴⁹ This view introduces a new problem since there is no way to determine whether Julian's purported children grew up or passed away. Certainly, such an interpretation would work to situate Julian in a line of women religious who, like Angela of Foligno, could not attain freedom to serve God unless their families conveniently disappeared either through abandonment or death. I believe Julian's depiction of a close relationship with her mother seems to disprove this possibility, since maternity proves spiritually potent rather than inconvenient.

Such loving hope finds expression in Julian's Long Text, where she describes her vision of "a little thing the quantity of an haselnot" in her hand. She explains, "I marvayled how it might laste, for methought it might sodenly have fallen to nought for littlenes. And I was answered in my understanding; 'It lasteth and ever shall, for God loveth it. And so hath all thing being by the love of God'" (139; *Revelation* ch. 5). The humble "hazelnut" is all of creation which, from a transcendent perspective, appears small enough to fit in the center of one's palm. Julian's metaphor highlights the hazelnut as the epitome of entelechy.⁵⁰ In time a hazelnut may grow into a perfect tree, the fruit of which sustains life by providing more of its kind, other self-contained "worlds" replete with potential. This everyday arboreal image not only evokes the significance of the Cross, but Julian's description of Christ as "the frute of the maidens wombe" (159; *Revelation* ch. 10). These figures serve to conflate the image of Christ with that of the instrument of his suffering within the Divine Plan brought to fruition. Even this tiny thing, Julian indicates, a thing easily discounted and perhaps superfluous, contains proof of God's creative essence. Like the loving hand of a human cultivator, God's power ensures that the hazelnut—like the world—reaches its full level of development. Julian's skillful use of metaphor reveals the hazelnut, a tiny bit of matter, to be a reflection of divine order.

Beyond that, this rhetorical strategy highlights the potential of feminine flesh. Like the hazelnut does for trees, the much maligned female body provides the

⁵⁰ Likewise, Cristina Mazzoni reasons that the hazelnut stands for all Creation. She deems Julian's metaphor an example of metonymy, though her analysis, too, indicates that Julian's use of the hazelnut is rhetorically synecdochal (14). See Cristina Mazzoni, *The Women in God's Kitchen: Cooking, Eating, and Spiritual Writing* (New York: Continuum, 2005).

materiality and refuge necessary for human reproduction. According to medieval philosophers and ecclesiastical authors, the male supplies primary form during reproduction. Nonetheless, Julian's metaphor suggests, it is feminine substance that permits the masculine soul to assume a physical shape and find expression in the material world. This comparison relies on knowledge of theological and philosophical theories that disparage the body as a mere covering for the soul that must be chastised or transcended. Julian casts corporeality as protective and obliging. She writes, "For as the body is clad in the cloth, and the flesh in the skinne, and the bones in the flesh, and the harte in the bowke, so ar we, soule and body, cladde and enclosedde in the goodnes of God" (145; *Revelation* ch. 6). The association of God with the allegedly derivative aspects of human existence allows Julian to construct an image of maternal divinity as the compassionate arbiter of redemption. Like a mother's body around that of her unborn child, God is also "oure clothing, that for love wrappeth us and windeth us, halseth us and all becloseth us, hangeth about us for tender love, that he may never leeve us" (139; *Revelation* ch. 5). She urges that this godly attire be acknowledged as essential to existence, claiming for this godly metaphor the recognition denied its earthly likeness, the feminine flesh.

Julian advances the rhetorical association of the hazelnut with the female body by highlighting an additional visual connection between the two images. Beyond the hazelnut's analogous shape to the world within the womb and its comparable containment of entelechy, Liz McAvoy points out that the hazelnut must "be broken asunder for new life to emerge," the result being "a type of *jouissance* in transcendence

of its essential self” (“Moders Service” 191). In the Long Text, Julian amplifies these physiological aspects of maternity when she overtly refers to Christ as Mother in a vision wherein Christ reveals the world beyond the wound in his side:

With a glad chere oure good lord loked into his side and beheld,
 enjoyenge. And with his swete loking he led forth the understanding of
 his creature by the same wound into his sid, within. And ther he shewed a
 fair, delectable place, and large inow for alle mankind that shalle be saved
 to rest in pees and love. And therwith he brought to minde his dereworthy
 blode and his precious water which he let poure all out for love. (201;
Revelation ch. 10).

Descriptions of blood and water that recall the spear wound in Christ’s side become associated with the elemental fluids that accompany the birth of a child.⁵¹ Furthering this impression is Julian’s clarification that “our tender moder Jhesu, he may homely lede us into his blessed brest by his swete, open side, and shewe us therein perty of the godhed and of the joyes of heven, with gostely sekernesse of endlesse blisse” (313; *Revelation* ch. 60).

Julian depicts herself as looking into Christ’s side wound, where she glimpses an ontological reality that lies beyond the enclosure of the earthly-state-as-womb much as a child being born emerges into the light of human existence. This tiny hole that contains a space “large enough for all mankind that will be saved” reinforces the paradox of

⁵¹ This imagery recalls a similar revelation granted to St. Catherine of Siena, who imagines herself suckling from Christ’s side wound, as well as, I argue, one of Angela of Foligno’s visions in which she rests her cheek against the dead Christ’s face. These gestures underscore the fluid boundaries between life and death, heaven and earth.

suffering and love that characterizes the maternal state. The anticipated proximity between Mother Jesus and His child Julian, a closeness exemplified by the physical acts of birthing and even breastfeeding, can only transpire after one passes through his side, reborn in blood. Medieval medical texts associate blood with milk since the former was believed to be processed into the latter within the mother's body. Therefore, "milk and blood are interchangeable, as are Christ's breasts and the wound in his side," because what "writers in the high Middle Ages wished to say about Christ the savior who feeds the individual soul with his own blood was precisely and concisely said in the image of the nursing mother whose milk *is* her blood, offered to the child" (Bynum, *Jesus as Mother* 133). Within the wholly physical and wholly divine body of Christ, the alimentary functions of Christ's breastfeeding and bleeding are conflated. While the maternal nature of Christ feeds the devotee's body figuratively, His sacrificial transformation into the Eucharist nourishes her soul literally. The status of the human mother can also be seen to profit from this analogy when Julian writes, "For in the same time that God knit him to our body in the maidens wombe, he toke our sensual soule. In which taking—he all having beclosed in him—he oned it to our substance, in which oning he was perfit man" (305; *Revelation* ch. 57).

Although a mother's primary function is said to be the enfolding of the child's soul within imprisoning flesh, nonetheless Julian's revision of the Mother topos resembles the figure of Christ Himself via the continuing sacrifices she makes in birthing the newborn and feeding it by miraculously transforming her very substance into sustenance. Her writing emphasizes extimacy, or the "problematization of the opposition

between inside and outside, between container and contained,” that informs any mystical project aimed at erasing the boundary between God’s essence and human identity (Aloni 163). Citing sensuality as a component of Christ’s humanity, the connection between the human and the divine realms highlighted by Julian is plainly an expressive one. Rather than denigrate female involvement in reproduction for introducing the problematic flesh, she utilizes woman’s association with the physical senses to accentuate Christ’s affection for humanity and His sorrow over their sin. “For luffe makes might and wisdome fulle meke to us. For right as be the curtasye of God he forgettes oure sinne for time we repente us, right so wille he that we foregette oure sinne, and alle oure hevinesse, and alle oure doutefulle dredes” (117; *Vision* sec. 24). Julian’s rhetorical modification of Christ’s image into the Mother topos proves so complete that she can present Him as a parent who cannot but proffer love even when His children are led astray.

Drawing a visual equivalence between motherhood and Christ’s essence, especially in the Short Text, Julian presents her anchoritic cell as a metonymic space where her separation from the world leads to reunion with her true Mother, as a place where she is reborn by looking through Jesus’ side wound onto eternal life. She describes her encounter with death in terms of that evoke a parturition from the perspective of a newborn: “my sight begane to faile, and it was alle dyrke aboute me in the chaumber, and mirke as it hadde bene night, save in the image of the corsse there helde a comon light, and I wiste nevere howe” (67; *Vision* sec. 2). Adding to this impression of prolificacy would be the conflation of the figure of a dying Julian with that of the author who sat in her cell, writing her recollection of the event. Foucault argues

that “the total effacement of the individual characteristics of the writer” occurs upon composing, that “the quibbling and confrontations that a writer generates between himself and his text cancel out the signs of his particular individuality” (“What Is an Author?” 117). Julian-the-author becomes the same Julian that suffers on the brink of death because the latter does not exist until the former writes her into existence for her audiences. Whether or not Julian had already sought enclosure by the time of her illness is irrelevant because the dying-and-reborn Julian emanates from the enclosed, protective structure of the cell which now functions as a textual womb.

