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# Late Medieval Women: Ascetic Performance and Subversive Mysticism

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**Late-Medieval Women: Ascetic Performance and Subversive Mysticism**

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**Late-Medieval Women: Ascetic Performance and Subversive Mysticism**

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It is a timeless truism that women are expected to perform simultaneously on many levels; in the Middle Ages, performance was often requisite not only for appropriating authority, but often for having any kind of a voice at all. The roles in which women could function during this period were finite and few, and also socially -- outwardly -- defined: wife/mother, widow/virgin, or nun/recluse. A certain group of women who lived in the mid-twelfth to early thirteenth centuries exploded these roles, but they did so in ways which ostensibly fit into already tried and socially acceptable prescriptions -- namely, female mystics. These women, each in her own way, performed the spectacle of divine intervention, preaching the words that God imparted to them, and especially using their bodies to demonstrate their status as "chosen," validating the authenticity of their experiences, and the permissibility of their alternate lifestyles. Christina the Astonishing (1150-1224), Mary of Oignies (1177- 1213), and Margaret of Ypres (1216-1237) are examples of such lay women who used the accepted role of Female Mystic to effect and secure alternative lifestyles, and also to gain authority that equalled, and often surpassed, the male voices that made up their communities. A fourth woman, Lutgard of Aywières (1182-1246), performed in the same circles as these three women, but her path to holiness was slightly different in that she did enter the consecrated life. Even though looking at a group of contemporaneous women will lend itself only to a synchronic study, by seeing them in light of the early desert fathers and "pillar saints," differences can be seen, and statements can be made, that are profound and sensational -- despite the fact that all four women shared the same two biographers: Thomas of Cantimpré and James of Vitry.

### **Late-Medieval Women: Ascetic Performance and Subversive Mysticism**

It is a timeless truism that women are expected to perform simultaneously on many levels; in the Middle Ages, performance was often requisite not only for appropriating authority, but often for having any kind of a voice at all. The roles in which women could function during this period were finite and few, and also socially -- outwardly -- defined: wife/mother, widow/virgin, or nun/recluse. A certain group of women who lived in the mid-twelfth to early thirteenth centuries exploded these roles, but they did so in ways which ostensibly fit into already tried and socially acceptable prescriptions -- namely, female mystics. These women, each in her own way, performed the spectacle of divine intervention, preaching the words that God imparted to them, and especially using their bodies to demonstrate their status as "chosen," validating the authenticity of their experiences, and the permissibility of their alternate lifestyles. Christina the Astonishing (1150-1224), Mary of Oignies (1177- 1213), and Margaret of Ypres (1216-1237) are examples of such lay women who used the accepted role of Female Mystic to effect and secure alternative lifestyles, and also to gain authority that equalled, and often surpassed, the male voices that made up their communities. A fourth woman, Lutgard of Aywières (1182-1246), performed in the same circles as these three women, but her path to holiness was slightly different in that she did enter the consecrated life. But even though Lutgard's life is quite different from the lives of Christina, Mary, and Margaret, by looking at the path that an ordained nun had to take in order to procure freedom from domesticity, and the level of authority and power she ultimately gained, the stories of the three lay women are even more dramatic,

although equally as scripted, as women who chose more socially quiet roles. Even though looking at a group of contemporaneous women will lend itself only to a synchronic study, by seeing them in light of the early desert fathers and "pillar saints," and comparing them to Lutgard, differences can be seen, and statements can be made, that are profound and sensational -- despite the fact that all four women shared the same two biographers: Thomas of Cantimpré and James of Vitry. Just because these women did not write their own stories, they wrote their bodies -- the words are male, but the actions are female. Catherine Mooney writes about this problem of female self-representation being at odds with male representations of female sanctity (Mooney, "Voice, Gender, and the Portrayal of Sanctity"). She does not discount the *Lives* of these women because their stories are chronicled by men; they are gendered as both masculine and feminine, and within this dichotomy, the issue of hagiography as genre becomes more essential than questions of literal accuracy. Again, this is why a study of a few women within the same temporal circle, and having the same male mediators, can still speak meaningful and accurate volumes about alternate female lifestyles, the anxieties they provoke, and the authority they claim.

The fact that women in twelfth-century France and Germany removed themselves from society to [ostensibly] devote their lives to God was not an unprecedented lifestyle choice. Male mystics from the first centuries of the Christian Church did this, and shared with medieval women strict ascetic practices such as starvation and self-mutilation. What is interesting about these late medieval women is not the concepts of denial and corporeal mortification that sensationalized their lives, but, rather, the reasons for these practices.

## Theological Questions

Nicholas Watson's research focuses on late-medieval English anchoresses, but his studies are directly related to the lay women who remained in society during this same period, if not by implication, at least by default. In order to understand the latter group of women, it is essential to understand the ascetic practices of the other lay women who chose formal enclosure. He makes the distinction between interiority and individuality, which he points out are not the same, and says, "[o]ne of the spaces in which we experience ourselves as having, or lacking, power is the one we call the inner self: the space of interiority...[but] to experience the self as powerful means to experience it stereotypically, within known models" (Watson, "Heat of the Hungry Heart" 52). He points out the fact that, even in present day, one's interior life is considered to constitute that person's individuality, but Watson argues that the latter is just as prescribed, public, and "generic" as any social role. He points out that "hermits are the nearest Christian culture has come to figuring interiority as a bodily mode of being" (53). Watson not only sees a connection between the early desert fathers and the twelfth-century female mystics, but he considers these two periods to be equally important to the concept of ascetic devotion.

Another scholar who deals with the theological issues late medieval mysticism is David Salomon; he explains the complicated and even contradictory concept of *Corpus Mysticum*, meaning the body of devotional work, and he distinguishes *corpus christi* (the Eucharist) from *corpus verum* (the physical body of Christ), and he argues that these terms became interchangeable by the fourteenth century. He argues that "the body becomes mystic discourse, that the body becomes text and that the text operates as body" (Salomon 142). Interestingly, he puts an expiration date on the type of physical religiosity that the women of the late Middle Ages

engendered. His idea is that the body of Christ -- the Eucharist -- became less important as the Middle Ages ended. By the Reformation, he argues, printing and hence increased literacy made the role of the female mystic unnecessary. He argues that the concept of printing helped to make the body of the [female] mystic unnecessary. The removal of the Catholic mass also made defunct the obsession with Christ's body. He states, "the elevation of the body as Eucharist (*corpus Christi*) was replaced by an elevation of the text as body (*corpus mysticum*). It is almost as if the resurrection of Christ's body is substituted by the raising (literally) of the printed word" (147). Before this, the woman's [mystic's] body was the text on which God wrote and through which he spoke, and was the literal site of devotion. An interaction with God requires a mediator: between a woman and God, an amanuensis/reader is needed, or a priest to distribute communion. A female body, by becoming a text, is a substitute body; her body is the vehicle, and is therefore the text. Sarah Beckwith also writes about Christ's body, but with a cultural materialist perspective that differs from the theological arguments of Salomon and Watson. Beckwith disagrees with scholars who look at these mystical texts as theological; she believes that it is more constructive (and only possible, in that they were all written by men) to look at these texts as evidence of social construction, both by the woman performer and the male recorder. Her understanding of the terms *symbol* and *culture* work perfectly with performance theory, which will be discussed presently.