The context of popular anchoritic literature bolsters this image. The similarity in shape between the anchoritic cell and a womb is notably exploited by the author of the *Ancrene Wisse*, who reminds anchorites that they must be dead to the world in their anchoritic tombs to be spiritually reborn within a cramped space that resembles Christ’s constricting tomb. Associating Christ’s tomb with Mary’s womb as sacred but confined spaces that harbored humanity’s salvation, he writes, “Yef ye then i nearow stude tholieth bitternesse, ye beoth his feolahes, recluse as he wes i Marie wombe” (141, pt. 1.421-422). Anchorites like Julian were meant to view themselves as sacrificial figures who died and were reborn willingly for the sake of God and others. This identification, fostered through a shared state of feminine restriction, furthers Julian’s description of a maternal Christ. “Oure kinde moder, oure gracious moder, for he wolde alle holy become oure moder in alle thing, he toke the grounde of his werke full lowe and full mildely in the maidens wombe” (313; *Revelation* ch 60). Christ not only shares Mary’s substance but shares her gendered, fecund qualities as well.

Julian completes the image of Christ as her Mother “in alle thing” by depicting herself as returning to the womb so that she may be understood as reborn in Christ.⁵² Thus, she can be seen to share in His humanity just as He shares His mother’s human substance. Julian cannot return to the textual lacuna situated outside of her audience’s purview, but must instead rhetorically construct an alternative matrix of identity that provides the metonymic location of Christ’s womb. In so doing, she underscores God’s immanence. Her words reflect the notion that He “embrac[es] *all* words and *all* text... embracing all time and space” (Jasper 49). God’s authority is exerted through His Word and embodied by Christ, but because her identification with Christ is so complete, spiritual as well as physical, Julian’s textual and corporeal rhetorics obtain divine authority. She, too, figures as an embodiment of God’s Word. Julian returns to her human birth and transcends that instant by joining with Christ at the moment of redemption outside of time where she encounters a “simultaneous experience of temporality and eternity” (Davis, *Mysticism and Space* 218). Julian can now glimpse beyond the veil into the heavenly realm where “the takeninge of sinne is turned into wirshippe” because recognition of one’s sin leads to contrition (99; *Vision* sec 17).

Fostering this image of the cell as womb are the historical particulars of anchoritic enclosure. Julian’s audience would have been familiar with the rituals associated with ceremony of enclosure, which included the sacrament of extreme unction (Flinders 80). Customarily administered to the sick or the dying for the purpose

⁵² For another discussion of the ekphrastic associations between Julian’s anchoritic cell and the maternal womb, see Liz McAvoy, “‘The Moders Service’: Motherhood as Matrix in Julian of Norwich,” *Mystics Quarterly* 24.4 (Dec. 1998): 181-197.

of providing absolution, this particular sacrament ties Julian's time of illness to the life she leads when she composes the Short Text of her *Showings*, extending the terms of pardon from revelation to representation. Suspended as Julian appears to be in a state of altered absolution, she is able to symbolically re-conceive herself as God's instrument of divine disclosure. She can theologize her visions in spite of her sex because the sinful implications of feminine corporeality have been undermined.

Julian creates an overlap between the biological location where the soul takes on the burden of sin and the otherworldly space where human failing can be confronted and realigned with the divine plan, pointing her audiences toward a notion of mystical extimacy. Gila Aloni defines extimacy thusly: "as one advances toward the inside and toward what one believes is the innermost secret, one actually progresses toward an encounter with what is foreign," and that "when one believes one is outside, one then encounters what is the most private" (174-175). Julian's rhetoric indicates that God, thought to be external and remote, dwells essentially inside all aspects of the world, including human sensuality. When she invites her audience to contemplate her own mystical experience, she teaches them to find God within themselves—within their bodies, their emotions, and their everyday life practices.

Julian's Rhetorical Defense and Offense

While in the Short Text Julian demonstrates "relatively little effort to interpret what happened and in fact omit[s] certain details that she would include later, because at the time they made no sense to her," in the Long Text, she regards her visionary

experiences “emphatically as Scripture—a God-given allegory, meant for all Christians, whose surface had to be scanned over and over before its full significance would yield itself” (Flinders 85). In the Long Text Julian elaborates on the visions described in the Short Text, having had years to meditate on their meanings. She assumes a prophetic ethos that can withstand accusations by potential detractors, especially at a time when charges of “Lollardy” became a growing concern. Therefore, even as Julian’s theology reaffirms the centrality of Marian devotion and religious symbols to her mysticism, her theology demonstrates the influence of evolving views that underscore personal relationships with God free of Church intervention. “Lollards” was an easily deployed term used by ecclesiastics to refer to dissenting groups who sought doctrinal reforms within the Church, reforms which deemed heretical because they went against traditional principles. Often, the term was leveled against the followers of John Wycliffe, who advocated for an English translation of the Bible so that all people could gain access to its knowledge and for women’s ability to preach (Glenn, *Rhetoric Retold* 102). Wycliffe translated the Bible, a move that contested the standing of the Church as the sole interpreter of God’s Word by precipitating the emergence of a proto-Protestant movement centered on the notions of *sola scriptura* and the illegitimacy of the papacy.

The notion of a set movement known as Lollards arises from histories of Wycliffism and dissent that mistakenly concretize a term used by both Church spokespersons and nonconformists alike. This “contentious term” was deployed by secular and ecclesiastical authorities alike, and by poets, dissenters, and historiographers of the period who employed the expression in a variety of semantic contexts (Cole 33).

Dissenting preachers were deemed “Lollards” by members of the Church hierarchy whose pronouncements, coming from the traditionally stronger party, had long been imbued with legitimacy. Wycliffites, too, adopted the term to disparage those ecclesiastics whom they interpreted as perverting the teaching of Christ, setting dogma over the simplicity of the *sola scriptura* approach. The possibility that “Lollardy” referred to behaviors deemed profane by either side illustrates the unclear line between orthodoxy and heresy that Julian had to mind. She had to ensure she could not be mistaken for a nonconformist instigator in expounding theology since she sought to defend the truth of Holy Mother Church, but also aimed to prove that her work derived from a personal relationship with God valued by dissenting groups.

An absence in the Short Text of the extensive exegetical passages that typify the Long Text does not imply Julian’s initial lack of rhetorical or mystical awareness. Instead, the declarative mode of the Short Text and the interpretive character of the Long Text attest to Julian’s awareness of their respective rhetorical functions. The autobiographical tendency of the Short Text speaks to Julian’s recent near-death experience, but also establishes her mysticism as a practice centered on a maternal God. The Short Text allows Julian to demonstrate for her audience the capacity of motherly images to illuminate God’s loving disposition, an endeavor that facilitates her later construction of innovative theological arguments. She exploits the evocative properties of domestic description to create a metonymic relationship between Christ and women that originates in Christ and extends concentrically outward into human wombs and anchoritic cells. The Short Text narrates the beginning of Julian’s journey towards the

self-assured understanding that defines the Long Text. Her mystical voyage begins with a meditation on the body's power to enable—rather than hinder—revelation, no small argument when negative views of the body could be deployed to silence women. By highlighting her own pain and that of her mother as analogues to the suffering of Christ and His mother, Julian exercises the mystic's duty to confirm God's "existence before humanity in the bodies of the human beings themselves rather than in the materialization of Himself separate from their bodies" (Scarry 195). Julian's rhetoric in the Short Text implies that her audience cannot access divinity in the same manner as she experiences, but that through Julian's descriptions of her suffering and euphoric body, they can identify through her with Christ. Only through the use of intimate details can Julian's message of extimacy be understood.

Julian would have to establish the authenticity of her experience and her understanding of God's message soon after the event if she expected to circulate her writing. Thus, she relies on personal and sensory description to relive the encounter and to depict its enduring urgency for her audience. Glenn finds in Julian's Long Text "a woman more confident in the significance and application of her showings to the point that, as Augustine would have it, the message overshadows the medium," a writer who broaches "the original distance between herself and other Christians to establish Burkean identification with her audience, [and] a vast and tender perception of unity with God and all of humanity" (Glenn, *Rhetoric Retold* 98). Had Julian attempted the Long Text's exegesis of her own visions first, treating her revelations with the same regard one might the Scriptures, she would have overlooked an opportunity to create the sensual, emotive

identification necessary to promoting widespread conviction. She might even have faced harsh consequences. There is little information to suggest that Julian intended the Short Text to promote public acceptance of the potentially controversial Long Text. Yet her presentation of a theology aimed at reconciling the notion of a loving God with a belief in the eternal torments of hell would not have been possible without the earlier composition of her highly illustrative text.

Julian's rhetoric in the Short Text precludes charges of heresy by drawing upon accepted Catholic doctrine surrounding notions of death and rebirth, penitence and identification, ritual and the profession of faith. By writing about her mystical experience as the result of a deathly illness that leads her back to the womb, Julian depicts herself as a person who demands a new life in Christ. Her infirmity results from a proclaimed need to be liberated from sin, a need that verges on a desire for martyrdom and recalls the piety of earlier women mystics and saints. Her use of bloody imagery and maternal motifs to describe the Passion evokes the centrality of the Eucharist to orthodox faith, and the Church as the sole source of Christ's body and Word:

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.
 And with all the swete sacramentes he sustaineth us full mercifully and
 graciously. And so ment he in theyse blessed words where he saide...

“All the helth and the life of sacramentes, alle the vertu and the grace of

my worde, alle the goodnesse which is ordained in holy church to the, I it
am. (313; *Revelation* ch. 60)

By stressing the importance of the Eucharist, Julian reminds her audience that Christ's sacrifice resonates through time and reconciles humanity and God only through the Catholic miracle of transubstantiation. Julian's rhetoric also stresses the adoration of Mary because her tender maternal grief models and perspectivizes her Son's love for the world. When Julian refers to the mother's ability to suckle her child, she invokes Mary's image indirectly as the source of Christ's humanity but reaffirms Mary's secondary status in comparison to that of her son. Paradoxically, she does so by exploiting an accepted view of Mary as a near-divine figure in her own right. Julian "takes Mary's divinity to its ultimate conclusion, uniting her motherhood totally with Jesus" (Glenn, *Rhetoric Retold* 100). The rhetorical power of these figural adaptations converges to create an orthodox yet reformist frame around Julian's ethos that permits her composition of the Long Text, a work that presents a more impersonal theology.

The Short Text also provides a defensive appeal by public confession that marks her as an orthodox believer. Based on the directive that Christians confess their sins to one another (James 5:16), early Church exegetes like Tertullian and Origen expounded the notion of exomologesis to denote a public confession of one's sins that allowed for re-inscription within the Christian community under a new penitential identity. Importance lay not in the verbal profession of sins, but in a series of observable acts that signified the purposeful turn away from sin. First and foremost, the repentant sinner had to openly acknowledge her sin in a public act that "linked [her] visibly to the state of

sinner and prepared [her] deliverance” (Foucault, “On the Government” 155). This sort of public confession was required after one committed mortal sins: idolatry, adultery, murder, or apostasy. Additionally, the ritual of exomologesis reinforced the call to auricular confession that distinguished Catholic faith from that of dissenting sects at the time that Julian composed her works. Because she publicly professes her faith and simulates being reborn, Julian engages in a highly strategic form of exomologesis. She frames her writing as a personal declaration before the community, a declaration that must be transcribed in order to overcome the in-visibility that hypothetically characterized anchoritic enclosure.

Writing in the repressive atmosphere of the late fourteenth century, Julian carefully couches her visions in terms of the sensual appeals reserved for women by Church authors even as she exhibits a “deep devotion to the human Jesus” that Julian could be seen to share with those deemed Lollards (Glenn, *Rhetoric Retold* 102). About the time of the Short Text’s composition, English law increased the prosecutory scope of the writ of *De excommunicato capiendo*, a writ that demanded that heretics be imprisoned until they recanted and submitted to the supreme authority of the Church (Richardson 5). Revisions to the writ during the 1380s allowed secular officers, or sheriffs, to enforce ecclesiastical petitions against heretics and commissioned legal investigations geared toward rooting out heterodox writings. In 1401, a Catholic priest turned Wycliffite named William Sawtre would become the first “lapsed heretic” to be condemned to death by burning (Richardson 5). “Lollards” and Wycliffites did not necessarily compose the same factions. Nonetheless, they shared heretical status for their

dissenting views. Julian toes the line between orthodox conviction and reformist beliefs by highlighting ekphrastic and emotional personal details in her vernacular descriptions of incontrovertibly Catholic motifs. By using visual and sentimental language, she constructs an effectively gendered rhetorical defense of her own visions.

In addition, Julian's defense doubles as a public argument against dissenters that authorizes her image of a maternal God. In 1394, Wycliffe's English followers published the infamous "Twelve Conclusions," a document that rails against what its authors denounce as the Church's flagrant lies, false miracles, and sodomitical practices. The text claims that the celibacy demanded by "private religions" contravenes God's command that men find "delight in women" and leads to sodomy among members of religious orders; it also denies the tenets of transubstantiation and auricular confession, and condemns the recitation of prayers for the dead, the use of religious iconography in personal devotion, and the practice of ritualistic behaviors from pilgrimage to exorcism ("Lollard Conclusions" 277-281). Karma Lochrie ties the dissenters' fixation on celibacy and sodomy with the large number of single women living in Europe during the late Middle Ages, and with what they viewed as a failure to properly monitor potentially perverse female behavior. This failure, they argued, could be rectified by demanding that all those who took vows of celibacy be forced to marry (Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies* 50). Wycliffe's followers also describe the adoration of "dead" and "blind" religious icons and objects like crucifixes and statues not just as idolatry, but as something "specially abominable" ("Lollard Conclusions" 279). Their language evokes contemporaneous discourses concerning sexual impropriety, tying celibacy to perversion, and idolatry to

sodomy. The authors deploy the Church's own definitions of heresy to denounce the same institution that defines heterodoxy.

Furthermore, the authors reason, through a belief in Mary, Christ, or the saints misplaced onto their venerated images, deluded worshippers become guilty of a veritable "spiritual necrophilia," and women, the demographic more likely to visit or adorn shrines dedicated to Mary, are indicted as particularly vulnerable to this sort of spiritual endangerment (*Heterosyncrasies* 54). Not surprisingly, "Lollards" were often accused of bearing no special love for Mary, whom they tended to regard as undeserving of worship. Given that they viewed the figure of Mary as a usurper of powers more appropriately belonging to God, the authors of the Twelve Conclusions also aimed to disprove adherence to the tenets of auricular confession and prayers for the dead. Mary as the Mother of Mercy does not care if her devotees are guilty; in fact, medieval stories about Marian miracles indicate that "the more sinful the soul, the more confidently it might trust in her prayers" (Newman, *Virile Woman* 133). Even those condemned to hell because they have sold their souls to the Devil may pray to Mary and gain forgiveness by admitting their failings.

The moral shared by such tales—that Mary has intercessory powers—grates against the Wycliffite notions that "special prayer made for men condemned is very displeasing to God" and that God alone holds the keys to heaven or hell ("Lollard Conclusions" 280). The Wycliffites' tendency to denigrate the status of Mary while advocating for women's preaching appears an ironic contradiction. However, because an emphasis on marriage as the guarantee against sodomy would deny women like Julian

the freedom to reject motherhood in favor of virginity, the preaching ability to be gained through Wycliffite reforms becomes an alternative means to scrutinize women's activity, rendering women all the more visible. In seeking to deprive the Virgin Mary of her intercessory powers, the Wycliffites reinforced Mary's human make-up and framed her solely as a loving wife and mother; likewise, they would consign women like Julian to actual domestic roles.

In response, Julian exploits a cultural preoccupation with Mary intercessory role in order to promote her timely and innovative theology about God's great love—a love that divorces physical maternity from the symbolic power of motherhood. According to Julian, humanity's love for God should render sin “so vile and so mekille for to hate that it maye be likened to na paine whilke paine es nought sin” (101; *Vision* sec. 18). In fact, Julian reasons, the torments of hell mean little to the soul compared to the knowledge that sin separates it from God, and in the end, God will reconcile His love for humanity with the need for the existence of hell. Deeming Julian “the clearest proponent of universal salvation since Origen,” Newman nonetheless finds that Julian's declaration that “all will be well” remains “unresolved and fraught with contradiction” (Newman, *Virile Woman* 130). The affirmation of impossibility is precisely the point, however, since Julian reminds her audience that nothing is unworkable for God even when things appear irreconcilable in human terms.

She reaffirms the “law of grace and full of mercies” expounded in the New Testament via Christ's teachings (“Lollard Conclusions” 280), but does so through by

associating God with the maternal imagery and literacy training belonging typically to mothers like the Virgin Mary:

God is grounde of oure kindly reson, and God is the teching of holy church, and God is the holy gost. And alle be sondry giftes, to which he wille we have grete regarde, and accorde us therto. For theyse wurke in us continually, alle togeder.