### **Bodies and Food**

Caroline Walker Bynum is the most important scholar to consider for this study because her work on medieval female mystics has focused on bodies -- the literal bodies of the women, their physicality and gender, and the symbolic body of God, as both suffering and Eucharist. It is



essential to look at this gendered physicality in order to discuss the corporeal mortification to which these women subjected themselves. In *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, Bynum explicates the concepts of food and eating that were so obsessively prominent in female religiosity of the Middle Ages. Specifically, Bynum considers the period from the twelfth to the fourteenth century a unique time for women; she notes that, during this period, "[w]omen's piety -- whether monastic or lay -- took on certain distinctive characteristics that powerful males, both secular and clerical, noted, sometimes with awe and sometimes with suspicion" (Bynum, *Holy Feast* 13-14). In the early Middle Ages, women could only participate in professional religious roles as ordained nuns, and this usually meant having some amount of money or coming from the aristocracy. But specialized branches of religious orders that were emerging during this period, such as the Premonstratensians and the Cistercians, began several communities for lay women within their respective orders; as the new movements grew, so did the opportunities for women to embrace a religious life without a monetary "donation" and without having to take official vows. This period also saw an increase in the number of female saints in proportion to male saints, doubling from about 11 percent in 1100 to over 22 percent by 1400 (20). Against this backdrop, Bynum writes extensively on how the women of this period created a unique type of mysticism for themselves, different from the traditional practices of males, and also different from the traditions of the nuns and female saints of earlier centuries. The main reason women mystics of the late Middle Ages focused so much of their devotion on the body of Christ, argues Bynum, is that women's relationship to food was, and is, vital in a way that it never was to men -- embodied in fertility, childbirth, and nursing. This gender demarcation, the medieval holistic relationship to eating, and the various movements toward individualistic piety that characterized

this period, all set the stage for lay women of this period to renounce traditional domestic and sexual roles while still remaining within society. Although they were not always validated, they were all given a certain permission for their alternative lifestyles by the fact that their lives were set down within the accepted genre of hagiography.

### **Performance**

These women, even as they physically and symbolically "withdrew" from delineated social norms, were social figures who needed constant validation through public performance. Judith Butler has done extensive work on performance theory, and it is vital to use some of her ideas in order to understand the dramatics of these medieval women and the resultant implications. Butler believes that gender is not a *thing*, but rather an *act* -- a continually reproduced construction. These acts do not exist independently; they are shared within given social groups and communities. "Gender" therefore is a loaded term, and implies the entire culture's interpretation of the performance of a given body. Medieval female mystics, especially the histrionic lay women, created identities for themselves by making literal spectacles of their bodies. To have a "voice" in society requires an audience, and a willing audience gives that voice authority; therefore, the reception of the performances of these women acknowledges their voice, whether met with approval or not. In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," Butler argues that not only is gender and cultural identity constructed through constant performance, but also that performance must be used in order to change one's identity. In other words, the daily routines of women in this culture who *did* adhere to traditional domestic and sexual roles would have required a consistent and socially mediated practice, but for women to distinguish themselves as mystics, and appropriate

any kind of authority, would have required a different kind of spectacle. Butler states, "If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts...and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender *transformation* are to be found...in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in...breaking or subversive repetition" (Butler 520, emphasis mine). These women could not have changed their roles by literally withdrawing from society; it was necessary for them to remain visible and audible. [The concept of anchoritism, which will not be discussed here, is not contradictory to this idea; a recluse, by agreeing to be literally buried alive, is still appropriating a strictly defined and socially acknowledged role, thereby performing as much as a woman does who is "free" in society.] Butler goes on to use Simone de Beauvoir's definition of woman as a "historical situation" (520); this is a perfect term with which to understand medieval women as mystics because the fact that these women acted in very scripted and generic ways does not make their performances any less subversive; for their given time and place, they were using something recognizable, whether or not it was approved. In this way, women forged the possibility of being "read" correctly, if at all.

Performance is also a large part of Nancy Caciola's studies on women during this period: she ties in the idea of performance with the dichotomy of demonic and divine possession. She reiterates that the female mysticism of the late Middle Ages was a lay and urban phenomenon that was embraced by women who chose not to (or could not afford to) enter convents (Caciola 279). She states that because these women "lived among the laity, their lives of ascetic denial and claims of supernatural visitations were exquisitely public, and therefore closely scrutinized...As women pursuing a new and unconventional form of life they became anomalous, defiant of easy categorization" (279). Caciola takes this idea of problematic performance, which

she shares with Butler, further by qualifying the types of visions these women were granted/accused of having. She argues that the community response to these women is not valued in a distinction between holy and evil, but only that the performances of these women were received and reflectively defined by the community and thence constructed as identities. During this period, a discourse was developed by ecclesiastical authorities called the *Discretio Spirituum*, the "Ecclesiastical Doctrine of Discerning Spirits." Although this formal theological decree restricted the approval granted to claimed mystical experience, it simultaneously provided a specific language and critical framework with which to discuss the varied religious effusions which marked this period. By establishing specific criteria with which to evaluate religious expression, the roles themselves were created, thus providing a recognizable and pre-defined type of performance. In other words, even though this doctrine sought to cull true religious experiences from the many suspect and spurious, it did not have the effect of limiting expression; quite the opposite, it provided the tools and guidelines for religious behavior and appropriating social definition.

### **Early Christian [Male] Asceticism**

In the earliest days of the desert fathers, Christianity was fiercely persecuted by the Roman Empire; the great persecutions of 303-312 were implemented by Diocletian, and demanded that Christians renounce their faith. There were open defiers and martyrs such as Paul, but many of the preachers who were vested with giving roots to this nascent religion had to remove themselves from areas of Roman occupation. Many of these early mystics settled in Egypt, and either started religious communities -- as did Basil -- or became famous figures of divine teaching *despite* their physical seclusion, such as Antony and Arsenius. These

communities became the template for Christian monasticism, and the practices and rules of these founding groups became the basis for all Christian communities which followed, both secular and ordained.

These first hermits focused on the body as the site of devotion. The concept of social service was not incorporated into the monastic lifestyle -- hence the more appropriate term *hermit* -- until Francis of Assisi made service to the poor a part of his lay group in the twelfth century. The hermitic movement in the fourth century is better described as an ascetic movement more than a religious one, in that it was concerned with personal perfection more than proselytizing, even though preaching and conversion were taking place at this time. The hermits who withdrew from society dedicated their full energies to self-control and discipline, and the task of subduing one's passions was the defining characteristic of their practices. It is even inaccurate to use the term "religious" to describe this early asceticism, as the focus was individual to the exclusion of all and everyone else.