And these be gret things, of which gretnesse he wille we have knowing here as it were in an A. B. C. That is to sey, that we may have a litille knowing, whereof we shulde have fulhed in heven. And that is for to spede us. (371; *Revelation* ch. 80)

The most widespread of medieval texts, Books of Hours were used in domestic instruction since everyone had to learn how to recite daily prayers. Hence, literacy practices that brought mother and child together revolved around these texts. Books of Hours reflected this intimate form of literacy training by depicting Mary as the first teacher of Jesus, from whom he learned his prayers and the ABCs. Such depictions can be traced to popular forms of *imitatio Mariae*. According to Green, “the popularity of this image [of reading instruction] met an obvious need on the part of literate women, justifying their reading practice against any opposition they faced by providing them with an unassailable role model” (87). Thus, for Julian’s readers and listeners, God’s association with the ABC’s reinforces His maternal essence through an appropriation of the role that Mary would play in her son’s life, and by extension, those of his followers.

Julian's reference to the ABC's also evokes "an association of instruction and pastoral responsibility with maternity and nurturing" popularized by twelfth-century writers (Bynum, *Holy Feast* 127). While these authors referred specifically to male religious, whom they encouraged to display feminine characteristics, the qualities they extolled converge in the Mother topos that Julian constructs. The identification of Mary's maternal role in literacy training with God as provider of knowledge is so complete that Julian compares the awe-inspiring wisdom of the Holy Spirit and Church with the basic reading skills provided by medieval mothers within the home. Yet by charging God Himself with the personal instruction of His children, Julian rhetorically endorses the symbolic position of Christ's mother even as she forges a direct tie between women like herself and God. *Imitatio Mariae* proves unnecessary because imitating the qualities of Mary means imitating those of God. "We know in oure faith that God alone toke oure kinde, and none but he; and ferthermore that Crist alone did alle the gret werkes that longeth to oure salvation, and none but he. And righte so he alone doth now in the last end. That is to sey, he wonneth here in us, and rewleth us, and yemeth us in this living, and bringeth us to his blesse" (371; *Revelation* ch. 80). Mary does not have to be invoked in order to procure salvation. Through God's motherly instruction, the repentant soul learns that contrition and prayer—in accordance with the teachings of the Church—can attain deliverance from sin.

From the outset, Julian reminds her readers that Mary is "greater, more worthy and more fulfilled" than all other persons except Christ. Yet Julian's transference of maternal qualities onto God Himself seems almost allow her to view Mary, Mother of

Jesus, as among her fellow Christians, especially as Christ permits Julian to witness his Passion “without any meane” (135; *Revelation* ch. 4). The loving and long-suffering Christ, rather than His mother, proves the appropriate role model for Christian women. Through identification with Christ Himself, Julian gains a masculine authority to teach others publicly without needing to embody the maternal condition in reality.

Mary’s image also assists Julian’s taking up of the debate over religious iconography in a manner that counters the Wycliffite call for feminine visibility through marriage. Julian believes that God shows her Mary in contemplation of her Creator because this activity allows Mary to realize her own small and humble nature; in turn, this realization causes Mary to be “fulfilled of grace, and of alle maner of vertues” (145; *Revelation* ch. 7). At the same time, Julian sees the crucifix begin to bleed heavily, a sight that draws her attention away from Christ’s mother and toward Christ Himself. The gory spectacle provides the starting point for her understanding and embodiment of Christ’s Passion. This realization should prove impossible, according to the Twelve Conclusions, which state that “exorcisms and blessings” performed over all manner of objects—from the bread and wine of the Eucharist to crosses—amount to nothing less than the “genuine performance of necromancy” (“Lollard Conclusions” 278). Material objects are not meant to be sanctified or granted the symbolic power to sanctify. Julian counters the nonconformists’ arguments that crosses are “blind” and images “deaf” by demonstrating that the cross she contemplates is very much “alive” by revealing the spirit of God that pervades all of Creation.

Julian does not assert that the cross itself contains substantial power, but that, much like texts or natural phenomena, it corroborates God's guardianship over the world, a custody so absolute that not even the smallest thing is overlooked. Christ's blood resembles pellets, herring scales, and raindrops bouncing off the eaves of a house (147; *Revelation* ch. 7). Like the cross, these objects are the stuff of domestic life. These images do not diminish the magnitude of God's power, but instead claim the medieval home as a "place of birth and death, and the scene of an unending struggle against squalor and confusion" (Spearing xx). That is, the daily traffic of the common home epitomizes the love that God feels for humanity; again, He is associated with maternal responsibility.

Julian counters two more "Lollard" claims—that objects are "dead" and that "private religion" is an abomination—and she does this by drawing from the evocative power of everyday images. Susan K. Hagen asserts that Julian's use of domestic imagery is meant to increase retention of her work within the hearts and minds of her audience. By creating astonishingly novel metaphors out of commonplace items, Julian emulates a cognitive process espoused by St. Thomas Aquinas that calls for "corporeal similitude" with a difference to make contemplative recollection easier (Hagen 99). These tiny everyday details are signs of omnipresent divinity, as well as the markers intended to denote the God unquestionable presence. Objects are not venerated because they are intrinsically holy in and of themselves, but because they reinforce their own metonymic relationship to that which is holy and contribute to the process of "remembering" God. By thus framing true worship as an inherently personal practice that takes place within

the heart, soul, and mind of the adherent, in those private places where God alone can see, Julian renders the public scrutiny facilitated by marriage an impractical measure of godliness.

Furthermore, by highlighting domestic imagery that can be found in all places, Julian counteracts the heretical argument against “private religions” that are supposed to lead to sexual perversion. The omnipresence of these little reminders implies that regardless of one’s geographical location, one is called to meditate on God’s presence at all times. The familial home is the sole arena the “Lollards” would have all women inhabit, but a personal relationship with God as mother, Julian counters, makes a genuine household out of any and all space. God Himself knows the goings-on of the human heart, so matrimonial supervision proves excessive and unnecessary. If hell is sin and sin separates humans from God, then love can reconcile the sinner with God. Ever faithful and affectionate as any mother, God reminds sinners to return to Him at every turn by making gentle reminders of all things. Because she claims that “God is in all, and all is in God,” Julian is capable of constructing a public ethos that transcends accusations of heresy, an ethos that reinforces the utility of Church doctrine to loving God.

Julian and Margery Kempe: A Rhetorical Relationship

Julian’s identification with a maternal God empowers her textual and embodied rhetorics, allowing her to speak and write as a public figure. The religious authority that she possessed in life can be attested to by her influence on that other, perhaps unfairly infamous woman mystic, Margery Kempe. To flesh out the circumstances of Julian’s

life, critics have found it necessary to turn to Margery's writing. Carol Lee Flinders asserts that "the blank space in the middle remains, for of all the actual events of Julian's personal life we still know next to nothing" (83). *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the first autobiography composed in English, recounts how, following the birth of her first child, Margery suffers from a severe form of mental illness that would now be recognized as postpartum depression. She begins to experience visions wherein Christ speaks to her, and she recovers. Their conversations continue for decades, during which she also meets the Virgin Mary and other notable sanctified female figures such as St. Margaret of England and Mary Magdalene. For several years, Margery battles worldly temptations. Then she dedicates her life to almost constant pilgrimage, traveling as far as Jerusalem (160; bk. 1.28) and Norway (397; bk. 2.3).⁵³

During this time she wears white clothing, attire reserved for unmarried religious women and particularly unsuited for a married mother of fourteen. She frequently has public crying fits, usually while in church and in the presence of holy relics. Her erratic behavior so irritates her traveling companions that at one point "[t]hey cuttyd hir gown so schort that it come but lytil benethyn hir kne, and dedyn hir don a whyte canwas in maner of a sekkyn gelle, for sche schuld ben holdyn a fool and the pepyl schuld not makyn oh hir ne han hir in reputacyon" (153; bk1.26). While her actions read strangely to contemporary audiences, leading some scholars to view Margery as hysterical or supremely narcissistic, recent re-evaluations have judged her *Book* as a direct rejoinder

⁵³ All quotations of Margery's writing are taken from *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. and intro. Barry Windeatt (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 2000).

to the established order that limited the opportunities of women like her, whom male officials did not quite know how to categorize.

Margery's book reveals several of the timely matters concerning women like Julian, issues that included celibacy and heresy. Beginning with Augustine, Christianity was troubled by the connection between female sexuality and Christian identity. Despite St. Paul's infamous injunction against women speaking in church (1 Cor. 14:34-35), the Pauline churches allowed women to preach and hold positions of religious leadership. In the Book of Romans alone, Paul names various notable women as his spiritual peers, including Phoebe, deacon of the church of Cenchreae, Priscilla, who risked her life for Paul, and Junia, who went to prison with him (Rom. 16:1-7). Elaine Pagels notes that early Christian women invoked the legend of Thecla—a woman said to have chosen a life of celibacy after hearing Paul speak—to argue for their right to preach and baptize; two centuries later, women opting for a life of asceticism deemed themselves “new Theclas” (Pagels 20). It remains unclear whether Thecla's story is completely fabricated, but certainly its currency and rhetorical impact attests to the weight borne by the notion of feminine authority bore among early Christians. Augustine's writings, particularly those on sexuality, changed such views. In his *Confessions*, he contemplates free will by equating “the question of self-government with rational control over sexual impulses” (Pagels 105). And, in *The City of God*, Augustine argues that women are less rational than men because Eve was created from Adam (757; bk. 22). Thus being more passionate, woman proved a constant source of temptation. For this reason, religious officials strictly regulated feminine activity in both ecclesiastical and secular settings.

By the Middle Ages, population growth and other social factors threatened the stability of both these arrangements due to a drastic rise in the number of single women that could find neither spouses nor space in local convents. According to Lochrie, “[i]t is no coincidence that the issue of female celibacy arises at a time when single women represented almost one third of the population of adult women in England” (*Heterosyncrasies* 49). Margery’s social and legal ordeals following her donning of white robes brings to light the difficulty facing women that could not be neatly pigeonholed as either wives of men or Brides of Christ. Margery explains that on one Trinity Sunday, “sche was howselyd al in white, and sithen hath sche sufferyd meche despite and meche schame in many dyvers cuntreys, cyteys, and townys” (218; bk. 1.44). Medieval circumscriptions of feminine religiosity demanded that women lead contemplative lives safely out of civic sight while remaining visible to officials who could determine the conventionality of their everyday habits. Margery’s resolve to wear clothing off-limits to a married woman, even one sworn to a life of celibacy, undermines the hegemonic system because, by making herself overtly discernible to the world at large, Margery invites the Christian community rather than the ecclesiastical hierarchy to judge her orthodox status. Her garments threaten to render visible the instability of the traditional regimes of power.

The preservation of established social order proved especially necessary during a time when revolutionary religious movements threatened the Church’s control over modes of popular religious expression. Catholic speakers referred to Wycliffites as “Lollards” even as dissenting groups accused the Church of “Lollardy” for elevating

humanly-authored doctrinal beliefs over those found in the “plain text” of the Bible. The distinction between a recognized party and a readily deployable appellation proves particularly relevant to discussions of the dangers posed to vocal women like Julian and Margery by potential accusers. Margery’s trials, resulting from her donning of a virginal white dress, demonstrate how treacherous proves the line between orthodoxy and heresy based on an ever-shifting signifiers like “Lollardy.” Celibacy became a major point of contention between the Church, who asserted that celibacy could erase one’s sex as Christ recommended in Matthew 2:19, and dissenters like the Wycliffites, who maintained that female celibacy became a means by which women’s bodies might remain outside the jurisdiction of male authorities. She and Julian’s rhetorical choices locate their discourses dangerously close to reformist arguments promoted by these heretical dissenters because they write in the vernacular and practice hybrid forms of public preaching.

However, Margery’s meeting with Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury, who actively persecuted suspected Lollards, demonstrates how adherence to orthodox ritual could frame their rhetoric as conventional. A decline in the burgeoning tradition of vernacular theology during this time has been attributed to the zeal with which Arundel pursued potential heretics (Baker 431). Margery the wife and mother cannot draw from and revise Catholic doctrine in the same manner as an enclosed celibate woman like Julian can, so she has no choice but to debate publicly to defend herself. This need positions her as all the more “Lollard” than Julian in spite of her attempt to reclaim virginal status by remaining celibate and dressing in white robes. Instead, she

emphasizes the centrality of the Sacraments to lay existence, asking Arundel for permission to choose her own confessor and to receive Holy Communion every Sunday. Arundel proceeds to write her a letter of permission “wythouten any sylver er gold,” (110; bk. 1.16). Indeed, his warm reception enables Margery to dare chastise *him* due to his laxity in running his household (111; bk. 1.16).

Although Margery’s problematic actions occur within the context of conventional Catholic activities, she can be denounced as a Lollard because she dares debate those clerics who tell her she is wrong for speaking about God. Consequently, when one considers that ecclesiastical authorities employed the term to describe those who preached without official sanction (Cole 44-45), it becomes clear that the term is used against Margery because she publicly appropriates rhetorical agency, not because her conviction proves questionable.⁵⁴ More than once, Margery must use her rhetorical skills to champion the orthodoxy of her actions. For example, on her way to see Arundel, a woman approaches her and says, “I wold thu wer in Smythfeld, and I wold beryn a fagot to bren the wyth; it is pety that thow levyst” (110; bk. 1.16). Margery maintains a Christ-like silence, and when she meets the Archbishop, she asks him to allow her to choose her own confessor and to take Communion every Sunday, requests that he grants. Because she upholds the rituals of the Church, her embodied rhetorics indicate that she merely wishes to live the feminine religious lifestyle promoted by clerics and authors.

⁵⁴ Cole states that the “open” character of the term “Lollard” is highlighted by the late-medieval poet William Langland in the C-text of *Piers Plowman*, where he attempts “to show that ‘lollardy’ is a construct—an utterance with a politically hostile valence that must be carefully weighed and, if need be, redirected against persons who are thought to be materially or economically unproductive, wasters and friars” (44).

Yet in order to do so, Margery must obey God and wear conspicuous clothing to draw the communal and legal abuse that she seeks as part of her *imitatio Christi*.

Margery becomes one “among the authors who both declare their differences from the juridical forms of orthodoxy that would condemn Wycliffism as heresy and who use the social typology of the ‘lollard’ to offer a new perspective on late medieval religiosity” (Cole 155). As seen in her clothing, Margery’s propensity for blatant emotionality relies on the approbation of her spectators, common people who might draw comparisons between her excessive weeping and the emotional behavior of well-known holy women from Mary Magdalene to Mary of Oignies. Margery, like many other women mystics, emphasizes societal endorsement rather than formal support as the solid foundation necessary to the formulation of original religious expression. Barbara Newman deems Margery’s piety “revealing precisely because she was not an original thinker like Hadewijch or Marguerite Porete but a virtual composite of feminine mysticism” (*Virile Woman* 129-130). Nonetheless, even while working off the rhetorical models provided by her predecessors, the laywoman Margery appears all the more attuned to the politically tumultuous atmosphere of the period. Certainly, like Julian, she betrays unmistakable anxiety over the possibility of being accused of heretical activity, even as she exploits the accommodating indeterminacy of orthodox mysticism to compose her *Book*.

Mysticism also becomes for Margery a rhetorical means by which to situate herself within a canon of mystics regarded as defenders of orthodoxy. Margery met Julian in 1413, when “sche was bodyn be owyr Lord for to gon to an ankres in the same

cyte, whych hyte Dame Jelyan” (119; bk. 1.17). She writes that she inquired after the legitimacy of her own visions and came away from their meeting with a sense of justification. Because her tears may inspire others to a life of godly behavior, she is assured that they are proof of the Holy Spirit working through her. Julian does not mention their meeting in the Long Text, but Margery’s account of Julian’s words “[ring] true in content, and even in style, with Julian’s own writing” (Windeatt 26). That Julian does not mention this encounter in the Long Text, which would have been completed after their consultation, comes as no surprise. Julian’s Long Text erases the autobiographical details found even in the Short Text’s description of her brush with death. Nonetheless, the self-assurance that Margery claims as the result of their meeting highlights the weight borne by Julian’s word during her own lifetime. In Margery’s *Book* Julian is an important figure in the surrounding communities, and she has the authority to corroborate Margery view of herself as a holy vessel. Julian’s renown represents the sort of recognition that Margery seeks. Margery’s account of their meeting speaks to Julian’s reputation as a much-sought-after voice of wisdom and to her critical role as spiritual advisor to another woman. Margery’s report offers, too, an explanation of Julian’s omission of autobiographical details in the Long text. Such details, so crucial to the construction of a pious ethos, would prove superfluous to Julian’s readers once her standing in the community had been firmly established.

Julian’s endorsement of Margery’s public religiosity exemplifies how medieval women could reinforce one another’s orthodoxy or mystical vocation, and in so doing, reinforce their own right to speech. Much as Elizabeth of Schönau’s correspondence

with Hildegard of Bingen helped to legitimize her visions before others, Margery bases her mystical authority upon Julian's established reputation as a woman of wisdom. Their association unites the two women in a disregard for "the language of the world": For Margery, of course, the language of the world has tended to be the insult, criticisms, threats and vilifications, which as an aspirant holy woman she has been receiving from her contemporaries. For Julian ... "the language of the world" also signifies those patriarchal cultural projects predetermining the hegemonic codes of gendered behavior which, in their separate ways, both women have contravened by means of their self-assertive literary or religious practices. In effect, Julian is advising Margery to circumvent the limitations of imposed socio-religious proscription, and trust instead in the language of her own mystically inspired impulses as manifested by her own female body (McAvoy, "Monstrous Masculinities" 55). The "language of the world" may indeed refer to radically different structures of social regulation, either the barrage of insults and immediate physical danger to Margery posed by the layfolk she encounters on a daily basis, or the religious discourses that stipulate legally the conventions of gendered behavior that Margery defies. I believe Margery's account establishes a correlation between these two modes of behavioral circumscription, a correspondence that informs Margery's notion of an embodied rhetoric.