The earliest figure who embodies the elements of [Christian] asceticism that sensationalize the lives of these late medieval women is Antony of Egypt, who lived from 251-356. His life was recorded by Athanasius:

More and more then he mortified the body and kept it under subjection...he made plans to accustom himself to more stringent practices...he often passed the entire night without sleep...He ate once daily, after sunset, but there were times when he received food every second and frequently even every fourth day. His food was bread and salt, and for drinking he took only water...[of course forgoing] meat and wine...A rush mat was sufficient to him for sleeping, but more regularly he lay on the bare ground...he said the soul's intensity is strong when the pleasures of the body are weakened." (Athanasius, *The Life of Antony* ch. 7)

Unlike the later women who undergo similar scourges in repentance or imitation of God, Antony seems to be doing these things in a vacuum; he is not looking outward, but only inward. This is the crux of the contradictory relationship between the aesthetics of the early pillar saints and the corporeal mortifications of late-medieval women. Both groups practice similar extreme and horrifying behaviors, but the motives for these behaviors could not be more different: one group looks inward, eschewing society, and the other performs outward, *toward* society. Anthony also went into ecstasies, moaning and trembling as do the later women mystics, a tradition which continues through the fifteenth century with characters as subversive as Margery Kempe; but, again, Anthony and Margery are polar opposites.

Once Christianity did become the official religion of the Roman Empire, there were still reasons for the devout to want to distance themselves from secular, political, and even religious society. Some felt that the church had become so powerful that it was becoming corrupted by its proximity to the Empire and its involvement in government. Early monasteries offered an alternative lifestyle to a Church that was seen as either straying from its founding ideals.

As stated above, the earliest male hermits were avoiding very real and physical persecution. But the hermitic lifestyle did not become defunct as Christianity became increasingly accepted; rather, it became an alternative lifestyle for those who had doctrinal or political differences with the establishment. A similar shift is seen in the hagiographies of the early through the late Middle Ages. In *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England*, Karen Winstead discusses the differences between the early virgin martyr stories, and the later [semi]hagiographies of lay women in the thirteenth century. She points out that the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, and its emphasis on writing for a lay audience, had an effect on

types of mystical writings that were being produced about women. Did the lives of these women have to contain so much violence because there was no one physically torturing them? They were not martyrs, so they had to martyrize themselves through self-torture. In her study, Winstead discusses how and if the lives of these women (late medieval lay) differ from the "generic virgin martyr" stories of earlier centuries. She states:

changing social conditions engendered definitions of saintliness that differed profoundly from those that had prevailed when the virgin martyr legend took shape as a hagiographical genre. Late medieval piety was increasingly private and introspective... [and in contrast to t]he virgin martyr legend, with its emphasis on spectacle, confrontation, and transcendence of the particular...[Also,] late medieval hagiographers were, to an increasing extent, addressing a lay audience...[perhaps their] lives could provide more direct models than those of virgin martyrs, who...spurned marriage, family, laws, and property. (Winstead 10)

But this is not to say that there was not torture in the lives of the later women, or that they did not "spurn" traditional roles; there was just as much spectacle and performance in the lives of the late medieval lay women as there was drama and formality in the legends of the earlier virgin martyrs. The main difference between the two groups is that, like the early desert fathers, the writers of hagiography became less able to use tropes of actual physical torture and murder as they found themselves in increasingly [ostensibly] accepting societies. The violence needed to remain, but the source had to change. And the subjects of these holy biographies were also shifting, focusing not on canonized saints but lay people/women. Winstead calls this locus the "intersection of the old and new paradigms of holiness during the later Middle Ages" (19). But with more acceptance of divine performance by lay women came the threat of usurpation of power; because "hagiographies" were now being written for and about non-ordained women,

one did not need to have official ecclesiastic backing in order to appropriate authority, and this caused anxiety about the unprecedented roles that these women were creating for themselves.

### **I. Christina the Astonishing [1150-1224]**

Christina the Astonishing is one of several women whose story Thomas of Cantimpré writes. Christina was orphaned at age fifteen, and left to live with two older sisters. Thomas explains that, in the religious tradition of the time, Christina's parents had arranged it so that the oldest sister would be allowed to spend her time in prayer, the middle sister would be responsible for the household, and Christina, as the youngest, was to have outdoor duties and take care of the farm animals. Throughout the narrative, Christina resists this uneven distribution of duties, but it is unclear if she is more against her assigned labor because she is jealous of the leisure afforded to her oldest sister, or whether, as Thomas claims, Christina was unsuited to any and all domestic and physical work. Her renunciation of domesticity is identical *in ideal* to that of Antony, of whom Athanasius writes "he devoted himself from then on to the discipline rather than the household, giving heed to himself and patiently training himself" (Athanasius 32). However, there is a difference between the two: whereas Antony renounced social roles in order to focus inwardly and *only* on himself, Christina (and the other women in her circle) did this in order to draw attention to herself and to what she felt was an unfair assignment of roles, and to forge a different role from which she could interact *within* the community.

Christina's *Life* opens almost immediately with her death; in her early twenties, she has a massive seizure, seems to die, and is given a funeral. But during the ceremony, her body re-animates, as it were, and appears to rise to the rafters of the church, ascending like a bird. This is the event that starts Christina's role as divine celebrity in her community. The dramatics that



characterized her long life -- she lived to be seventy-four -- included spending hours and even days in a frozen river and letting herself be caught by a mill and dragged underwater. She would also subject herself to physical harm by running into thickets, letting herself be chased and bitten by wild dogs, and throwing herself into burning furnaces and rolling in the flames (Thomas). But despite these repeated trials, she never once displayed any physical injury. Christina would fly away and hide -- she is constantly described in bird imagery -- ending up usually in the wilderness or in a tomb, sleeping on rocks and wearing only rags. She claimed the ability to smell sin on others, and this disgusted her so much that she tried to avoid all human contact by hiding or levitating. Thomas speculates that it was the stench of humans that caused her body to fly from her coffin up to the rafters, where she would have stayed if not coaxed down by the power of the Eucharist. Men were especially offensive to her senses; one male body [Christ] draws her in, while all others repel her.

More than others, Christina purposefully and ostentatiously made herself a public spectacle; her performance seemed to be more important than the asceticism she practiced on her own body by fasting and cutting. And her fleeing from society is very different from the withdrawal of hermits and other religious contemplatives; when Christina flees -- again, like a bird -- she does it to attract attention, not to avoid it. She is not avoiding the community, but rather drawing everyone's attention away from the community towards her. Removal for Christina is a venue for performance to highlight her actions -- she wants to be the center of attention without any competition from the daily distractions of the community.

Because she had no alms to give, she fasted and begged from others. Her body was able to judge both the integrity of anything she ate, and the morality of the person from whence any

product came. Her story states that "when she ate anything given to her as alms which had been wrongly acquired, it seemed to her that she was swallowing the bowels of frogs and toads or the intestines of snakes...She would beat her breast and her body and say: '...Why do you desire these foul things? Why do you eat this filth?'" (140-1). She is not subduing her appetite in this instance, but rather her appetite is working as a tool of God to authorize her to judge others. With this special power of discernment, Christina is *the* intermediary between God's grace and man's behavior.

But this is not to say that Christina did not consciously and deliberately abuse her body through eating practices. She starves herself by purposefully making food as repulsive as possible, not having it turned so by the power of God, as described above. Thomas writes, "The food she ate was vile and loathsome. She boiled in water bits of food that had been scraped from dirty dishes, fit only for the garbage. With this she ate bran bread so hard that it had to be first softened with water. She ate these things only after she had first fasted for two or three days at a time" (141). Here, If Thomas wanted to state that Christina was simply fasting, or starving, he would not use these images of rotten food and garbage; Christina and Thomas are constructing a much more socially loaded image here, one that implies value judgements of filth, poverty, and animalistic conditions.