Both Margery and Julian must overcome religious restrictions in order to be heard or even to discuss the issue of Margery's orthodoxy. The two women challenge convention in seemingly divergent ways, although both resort to the efficacy of feminine corporeality. The two regulatory modes—public opinion and juridical ruling—are

inextricably linked and work to create the very limits that both women must transcend so as to be viewed as exceptional. Carmel Bendon Davis associates Julian's framing of her orthodoxy with Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* (*Mysticism and Space* 75). However, this notion proves especially pertinent in examining the religious activity of a laywoman such as Margery. According to Bourdieu, *habitus* reveals that institutions train bodies to exemplify the "arbitrary cultural limit[s]" that they seek to impose so that "those who might have forgotten (or forgotten themselves) are reminded of the position assigned to them by the institution" (Bourdieu 123-124). The "incorporated signs" that Margery displays, her physical acts of weeping, wailing, and her civic circulation, point to a refusal to accept the designated social space permitted a married woman and mother of her class.

Hagiographers exalt such signs as indicators of mystical piety in textual contexts. Margery depicts herself as embodying these signs, revealing their distasteful nature when evident in material, everyday circumstance. These signs become a bodily rhetoric that increases her visibility and that others find difficult to counter, as her detractors soon learn. They secure the approval of those who have faith in her godliness, those who accept that feminine piety must of necessity be corporeal. Julian's advice to Margery, that she listen to a personal language expressed by her own body, proves useful rhetorical advice indeed. There exists an efficient connection between bodily composition and institutions because social conventions determine how identity may be expressed corporeally. Therefore, Margery's embodied rhetorics appear to be the

legitimate, foreseeable results of internalized religious norms circulated through the literature of the Church.

Julian does not depict herself as someone who exhibits the outrageous behaviors that render Margery a visible and, at times, respected figure, but she does represent conduct that rejects an internalization of the association of women with treacherous flesh. Accordingly, she prays for blessings intended to bring the body into alignment with the soul. She asks for physical suffering to the point of death, and emotional “wounds” that enhance her spiritual sight. The spectacle of the Passion trains her emotions toward godliness by enabling her experience of contrition, compassion, and longing. Julian claims that the pain caused by her spiritual wounds brings divine knowledge, a claim reaffirmed by the belief that the medium that causes her wounds, the Holy Spirit, personifies the wisdom that she will receive. According to Elaine Scarry, a lasting impression that pain is an inherent property of weapons means that weapons were seen to “lift pain and its attributes out of the body and make them visible” (16). Similarly, Julian’s spiritual wounds can be seen to reveal properties already present within her being, heightening the impression that Julian deserves recognition as an intrinsically virtuous person. Like Margery, Julian displays signs of piety that her readers recognize as indicative of “genuine” feminine religious understanding, but she does so in a manner that carefully recovers the female body as an instrument of orthodox religious and rhetorical identification.

Consequently, it is tempting to imagine that Julian discounted medieval Christianity’s view of femaleness as associated with sin. Glenn reminds us that the

“parabolic and hortatory teachings of Church Fathers and male clerics demanded that Christian women desex themselves. The fundamental maleness of Christian theology regulated the possibilities for female redemption—but not according to Julian” (*Rhetoric Retold* 99). Comparing Julian to modern-day feminists, Glenn argues that Julian enacts “a kind of feminist liberatory praxis” that ensures the Church “neither excludes nor desexes female followers” (*Rhetoric Retold* 99). I concur that Julian’s rhetoric recognizes society’s tendency to treat the male religious experience as central to Christianity, and that her construction of a maternal God provides a theology more inclusive of women. However, we must question to what degree Julian herself sought to actively counter the ecclesiastical demand that women religious desex themselves. There is little evidence to suggest that Julian intends to overtly support Margery’s flouting of rigid gender norms, especially as Julian herself chose one of the most demanding religious lifestyles available to medieval women. Certainly, Julian’s rhetoric undermines “the maleness of God, as Jesus, of Christianity, with a feminine and masculine Christology through which women and men could be liberated and redeemed—as women and as men” (Glenn, *Rhetoric Retold* 100), but she does so to claim speech that reaffirms God’s compassion and His ability to repair the world.

Instead, what Julian’s rhetorics demand is recognition of the male-and-female essence of God, for that alone positions women as fully capable as men to choose to repudiate the social implications of their sex, which women are not allowed to do even when they choose the religious life. Julian stresses that men and women alike are oppressed by their bodies: “For we be alle in party noughted, and we shal be noughted,

following our master Jhesu, till we be fulle purged: that is to sey, till we be fully noughted of oure dedely flesh, and of alle oure inwarde affections which be not very good” (209; bk. 1.27). This sexual equivalence in sin is modulated in the writing of male authors who rail against the sordidness of all flesh but emphasize woman’s greater wickedness. This premise allows women writers like Julian to exemplify the sin-laden corporeality that Christ assumed to rescue humanity. To identify with the human Christ, however, women must deliberately step into that same subaltern role imposed on them by male authorities. Paradoxically, they must fully embrace the cultural implications of their sex so as to attain the spiritually desexed state facilitated by religious life. Since Julian’s works uphold orthodoxy—or at least do not overtly challenge convention—she can be seen to embody clerical interpretations of Christ’s words concerning those who make themselves as eunuchs for the kingdom of God (Matt. 19:12). Her writing illustrates that Christians can rhetorically desex themselves by renouncing certain secular gender roles, even while profiting from the symbolic power attached to the qualities that those roles encompass.

To desex oneself does not refer to the repudiation of an essentially gendered identity, but the rejection of the civic responsibilities that accompany that identity. Julian is included among the Christians capable of “desexing” themselves since her vocation allows her to opt out of societal expectations reserved for laywomen. Furthermore, via her close association with the Holy Spirit and her presentation of a “wounded” bodily rhetoric, she emphasizes a renovation, if not total erasure, of earthly, embodied femininity that allows her to theologize and compose. Instead of suggesting that women

should not have to desex themselves, Julian makes sex itself as the paradoxical means by which devout women can desex their identities. Once again, Julian brings to bear the religious and philosophical correlations between femaleness and physicality. Because bodies symbolize all that is fallen about humanity and women epitomize problematic corporeality, Julian presents her female body as a social scapegoat that, like Christ, can sustain the cruelty of an unwitting world and transmute its sin-laden substance into the essence of salvation. She depicts her body as capable of performing this imitative function because she has proven herself a woman removed from worldly womanhood.

Women like Margery could not forsake their secular gender roles due to social, religious, and economic constraints, though the ultimate goal of sexual renunciation might remain the same. Therefore, when Julian counsels Margery to listen to the language of her body, to view her excessive weeping and wailing as a godsend, her words allow Margery to instead embrace the hyper-corporeality of the female body and deploy its assumed overreliance on emotion as a channel for redemption. Beer states, “Julian might be expected to reveal a measure of dualism in her thinking. The eremitic tradition was inherently ascetic; the solitary life implied a mistrust of the flesh and the physical world, and its penitential focus presumed an emphasis on personal sin. But in fact these elements are not evident in Julian’s writing” (78). Emotional knowledge was typically viewed as suspect because emotions derive from the senses, but in Margery’s writing strained passions become the visible proof that God has selected Margery as His spokesperson. Margery’s pathos-centered rhetoric relies on the view of women as especially susceptible to emotional display. She subverts this interpretation by drawing

the ire of an annoyed public in order to identify with Christ's Passion, framing her sobbing as a divinely inspired performance rather than a natural attribute of women. Through her validation of Margery's ostentatious tears with counsel regarding the language of the world, Julian advises Margery and her audiences that public anger proves useful against more critical accusations. Julian's discourse stresses that the abuse leveled by Margery's lay detractors permits her to demonstrate her desire for martyrdom, and their invective allows her to hone the rhetorical skills that will later save her in court.

United in their desire to serve God, Julian and Margery both depict themselves as sharing in the affection that binds avid members of the Christian community. The respect that Julian shows Margery in listening to her plaint, to her expression of uncertainty regarding her very identity, diverges greatly from the disapproving and often harmful reactions of others. Margery does not refrain from depicting her detractors using nearly scornful imagery, while describing her supporters like Julian as generous and godly. That the same Margery who would offer the Virgin Mother advice on breastfeeding portrays her meeting with Julian using a subdued tone suggests the immense respect that Margery bears for her advisor. Although Margery and Julian appear to meet just once, what Margery depicts can be construed as a crucial relationship between women that bridges the divide between the religious and lay communities, between embodiment and text, between earthly and spiritual forms of love. Perhaps it is fitting that the pair met on a single occasion, as it furthers the image of Julian as a sacred guide who, much like Christ, substantiates another's holy undertaking before she recedes from sight, leaving the implications of her textual and embodied example to resonate

through time. Her compassion for another in the face of pain and inquiry promotes a correspondence between the anchoress and her beloved Lord that aligns well with the professed familiarity between Julian and Christ, a familiarity that allows her to re-envision Him as a devoted and sympathetic mother.

Based on the impression of Julian that emerges from a close reading of Margery's account of their encounter, the two women harbor a similar, if not identical, outlook regarding the body's utility as a tool for experiencing and conveying knowledge of the divine. Davis observes that "the human body is both necessary and unnecessary and mystical experience is both embodied and disembodied: embodied in that it requires a body as initiator and conduit but disembodied in that the experience is spiritual, not physical" (*Mysticism and Space* 56). This paradoxical view of the female body as "initiator and conduit" draws attention to the ability of laypeople to incorporate aspects of the divine into everyday life, even as ecclesiastical writers claim that ability as the exclusive right of clerics and monastics. Margery's *Book* reveals the duplicitous, regulatory function of religious exhortation that demands a constant attention to spiritual matters that can never be set right while remaining in the world. In contrast, Julian's works, especially as they change between the Short Text and the Long Text, present a subtle internalization of the lessons that may be drawn from ordinary events. Common occurrences and objects, childbirth, death, and even hazelnuts become the stuff of metaphor that illuminates hidden truths, moving the author and her audience into the realm of the spiritual senses.

Conclusion

Julian, like her associate Margery Kempe, is often thought to exemplify the only knowledge that late medieval audiences expected from women, a mystical wisdom that eschews scholastic reasoning and literary skill in favor of divine insight. Yet her embodied and textual rhetorics indicate that she was familiar with hagiographic ideals advanced by male authors, as well as the reasons behind these authors' promotion of silent, introspective models. Julian the enclosed anchorite is usually described as an "orthodox" mystic, especially in comparison with the ostentatious public behavior of someone like Margery Kempe. Yet her rhetorics, like those of Margery, do not quite conform to the standards imposed by male writers. Julian's transformation from an emotive body in the Short Text into the authoritative theologian of the Long Text indicates that during the intervening years, her rhetorical objective changed deliberately. Nonetheless, both of her works "spoke to her audience rather than for it" by employing "the language of those outside the influence and protection of a religious or educational academy" (Glenn, *Rhetoric Retold* 93). That Julian could adapt her plain style in the vernacular to the lofty project of theology denotes her remarkable composition skills and her discernment of either text's reception, as well as her awareness of the possible censure that accompanied her unauthorized writing in Latin.

Additionally, Julian reformulates the religious rhetorical situation so that the connection between writer and audience becomes one based on a mutually held understanding of divinity and its approximation, rather than a notion of God that bolsters earthly hierarchy. Foreshadowing the feminist rhetorics of contemporary theorists,

Julian's writing sets the "emotions and physical senses as the ground for the creation of shared knowledges, knowledges that emerge out of our diverse but interconnected bodily histories and memories" (Spoel 208). Julian represents herself as a corporeal witness to Christ's Passion and highlights her orthodox faith in Catholic doctrines. In this way, she guards against accusations of heresy at a crucial point in the struggle between the Church and the followers of Wycliffe, while simultaneously constructing a defense of the textual and corporeal religious rhetorics enabled by her status as anchorite. Julian depicts herself as but the beneficiary of blessings that pure contrition have prompted her to ask for and as the embodied witness to these miracles. She becomes a spokesperson whose true vocation is to remind the reader or listener of her own spiritual connection to Christ, a connection so personal that it requires no intercession, not even from His mother. Revealing that humanity's home rests safely in God's hands, Julian's rhetoric transforms each individual, indeed, the entire world into the site of maternal redemption and spiritual union.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION: REEVALUATING MEDIEVAL WOMEN'S MYSTICISM

This project has examined the use of feminine topoi in the rhetoric of five medieval women mystics: Hildegard of Bingen, Hadewijch of Brabant, Angela of Foligno, Birgitta of Sweden, and Julian of Norwich. Topoi are rhetorical commonplaces, which can occur as figures, techniques, or ideas. Lady Rhetoric is one example of an image topos. The humility topos (or apology) that women mystics used to excuse their writing is a technique topos, while maternity is an idea-based topos, one that demonstrates how parturition is framed as both beneficial and dangerous in medieval ecclesiastical works. Such topoi are feminine, in that they create rhetorical spaces where notions about women can be articulated and deliberated. They are also feminine in that male authors used them at their discretion to reaffirm often the feminized position of women in medieval society.

The women mystics use feminine topoi to explain the otherworldly, ineffable knowledge that they claim is imparted to them by God, and to authorize their own public speech and, at times, that of other women. Hildegard of Bingen uses the allegorical images of Ecclesia and Synagogue to represent spiritual truth via physical integrity. Likewise, Hadewijch of Brabant personifies concepts when she presents Queen Reason as a servant of Minne. Angela of Foligno highlights social anxieties contained within religiously- and scientifically-charged views of leprosy to depict her body as a

circumscribing agent. Birgitta of Sweden rewrites maternity and parturition as potent metaphors for the heavenly struggle for human souls. And, Julian of Norwich emphasizes God's motherhood as a means to advance a love theology that counters orthodox notions of hell. These medieval women mystics wrote between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, and they belonged to an array of religious communities. Yet a comparison of works by these authors, women from diverse educational and geographical backgrounds, suggests that these women deliberately used feminine conventions for their accessibility, efficacy, and scope. By engaging many "weak" impressions of femininity that permeated medieval culture, the women mystics appropriated religious and philosophical notions as a means to situate their rhetorical endeavors within authoritatively derived frameworks. Combining the claims of a personal summons from God with commonplaces that highlighted female imagery to convey theological concepts, the women mystics took advantage of the rhetorical opportunities afforded by a polysemous definition of gender that manifested in a range of feminine topoi. Therefore, rather than critique medieval female mysticism as an essentially gendered response to medieval views of God or assume that men and women intrinsically experience the divine in different ways, this project has sought to explore mysticism as a highly determined, highly public combination of rhetorics employed by men and women with limited academic or religious power—certainly, a situation more characteristic of women during the period. This approach challenges certain assumptions that have characterized criticism about medieval women's mysticism.

Until recently, scholars have tended to assume that women mystics all experienced periods of frenzied ecstasy, and that these violent conditions appeared in their works and lives as authorizing signs. This project seeks to counter the view that the women mystics were necessarily sick or mad women. They have been deemed anorexics and hysterics, masochists and victims; close examination of their own works—rather than works of hagiography about them—reveals that in those instances in which somatic symptoms emerge, they usually do so as rhetorical support for the speaker’s claims. When the bizarre acts of mystics are taken to be active responses to social pressures, there is an assumption that these behaviors transpired outside of the mystical text rather than as solely rhetorical conventions. Approaching these texts from a rhetorical standpoint, this project determines instead what is to be obtained through their textual inclusion, framing these acts as phenomena that occur solely in the material of their “recording.” Such a reframing is especially crucial since the women mystics actually tend to discount or ignore the presence of physical symptoms in their own reports. Hildegard explains at various times that her visions do not interfere with her “external” life—they do not even interfere with her regular sense of sight. Hadewijch poses the struggle with Minne as a spiritual one, and Julian’s illness is a single event, the result of a godly gift. While Birgitta does state that she experiences states of ecstasy when receiving visions, such descriptions seem to indicate that she is simply unaware of her surroundings; there are no somatic maladies present. The one mystic whose *Book* does make much of her ecstatic state is Angela of Foligno, who begins her mystical career by screaming and weeping much like Mary of Oignies. However, Angela’s case proves an

exception since her scribe, Brother A., leaves much evidence in the text of his attempts to defend Angela's orthodoxy. Such justification would necessarily be based in pre-authorized hagiographical models that emphasize female bodily symptoms. Brother A.'s rhetorical intervention notwithstanding, Angela's case is also unusual in that her self-representation conflates symbolic significance and concrete depiction in a manner that the *topoi* employed by the other women mystics examined here do not.