According to the tradition of the lay holy women of this time, Christina often and openly cut herself. But just as she remained unhurt after being attacked by dogs, so did her wounds disappear when the blood was wiped away. As Thomas describes:

[she] used to torment herself...with thorns and brambles so it seemed that her whole body was entirely covered in blood. The many people who had frequently seen this happen were astonished that there could be so much blood in a single body. In

addition to this bloodletting, on many occasions she bled a great quantity of blood from one of her veins. (135-6)

The focus here is on the blood, not on the wound or the pain; this is another way that Christina's self-mutilation is different than the self-violence of the other women.

Because of her revulsion to man[kind], and because of her uncanny way of disappearing like a bird, Christina was often chased, most often because the community thought she was possessed by demons. To return to Nancy Caciola's argument, lay "medieval women mystics were not universally regarded as channels of divine grace....[rather] women claiming divine inspiration and supernatural powers elicited as much repugnance as they did reverence" (Caciola 273). They tried to restrain her, even with iron chains, but she always managed to escape. As if playing a game, she would hide from them as long as she could avoid capture. One time, she escaped into the forest, and remained hidden but soon became hungry. She prayed to God to allow her to stay hidden and not return home, but she needed food. After asking for God's intervention, "she immediately saw that the dry paps of her virginal breasts were dripping sweet milk against the very law of nature...Using the dripping liquid as food, she was nourished for nine weeks with the milk from her own virginal breasts" (132-3). She nourishes herself by her own femininity, impossible because she was not a mother, and impossible because she could not produce food without taking any. Christina is the ultimate sign of divine contradiction in the scene -- a virgin mother fed through starvation. And more importantly, Christina could not have had this experience if she had not "run away"; this is further evidence that the removal from society that these women claimed to long for was not conducive to authorization, nor was it the

goal of their performances at all. By "protesting" their interaction in the community, they were actually solidifying their places in it, albeit different places than they were supposed to inhabit.

A similar event happens later in the narrative, at the point when the opinion of the community definitively changes towards Christina. The people in this town, including her sisters, continue to chase Christina, tying her up and treating her like an animal. At one point she is tied to a wooden yoke, which crushes and blisters her body, as she is denied food and water. Once again, God intervenes, and nourishes Christina through her own starving body; Thomas states, her "virginal breasts began to flow with a liquid of the clearest oil, and she took that liquid and used it as a flavouring for her dry bread and ate it as food, and smeared it on the wounds of her festering limbs as an ointment" (138). Not only does her body ooze nourishment, it also oozes medicinal balm. This is the turning point in Christina's life; instead of being feared and *persecuted* by the community, she is now feared and *respected* as a result of this grotesque show.

Christina relishes her self-exile, and she spends the last years of her life in the "wilderness," which is Thomas' dramatic description of her hiding in the forest, which she did only as long as she could until members of the community came to bring her home. The dramatics here are loaded; she flees, but must be brought back to the community in order to fulfill her role as mystic. Again, her escape is only meaningful as she is forced to return, which occurs very publicly. Thomas relates the end of her life with exaggerated pathos, saying "[a]t the end of her life, she ate little and very rarely...[she] would eat only a scrap of food and sleep only a little before midnight and then go into the wilderness. In those days, no one ever saw a smile on her lips: she was like one who has gone mad from excessive sorrow" (152). A calm enters

her life at the end, clipping her wings and making it unnecessary for her to fly away and flee company.

## II. Margaret of Ypres [1216-1237]

The life of Margaret of Ypres, also written by Thomas of Cantimpré, is in many ways similar to the life of Christina the Astonishing. She was from a middle-class burgher family, and she remained lay and stayed at home. Her mother was impatient with her laziness, and her sisters seemed to resent the fact that she did not share in the housework. Just as Christina refuses to help with domestic duties, Margaret rebels from the expected role that society defines as her responsibility. But Margaret's starvation and self-mutilation begin much earlier than Christina's do. Thomas records, "before she had reached the age of seven...[Margaret] used to press nettles and the stinging barbs of flax seeds into the flesh of her bosom...at the age of ten, she...scourged herself with yew branches and thorns even to the shedding of blood" (Thomas 166). Her feats of starvation are no less dramatic:

[a] child of three could barely have lived on the food she ate while she dwelt in the flesh. If any table companion urged her to take a morsel, she seemed quite unaware of the food...Often she fasted continually for two or three days, eating nothing, and she scarcely ever had anything to drink. She abstained completely from wine and meat and delicate foods. (178)

She mortified her appetite to such an extent that, by the end of her life, "she could no longer discern the taste of foods with her palate" (197). The true indication of Margaret's holiness, however, was not that she could abstain from food, as much as she was able to subsist on the smallest amount of God's physical body, either by divine visitation, or through the sacrament of the Eucharist. The importance of and obsession with communion is shared by all of these women, as it was, as Bynum discusses at length, a defining characteristic of the Christianity of

the late Middle Ages. However, what distinguishes these women from men who could likewise receive communion is that the women are given special nourishment directly from God himself -- he feeds them as if they were infants. This is so much more intimate than the sacrament of communion, where a human priest is the intermediary between the consecration of the host and its access by the recipient. Thomas states, "Inclining his hand towards her with the vessel, Christ gave her something like a tiny drop with which to moisten her lips...As soon as she had drained the tiny drop from the vessel in the Lord's hand, she was fully refreshed, although she had tasted nothing for three days" (199). Margaret's access to Christ's body is direct and intimate; she receives it not as the transmuted and consecrated host, but rather as a literal drop of Christ's bodily fluid.

### III. Mary of Oignies [1177-1213]

Unlike the lives of the previous two women, a more detailed *Life* is written of Mary of Oignies by James of Vitry. This narrative is quite different from Thomas' chronicles. James does not go into Mary's life immediately; rather, he extensively discusses the desert fathers, including Jerome and Gregory, and their ascetic and devotional practices. He then devotes an entire chapter to Mary's "Confession, satisfaction, fasting." The middle section -- "satisfaction" -- is subtitled "her penance" (58-9). This section repeatedly *refers* to her physical mortification, but only relates one example in detail. James writes that, on one occasion, Mary remembered a time when she had eaten meat and taken a little watered-down wine. This memory of her weakness so disgusted her that "she needlessly cut out a large piece of her flesh with a knife which she then buried in the earth from a sense of reticence" (James 60). Even though there is only one description of such an event, James implicitly relates that Mary had done this to herself on

several occasions: "After she had died, the women who were washing her corpse were amazed when they found the places of the wounds [plural], but those who had known of this event...understood what the scars were" (60). It is interesting that James chooses not to sensationalize the details of Mary's self-mutilation, and the one instance he does relate involves a dissociation from her body -- removing her flesh and putting it in the ground. Instead of the voyeuristic details, James offers only the existence of scars.

The third section in this chapter, devoted strictly to Mary's fasting, is longer than the previous two. She consumed her own blood, which was sweet to her taste, as if she were offering her own flesh for eucharistic consumption; she would eat bread that was so hard it would cause her mouth to bleed, but her blood made the bread sweet and soothing to her. There are very mundane and realistic descriptions of her body, and how it was affected by her starving: she had a "constricted stomach and she would become bloated by only a little food that she would then spit out" (61). This section changes focus from the sweetness of blood, the nourishment of a divine and ambrosial Christ, to a very physical description of Mary's damaged digestive system. I believe that the focus here on the internal physical effects of starvation is uniquely feminine; it is intrusive, almost vulgar. Not only is James showing too much, providing repetitive proof that these women starved themselves, he is also showcasing the female body in a way that would not be necessary for the validation of a male ascetic. It is almost insulting, or at least disrespectful, to document constipation as proof of Mary's religiosity, but this disrespect, although unintentional, is something concomitant with the subject's femininity. Although this seems to *contradict* James' [perhaps respectful] reticence regarding her self-mutilation, it actually *supports* the fact that James is treating Mary in a more feminine way than

the other women are treated. Because James does not have to insist so emphatically on Mary's authority, he does not have to masculinize her body as much by making it subject to graphic violence. In a more general sense, all of these women, to varying degrees, had to de-feminize themselves in order to inhabit their new roles; the greater the resistance from society, the more proof needed, the more each woman would have to deny her body.

Mary's story is the richest example of the Eucharist as being not only nourishment, but excessive nourishment -- more rich and sweet than any delicacies in which these women could partake by eating. Whether they starve or not, all these women to some extent avoid richness in their diets, but the terms that describe how Christ's body would nourish Mary are overly rich and excessively unctuous. James writes that Mary's "soul was, as it were, filled with fat and oil" (64); not only is she nourished, "she was...fattened...with spiritual food" (85). This is the same type of image of overabundance that is offered when Christina spontaneously feeds herself with miraculous oil pouring from her breasts and fingertips.

Like the other women, Mary beats herself to the point of bleeding. Her blood is described as being as rich as Christ's body is to her, as rich as Christina's effusions that she uses to soften her stale bread. James describes how Mary would typically beat herself:

she would salute the blessed Virgin by genuflecting eleven hundred times both day and night, and this...continued for forty days...she would genuflect without stopping...She would then beat herself with a discipline three hundred times and would offer herself up to God and the Holy Virgin as a sacrifice by a long martyrdom. At the last three strokes, a copious flood of blood would pour forth which thus would become the seasoning for the other strokes. (64-5)

Just as Christina's body was used as an instrument to test the goodness of others, and the integrity of any food, so was Mary's body able to discern holy from mundane. On her deathbed, she was tested by those around her, who would give her an unconsecrated host to see if she could



tell the difference. According to James, she could, and "she was immediately revolted by the smell...As soon as her teeth touched the tiniest part of it, she began to cry out and to spit, and it was as though her breast would break from her retching, and she began to gasp with a monstrous anxiety...[she] rinsed her mouth repeatedly" (123). This ability to judge on God's behalf implies an authority which not only acknowledges the unique roles of these women, but which also puts them on a level above any of the people -- male or female, ecclesiastic or lay -- with whom they interact.

Mary died at the young age of thirty-six, no doubt a direct result of her starvation. In a passage that echoes the description of Mary distended body due to fasting, James describes how her body appeared after she had died. He writes, "[w]hen her tiny holy body was washed after death, it was found to be so small and shrivelled by her illness and fasting that her spine touched her belly and the bones of her back seemed to lie under the skin of her stomach as if under a thin linen cloth" (126). Again, this description is intrusive, probing inside her body to prove her holiness.

#### **IV. Lutgard of Aywières [1182-1246]**

The three previously discussed women were all lay; although they all affiliated with a certain religious order, and were tied to specific male confessors, they were never ordained or officially authorized. Lutgard of Aywières (1182-1246) was ordained, but she is included in this study because her life shares many of the defining characteristics of the lay women who were her contemporaries.

Lutgard was born in Tongeren to a noble mother and burgher father. At age twelve, she was sent to the Beguine community of St. Catherine's of Sint-Truiden, because the person with

whom her father had invested her dowry lost almost all the money. He had invested twenty silver marks with a merchant in hopes that it would yield a larger dowry when she came of age. Lutgard *did* look forward to the prospect of marriage, unlike other young women of this genre, who seemed repulsed by the very idea of marriage, even from a very young age; Thomas writes that "she yearned for marriage insofar as someone of her age could wish for it" (Thomas 215). The merchant who had been entrusted with this money lost all but one mark, and Thomas, instead of seeing this as an unfortunate event, records it as the intervention of an almost jealous God who "frustrated the father's resolution and disposed otherwise for Lutgard so that she might be espoused to himself" (216). Unlike Christina, Mary, and Margaret, who all voluntarily chose to abandon male company, Lutgard is portrayed in this narrative as passive, and it is God who makes the decision of chastity for her. Thomas of Cantimpré, in his *Life of Lutgard*, documents the pushy response that her mother had to this change in fortune. She gave her daughter a weighted choice: "If you are willing to wed Christ, I shall arrange for you a most respectable monastery wherever you wish. If, however, you choose a mortal husband, you shall have no one but a cowherd.' With these and similar words, this excellent woman changed both her husband's desire and her daughter's will to plan for a better condition" (216). This is different than the paths of Mary and Christina, who both willingly -- and *against* the wishes and plans of their families -- refused to marry, and even refused to participate in domestic duties. As she is taken to the Benedictine convent at the age of twelve, she still, as Thomas states, does not know the Lord, but she does have some inward stirring of a presence of something. He states that "from that time on, the Lord was preparing for himself within Lutgard a temple most worthy to be his

dwelling place" (217). Again, all of the heretofore action of spiritual movement is upon God, and denies Lutgard any agency or voice.

This vision of the wound in Christ's side was the only perceptible mention of God in Lutgard's teenage years -- most often, she is busy fending off men, once even physically overpowering one as he attempts to rape her. Thomas relates an incident in Lutgard's youth that seems like witchcraft, but that he protests is "more...a prophecy than a curse" (221). As a knight is dismounting a horse and approaching Lutgard to seize and ultimately rape her, he hands the bridle of his horse to a fellow knight. Lutgard proclaims:

'With the same hand by which you hold the reins of this hostile knight's horse, you will soon perform deeds that will bring you to ruin in this world.' Now see, reader, how quickly and truly this prediction was fulfilled. For, upon returning home, with the very hand that had held the bridle he killed his own wife, and for this he was banished from his country and deprived of all his goods. (221)

This prediction must be seen as more than a disinterested prophecy, because Thomas notes that it happened immediately following the event; it therefore must be seen as punishment for the attempted rape.

There is also evidence in the text that Lutgard, despite Thomas' protestation of escape, was in fact raped at least once. When she returns to her convent, she is met by contumely and blame of the people. Bracing herself against the crowd, she calls upon the strength of Christ who withstood the shame before his execution; this is the first instance where Lutgard is described as consciously emulating Christ. As she passes through the town, hearing the insults of the community, she exclaims, "'I offer up to you my modesty, spurned as it has been for your sake.' Wondrous thing! Scarcely had she completed these words than the throng of people moved away, disturbed by the unveiling of her face" (221-2). This is undoubtedly the turning point in

Lutgard's life; just as Christina had a specific moment which changed the opinion of the community from hate to approval and reverence, so does Mary have a similar moment of public acceptance, incited by divine intervention.