The tendency to omit references to physical symptoms is notable as well because each of the women mystics remark on the centrality of reason to the mystical quest. Although mysticism is often posed as an alternative, if not antithesis, to rational systematic theological pursuit, the mystics emphasize that reason is the only way to succeed as a mystic and even in everyday Christian life. Reason is what allows the mystics to recognize Christ as the Savior by pertaining to Ecclesia, to imbibe effluvium and frame it as a miracle, or to identify with the Virgin Mary as a Mother who debates devils for souls. Julian states that love, too, is needed, and Hadewijch makes Reason a queen that serves Minne; yet both writers argue that reason is the only means by which the soul will reach union with God. Each of these writers claims for women the reason with which all human beings are imbued by their Creator, and in doing so, their rhetorics complicate religious associations between women and the irrational flesh. Their works take advantage of this ideological connection to advance their feminine humility as a supreme virtue. In the bodies that they present to their readers in their texts, the irrational flesh that might mark the woman mystic is unexpectedly absent. Instead, in their writings the body, while unreliable, is often presented rhetorically as consigned to the

will of the soul, much as Augustine urged, even as these authors emphasize their own spiritual struggles. Through their use of feminine topoi, these women mystics exhibit alternative forms of spiritual advancement, and reason becomes a feminine trait.

Therefore, we cannot assume that the women mystics necessarily bought into negative notions of women. Like scholars such as Amy Hollywood and Rosemary Radford Ruether, I counter the assumption that mysticism is a genre defined by male manipulation of the woman mystic's image. Rather, that impression emerges from the confluences of the hagiographic and mystic genres, which speak to different readerships and serve different purposes. Although hagiography may take as its subject a woman mystic, hagiography functions to promote ecclesiastical admiration rather than popular support. Works of mysticism—texts composed by mystics themselves in an attempt to speak the ineffable—function instead to speak to wider audiences to reveal the *vestigia trinitatis*, the traces of God in all things, even in readers and listeners themselves. Certainly, even as the mystics defend the rights of women to speak or write publicly about theological matters, they do not automatically assert that all women are worthy of the same privilege. They may argue that women are not the demonic creatures that male authors make them out to be, that women, too, are imbued with reason, but they sometimes reaffirm factors such as marital status and socioeconomic class as issues by which hierarchy is established. Nevertheless, the women mystics employ powerful rhetorics that provide adaptable models for subsequent women rhetors by emphasizing the holy essence—and the rational—that imbues everyday life and everyday people.

Much criticism in medieval rhetorical studies has focused on handbooks and the writings of *auctores* whose works are modeled after the classical examples provided in manuals. The rhetorics of the women mystics permit us the ability to explore what modes of communication proved effective among the larger populace who, in the absence of material texts and lacking educational opportunities, relied on the embodied examples of others as a form of literacy. During the Middle Ages mysticism proved a new mode of knowledge production. Often forbidden to write in Latin and debarred from higher education, the women mystics modeled for their readers some of the first compositions in the vernacular languages, and the creation of alternative epistemological systems. They also demonstrated “embodied” rhetorics that revealed for popular audiences how they might identify with the divine in everyday life. Given the complex arguments that the women mystics composed to protect themselves and others while appearing orthodox despite gender proscriptions on public speech, they must be recognized as fully-fledged rhetors whose works speak to the sundry sorts of multimodal practices popular during the Middle Ages.

Their writings emphasize the utility of feminine topoi and embodied ethoi as central to the creation of rhetorics that meld words and textually composed corporeal examples to persuade. These complex forms of verbo-physical rhetoric allowed these authors to address matters typically deemed off-limits to women because they could create authoritative ethoi that positioned them as recipients of knowledge secured through kenosis. The case of Angela of Foligno illustrates how we may read against the pessimistic view that female subjects of *vitae* were not the “subjects of their own lives,”

that they “are not subjects because . . . even at their most active, they are portrayed as the bearers of another’s message, the means by which God works miracles” (Petroff, *Body and Soul* 177). Women like Angela are subjects precisely because at their most active their responsibility is usurped by God. In the religious economy of the Middle Ages, with its rigidly gendered rhetorical norms, proving that an author’s words came from God Himself secured the woman writer the authority to speak and share her vision of God. We cannot allow contemporary notions of authorial recognition to cloud our judgment of Angela’s achievements. Her stated aim is to subsume her will into that of God and to speak his Truth, and she presents herself as having realized just this using embodied and textual rhetorics. Moreover, that Angela managed to impress her audiences as having accomplished her ambitions—as evidenced by her many followers—indicates that the persona she created was very much the subject of her life story, even if it was written in close collaboration with another.

Other rhetorical trends that emerge by tracing the women mystics’ use of feminine topoi are a tendency by later women mystics to redefine corporeal integrity in their works and a general inclination toward presenting feminine imagery in more concrete terms. One of the major anti-woman themes in medieval literature concerns the porous nature of woman. Drawing on women’s anatomical differences from men, male authors deemed women more open to spiritual and moral corruption because vice could more easily enter their bodies, for which reason they should be enclosed and silent. Notably, the earlier mystics whose works I examined do not contest this issue, perhaps because the feminine images that they use are symbolic in nature. Ecclesia, Minne, these

figures are seen as corporeally intact when they are described, as opposed to one such as Synagoga, who is decrepit and blind. However, the earlier women mystics do not engage anxiety over women's permeability directly as do the later mystics, who deliberately feature ekphrastic depictions of porous female bodies. Angela's effluvium-imbibing mouth, Birgitta's maternal openness, and Julian's bleeding Christ, all of these are represented as open in order to provide life for others, evoking the salvific function of their writing.

This change coincides with a tendency for the feminine topoi used to become less clearly symbolic and more prominently concrete over time. That is, while Hildegard and Hadewijch employ feminine topoi that are personified figures to represent devout persons and emotional turbulence respectively, Birgitta and Julian rely on concrete notions of childbirth and pregnancy to evoke more "diffuse" concepts of motherhood that are being reinscribed. Somewhere between these poles of representation lies Angela's *Book*, which depicts her body as a concrete presence. She uses her body as a symbolic object that circumscribes cultural impressions about leprosy. However, I argue that these rhetorical transformations occur due to the greater attention paid to Christ's humanity during the later Middle Ages, and the identification with the human Christ that such a focus allowed. Thus, the later mystics, beginning with Angela, identify with Christ whose rent body redeems the world. And, through such identification, they redefine corporeal integrity as necessitating a body open to the world, a body imbued with compassion that transcends and reinscribes permeability. Hildegard and Hadewijch, writing in the period before the emergence of a feminine Christ whose hyper-

corporeality is stressed, instead use feminine “embodied” figures that underscore the immanent presence of the divine. These are findings that bear additional consideration.

Scholars have now begun to reconsider previous views that overstated the extent to which women were forbidden to learn or philosophize about theological matters.

Kathryn Kerby-Fulton writes, “Not all texts written by members of the laity were in the vernacular; not all women were wholly dependent on the vernacular, even in the Middle Ages” (33). Warning against making too much of the notion of “unauthorized” vernacular theology as directly oppositional to “legitimate” Latinate literacy, her work reveals the sort of theological diversity present during the Middle Ages by pointing up the variant orthodoxy of figures like Hildegard and Catherine of Siena, among others, during their own lifetimes. A general consensus has emerged that the restriction of women’s education to the basic skills necessary for reciting prayers or overseeing the household—rather than overt brutality—ensured that the number of women engaged in ecclesiastical and academic rhetorics remained low in comparison to men.

For women everyday life guaranteed that few could write for public consumption. “The creation of literary texts does not just happen. Certain conditions must be met for writing to take place” (Petroff, “Visionary Tradition” 4). Most medieval women writers eschewed marital responsibilities and joined religious orders, guaranteeing them some degree of independence and sometimes access to literary patronage. They could not readily attend the institutions that prepared men for public life, nor did they always have the recourses necessary for addressing male audiences. Nonetheless, women religious created new ways to espouse their spiritual views and

experiences by adapting existing rhetorics to their communication needs. They couched their words in terms of mystical wisdom that proved ineffable but emotional, as knowledge that could be expressed in familiar images that had evolved over time to contain multiple, even contrary meanings. The complex rhetorics of the women mystics reveal that more women than previously imagined may have shared their wisdom publicly, and that perhaps it is the rhetorical record that must be modified to recognize their accomplishments.

Speaking to feminist scholars' attention to Christian mysticism in recent years, Sigridur Gudmarsdottir states, "This renewed interest in mysticism emerges, not because the texts are pure of patriarchal residue and not as a common root experience of all women. Rather the possibilities lie in their acting as openings and intertexts of resistance, on the edges and within the interstices of dominant discourses" (277). Women mystics writing during the Middle Ages resisted their exclusion from the masculine domains of knowledge by composing texts that refuted the prevalent view that women were incapable of intellectual activity. While relying heavily on embodied experience and affective discernment, modes of learning traditionally devalued in contrast to systematic scholarship, these writers reveal that they were acquainted with theoretical notions advanced by male scholars of the period. Writing from the margins, women mystics developed new modes of rhetoric that mingled disciplines usually viewed as discrete with popular ways of knowing. They forged oratorical spaces at the junctures of exclusionary discourses and provided rhetorical models for other women who were likewise disallowed speech.

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