Lutgard's intimacy with the body of Christ is highly sexual and complicated: it reverses the male and female roles by making Christ's body full of orifices and discharge, but it simultaneously portrays God as forcing Lutgard to press "her mouth against the wound in his right side. There she drank in so much sweetness that, from that time forward, she was always stronger and quicker in the service of God...for a long time afterwards the saliva in her mouth tasted mellower than the sweetest honey" (228). The power dichotomy has shifted from when Lutgard began her life; initially, God chose her, but as she ages, she appropriates power. There is another equally graphic scene that shows this interaction; it states, "she would see Christ with the bloody wound in his side and, pressing the mouth of her heart against it, she would suck such sweetness that nothing at all could distress her" (229). But the aggression and penetration of this relationship goes in reverse, as well; Christ is shown to be an incubus. In church, "it sometimes seemed to her as she was singing that Christ, in the form of a lamb, positioned himself on her breast so that one foot was on her right shoulder and the other on her left. He would place his mouth on hers and by thus sucking, drew out from her breast a melody of wondrous mellowness" (234). The "wondrous mellowness" is her voice, but it is also the miraculous oil that, like Christina, she oozes as a sign of her union with God.

Whereas the voice of God told the other women to contemplate Christ's suffering, God told Lutgard to act as a physical ambassador to organized religion. In 1216, the Dominicans take over the Albigensian Crusade preaching, and Mary (not God) asks Lutgard to take action. This

was the occasion for Lutgard's first extended fast, and she would have been about 35 years old. This "fast" is strikingly different from the suicidal fasting of the other women, who withered away in their late teens and early twenties, emaciated to the point of immobility; indeed, a diet of bread and beer would have seemed beyond extravagant to them! However, this does not make the agency of Lutgard's dietary behavior less extreme or effective than the dramatics of the other women. Lutgard's fasts were directly tied to events that were influencing her immediate area, both religiously and officially.

The descriptions of her fasting and mortification are much less sensational than the stories of the three other women. With them, there is a pathos and voyeurism in the descriptions of their self-mutilation. However, Lutgard's life is described in a very methodical way, with very heavy use of scripture, interspersed throughout with never more than a few sentences between references. Her fasts are set out as historical events, almost as mini-crusades: the sections are introduced "her first seven-year fast," "her second seven-year fast," and "her final seven-year fast." The periods are presented almost as official campaigns, not as suicidal starvation by a small woman (as the others are). Thomas even justifies Lutgard's refusal to be too harsh on herself, in contrast to his praise and awe at self-starvation of Christina and Margaret, whose lives he also wrote. One instance in Lutgard's *Life* seems almost ridiculous when compared to the stringency of these other two women. Thomas tells of an afternoon after mass, having received communion, Lutgard deviated from her "normal desire" and decided to eat lunch. But he states that this was not because of any weakness on Lutgard's part, or any inability to fast. Rather, there was a nun in this community "with such an illness such that she needed to eat frequently both day and night" (254). In a comical moment of "selflessness," Lutgard prays to God to give

her own ability to abstain from food to this nun who could not stop eating; Lutgard takes upon herself the affliction of that nun, and partakes of lunch, but only so that the other woman be relieved of her "suffering" for a few hours. The way Thomas frames this anecdote belies the much larger justification he is making: his defense of Lutgard's comparatively lenient diet. He says that moderation is "gracious Lutgard's great discretion. She did not want to weaken her body, even for spiritual occupations, for she considered it more useful to keep strong for many other labours useful for souls than to weary it in vain to the point of destruction" (254). His justification becomes a more general commentary when he speaks about those who "become enemies to themselves and reject their bodies cruelly. Although they direct themselves to God in this way with a stronger spirit, they destroy the body which was given to help the spirit. Thus...the spirit...[is] weakened by the destruction of the body" (254). Unlike Mary and Margaret, who die at very young ages from [assumedly] starvation, Lutgard is "allowed" to be less strict on her body, perhaps because the title "nun" has an implied authority that the lay women have to work harder to appropriate.

Lutgard's second seven-year fast follows immediately upon the completion of the first one, and this begs the questions: how long was her period of reprieve between the two, and also, why break these up into two separate fasts? Whereas her first fast was for the specific purpose of resisting the Albigensian heresy, her second fast is only introduced as Lutgard's desire to "fast for sinners everywhere. She gladly accepted this and fasted seven more years, this time on bread and vegetables" (246). Her third fast, while also lasting seven years, was unlike the second in that it came after a nine-year break. Just as the numbers three and seven are symbolically perfect

in the retelling of Lutgard's life, so is the placement of these fasts: she dies during the last year of the last fast.

Food, especially meat, was so odious to women such as Christina that it sickened them; not only would they avoid food at all costs, they were so repulsed by it that, even when starving, any morsel would cause their bodies to revolt and reject it. But the differences in Lutgard's *Life* prove that many of the events that Thomas describes in all of these stories are standard tropes; he includes this repulsion to meat in Lutgard's story, but not as her repulsion, rather as the evidence of grace in another woman. A young girl who lived with the Cistercian women was upset because she was unable to abstain from meat as the elder nuns did; she was young, but also in very poor health. The girl begs Lutgard for the ability to fast despite her frail body, and Lutgard eventually does, proclaiming "'Begone, and from this day on, you will be able to do without meat'" (259). These words are enough to effect the change the girl has been praying for; Lutgard, in one verbal declaration, grants a desire that the girl had been praying to *God* to grant her. Lutgard is so powerful at this point in the narrative that it would be contradictory for her to be overcome by a smell; therefore, the trope of sensitivity to flesh and rich food must be vicariously accorded to someone else other than Lutgard in order to maintain her masculine and absolute integrity. The same words that are used to describe the aversion to food of the other women are ascribed to this young girl, this proxy for self-denial. Thomas states, "as usual, meat was brought to her...[but w]hen she gazed at it, the food...appeared so disgusting that at once she drew back from it in horror, and, turning her face away, she was quite unable to eat...she conceived in her mind such a loathing for meat that never again, after Lutgard's words, did she eat any flesh" (259). Because Thomas wrote the *Lives* of Christina, Margaret, and Lutgard, and

because these women had some striking differences, but are described with such identical language and imagery, it is clear that much of Thomas' narrative is standard discourse -- an accepted and expected framework in which to present evidentiary text on the holiness of these woman.

Another aspect of Lutgard's life that is in contrast to the other women in this paper is in the self-cutting. All of the other women, from the time they were young girls, cut and scratched themselves, drawing blood often and variously. However, Lutgard's childhood lacks this element completely. It is not until she is twenty-eight that she first sheds blood, and even in this instance, it is not done *by* her, but *to* her. Thomas opens this section with a wide statement, saying that "the time of martyrdom had 'passed like the winds and the rains had come and gone,' [and so] Christ prepared [Lutgard] for...another kind of martyrdom" (255). Just as he seems to be excusing Lutgard from the dramatics that characterize other holy women of this time when he mitigates her unspectacular feats of fasting, so he prefaces her first instance of physical suffering with the statement that martyrdom is just not "done" anymore. With this set-up, he offers Lutgard's symbolic physical suffering as this "other kind of martyrdom." He writes:

one night as she was standing before her bed...she began in a wondrous and ineffable way to desire to endure martyrdom for Christ like the most blessed Agnes. As she burned with such great longing that she expected to die...one of the outer veins opposite her heart burst, and so much blood flowed from it that her tunics and cowls were copiously drenched. (256)

In order to underscore the significance of this event, Thomas ends this section by saying that, after this spectacle of blood, Lutgard never again menstruated, despite being only twenty-eight. Her femininity is taken away; she does not need the ability to bear or nourish a child, because she nourishes herself and God through her own body.



Thomas further insists on the symbolic representation of Lutgard's blood, so different from the very physical self-cutting of Mary, Christina, and Margaret. He describes Lutgard as appearing *as if* she is covered in blood while she is in deep contemplation, but that this illusion vanishes when she regains her consciousness. He says, "note, reader, the reason why Lutgard *seemed* to become red with blood. In this life, she had a very special role...for, from the intellectual consideration of her mind inwardly, her body outwardly drew its likeness" (257, *emphases mine*). For some reason, she is a step removed from the act of bleeding (like Christ), and instead seems only to be covered *with* blood.

One step further than official intercession, there is also a political aspect to Lutgard's life that is missing in the stories of the other women. She predicted (and assured an emissary of the Pope) that the Tartars would not reach Germany during their extended attacks. But this is more than a prediction -- Lutgard claims to be the power behind this decision, and she says, "'I have not yet begun to pray to the Lord about this, but I am already certain that the Tartars will not now proceed to these lands.' He [Friar Bernard] accepted this *as if* it had been divinely proclaimed from heaven" (279, *emphasis mine*). Lutgard also tells correctly of deaths that happen far away, before it would have been possible for the news to have reached her area; she even correctly states the exact times of death. The last "prophecy" that Lutgard makes happens while she is on her deathbed, and this one has a violence that dwarfs the other instances where she curses an individual with death or disease. At the end of her life, as she was lying sick and blind in the infirmary, she overheard that the young nuns who were attending to her were not being conscientious in their attention to their hours of prayer. Lutgard lets a little time pass, but the sisters do not correct their behavior, and Lutgard says:

'I know that after my death, the Lord's hand will avenge this defect in the sisters...remembering my words and my lashing reproach, they will be humbly corrected'...[Thomas then states] No one doubts the truth of this prophecy. For just after...Lutgard's...death, a grievous plague raged in the convent, and within a short time fourteen of the most proven nuns had died...[but] Immediately afterward, when the sick nuns...had thoroughly corrected themselves by saying the Hours punctiliously, the Lord mercifully withdrew his hand, just as Lutgard had predicted, and the plague soon ceased. (286)

Lutgard's healing is more than incidental and physical, and her prophecy is not passive statement, but rather active prayer and/or curse. Her power is on a higher level than anecdotal and personal, and her importance seems to raise her to a level of authority that the other three women were capable of having. Perhaps this distinction is a result, or a reason, for the fact that Lutgard was the only one of these four women who took formal vows.

Lutgard becomes increasingly bold as she gets older; she admonishes priests, and even shows anger towards God, giving him ultimatums. But he is never angered at this, and responds as would a submissive husband. She takes it upon herself to pray for the recently deceased, seeking to decrease their time in purgatory, even when God tells her that the person's soul is being rightfully judged without her intervention. She even prays for James of Vitry, the confessor of Mary of Oignies, who finds himself unwholesomely and increasingly attracted to a holy woman to whom he is ministering. Fearing that James' soul was in danger of lust, "she accused the Lord of cruelty...[and] grew impatient and cried out to the Lord with a mighty voice, 'What are you doing, O most just and courteous Lord? Either separate me from yourself or liberate the man for whom I pray, even if he is not willing.' Wondrous event! There was no delay between her plea and its result" (241). Lutgard has such power at this point in the narrative that she can change God's mind in the course of a short conversation, and the battle of wills ends

immediately as Lutgard threatens God to remove her devotion. Lutgard is so important to God that he will suspend his omniscient judgement just to keep himself in her good favor. Another instance of this insistence occurs when Lutgard is trying to save the soul of the recently deceased Abbot of Foigny; the narrative states that "[a]fter she had insisted with many prayers...she insisted the more importunately [and demanded]...'By no means will I desist from sobbing, Lord, nor will I ever be consoled by your promises, unless I see that the one for whom I pray has been liberated.' The Lord did not suffer her to be disturbed any longer [and granted her request]" (242). The lay women -- Christina, Mary, and Margaret -- are never this aggressive with God.

Just as Lutgard, when she was a girl, cursed the man who held the reins of the horse for the man who was trying to rape her, she also curses towards the end of her life. Thomas relates a similar instance of prophecy that borders on cursing. At this time, Lutgard was in contention with the abbess of Aywières over the frequency with which she was allowed to receive communion. Innocent III had set rules about communion, limiting reception to fifteen holy days a year; before this, weekly communion was condoned, and perhaps even more often than this, as is seen by the mystics who came before Lutgard who subsisted on a diet of [allegedly] only the Eucharist. Lady Agnes, the abbess, forbade Lutgard from taking communion every Sunday, and Thomas states that:

...gracious Lutgard said to her, 'I will be obedient, dearest mother, but I have most certain foreknowledge that Christ will *avenge* this injury on your body.' There was no delay. In *revenge* for this deed, the abbess was so afflicted by an unbearable sickness that she could not enter the church, nor did her pain cease for even a moment, but kept on increasing until she acknowledged her sin of imprudence and, repentant, relaxed the prohibition on Lutgard. The other nuns who had also opposed her in this were either conspicuously taken from the light of this world or else converted to her side in a spirit of humility. (250, emphases mine)

The language of revenge is explicit, and there is a didactic quality to this lesson, in that the nuns are afflicted until they learn the error of their ways. This is to say that the goal was not to give Lutgard what she wanted, necessarily, but rather to instruct these nuns in proper belief and practice, as exhibited by Lutgard. Her first "curse" was on a lay man who was committing a sin and a social crime, but, as an adult, Lutgard takes on the task of cursing and instructing as punishment.

Many high-ranking ecclesiastical officials appear to Lutgard after their deaths, thus increasing her importance to the church as divine intermediary, and validating her status as the instrument of God. Even though Christina, Mary, and Margaret all act as vessels of God in that they are living and corporeal evidence of divine workings, and relay messages from God, the actions of these women do not have the official validity that the visions of Lutgard do. Thomas relates a time when he himself needed Lutgard as his confessor in order to get through the trouble he found in listening to people's sins all day. In his office as official confessor, he was deputy to the bishop, but he does not seek the bishop's advice or prayers when he is troubled -- he goes instead to Lutgard. She, of course, removes all fear from him. Not only does Lutgard serve as the confessor to a *male* confessor, she also acts as *the* confessor for Pope Innocent III; he appears to her after his death, and reveals that there are three things he did while alive that will keep him in torment until the Final Judgement. Lutgard makes herself not only a confessor -- an office strictly male -- but a confessor to the highest ranking ecclesiastical male. And her status is so elite at this point that Thomas ends this chapter of his narrative with a disclaimer that further solidifies Lutgard's authority; he writes, "Note well, reader, that Lutgard revealed these

three reasons to me, but I will shroud them over out of reverence for so great a pontiff" (244). Of course, Thomas is also authorizing himself here by making himself privy to this secret, and by reminding the reader that he [Thomas] is closer in divine preference to Lutgard's station than he is the level of the common Christian. This short statement is one trademark of the generic and traditional vehicle of hagiography as authorization.

Christina heals people while she is alive, but, except for two specific occasions, Lutgard only heals people physically once she is dead. While alive, she prays for souls, and delivers them from demons and purgatory; in many instances, she acts as a literal exorcist, and Thomas does not have any hesitation about citing these examples and giving full agency to Lutgard. The way Thomas describes Lutgard's constant battles with demons is identical to the *Life of Antony* written by Athanasius. Antony fends off demons often by merely making the sign of the cross; Thomas states that "[d]emons frequently came to Lutgard as well...but she spat on them and drove off the insistent ones with the sign of the cross" (251). Only after her death do her body and relics have the powers of healing that Christina had while she was alive. Christina, on her deathbed, even makes this distinction, saying, "While she [Lutgard] lives, she now performs spiritual miracles, but after her death she will work bodily ones" (246). It seems that Lutgard was more powerful while she was alive, and perhaps the only reason her body and relics effected physical healing once she was dead was to attest to her saintliness; this is to say that postmortem physical validation is the definitive test of a person's saintliness in the Catholic church, moreso than reports of miracles and eyewitness accounts. The dead bodies of some saints were said to be "incorruptible," and hagiography often end with the documentation of such divine exemption from corporeal restraints. Thomas states that, "although it is a natural property of the dying to be

darkened in the blue-grey pallor of death, yet Lutgard's face shone with the lustre of a lily...The skin of her whole body was found to be so soft to the touch that it felt like linen beneath the hand, lustrous and utterly soft" (288-9). And it is upon Lutgard's death that the *physical* feats of healing begin; before she was even buried, when her "sacred, lifeless corpse was being washed, this sister accidentally touched the body with her paralyzed hand...and suddenly the hand was restored to health, fully functional for all tasks" (289). The words of Mary of Oignies, that Lutgard would save souls while she was alive, and would heal bodies once she was dead, were fulfilled.

### **The Other Lay Women: Anchoresses and the *Ancrene Wisse***

As a final foil to highlight the unorthodoxy of the ascetic practices of Christina, Mary, Margaret, and Lutgard, it is interesting to look at anchoresses -- women who were also lay, but differed in that they devoted their lives to physical and permanent enclosure within the walls of a church. Female anchorites were the holiest of holies, often transcending male religious figures in their untouchable and sacred status. Michelle M. Sauer writes about anchoresses, and argues that their "seclusion" was not seclusion at all in a social sense; on the contrary, by "leaving" the community and going through ceremonial enclosure, these women were joining a different group, one just as socially active in identity formation as women who were "free" in the community (Sauer 157). This *seeming* contradiction is important to understanding the other group: the *un*-enclosed lay women and *their* seemingly contradictory lifestyle, who purported to eschew society while still being dependent upon and influential within it. Just as Butler believes that performance creates identity, Sauer believes that negotiating boundaries creates communities (157). For both of these critics, the various degrees of social non-conformity of medieval

religious women were all doing vigorous work within gender roles and societal expectations, despite claiming to renounce all ties.

And there are other aspects of female anchoritism that prove that the actions of the laywomen who were not enclosed were just as rigorous (even moreso), prescribed, and even generic as formal religious roles. The *Ancrene Wisse* was a guidebook copied sometime between 1225-1250, written specifically for female anchorites. One would think that the asceticism of these professional "lay" mystics would be *at least* as strict as the lives of the women in open communities. The eighth and last chapter of the *Ancrene Wisse*, "The Outer Rule," begins:

you must eat twice every day, except on Fridays...and in Advent, you will not eat white food except when necessary. For the other half of the year fast all the time except Sundays, when you are in health and full vigor; but the rule does not bind the sick or those who have let blood. / You must not eat meat or fat, except in the case of great illness, or unless someone is very weak. Eat vegetable stew willingly, and accustom yourselves to little drink. Nevertheless, dear sisters, your food and drink have often seemed less to me than I would want you to have. Do not fast on bread and water any day unless you have leave. (Savage and Watson 199)

Even not knowing for whom these directives were written, they seem lax, especially compared to the stringent and almost suicidal dietary restrictions of Christina, Mary, and Margaret. But these directives were intended as *ideals for which to strive* by the paragons of female holiness. The chapter continues with proscriptions against corporeal mortification, and commands:

Let no one belt herself with any kind of belt next to the body, except with her confessor's leave, nor wear any iron or hair, or hedgehog-skins; let her not beat herself with them, nor with a leaded scourge, with holly or briars, nor draw blood from herself without her confessor's leave; let her not sting herself with nettles anywhere, nor beat herself in front, nor cut herself, nor impose on herself too many severe disciplines to quench temptations at one time. (202)

The two most sensational aspects of the "hagiographies" of the late-medieval lay women are the physical tortures -- namely cutting and starvation -- to which they subject themselves; yet both of these acts are prohibited by the highest (next to God) authorities of holiness. Nicholas Watson wants to make a clear distinction between thirteenth-century anchoritic spirituality and later English devotional writing. The *Ancrene Wisse* [although written in the thirteenth century] is an example of this shift in spirituality that Watson delineates. The latter is a discourse of mystical ascent, spiritual progress, and the interior life, eremitic, lay, individual, and its literature is not specialized. The former is a deliberate discourse for a particular cenobitic audience -- "professional tools with a specific function" (Watson, "Methods and Objectives" 138), it uses the external world and is not a discourse of ascent. Godhead is abstract for these later mystics, while the manhood of God of the earlier lay women mystics is physical, sensual, and pragmatic. Watson points out that "anchoritic works [such as *Ancrene Wisse*] are narrow in intellectual and emotional range, just as the lives of their readers were physically circumscribed" (146). Although they were not ordained, the anchorites for whom this manual was written were official -- they were officially recognized, had official power, and their lifestyle did not pose a threat to the gender balance in society. Christina, Mary, and Margaret, on the other hand, had much more to prove, and had to make themselves vulnerable spectacles in order to gain the validation that was already implied in the very title "anchorite." Both of these groups were lay, but one was approved and innocuous, and while the other was dangerous and potentially subversive. Watson argues that the *Ancrene Wisse* "testifies to the decline of institutional opportunities for religious women from the late twelfth century on...[and even shares] antifeminist assumptions...[that]were influential in that decline" (Watson, "Heat of a Hungary Heart" 54)



Ostensibly, lay women in these circles removed themselves from society, both physically (to varying degrees) but also conceptually, eschewing traditional gender roles. But by flying away "like" skittish birds, they attracted more attention than they claimed to, and this is how they forged unique and ultimately unassailable authority for themselves and their alternative lifestyles. Lutgard became in essence a political advisor, papal confessor, and administrator of justice within her role as a nun. Even more spectacularly, Christina, Mary, and Margaret treaded the precarious line which demarcates hysterical and demonic women, and eventually appropriated roles for themselves which did not require marriage, childbearing, or formal religious vows. The asceticism that these women practiced on their bodies, while seeming to be similar to the asceticism that marked centuries of male religiosity, was in fact radical, subversive, and strictly feminine; these women used the Trojan horse of "seemingly" innocuous femininity -- wasting away from starvation, physically broken -- to explode gender assignments and domestic expectations, and to create a valid, respected "other" alternative lifestyle for themselves.

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