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Mystical Androgyny: Annihilation and Deification in Medieval Women's Visionary Literature

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A Thesis in the Field of Religion

for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

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Abstract

In women's visionary literature dating from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in Latin Christendom, a clear pattern emerges when one analyzes the trajectory of self-annihilation to authoritative self-assertion as a result of their mystical encounters with God. It seems that the self who is encountered by God thus realizes her need for annihilation before the Face of God. After this encounter with God ultimately leads to the mystical annihilation of the self, the self is then built back up as one completely fused and integrated with the Godhead, ultimately resulting in an authoritative reassertion of the self as "I," though this new "I" is always and at once fused to the Selfhood of God. This process of encounter, annihilation, fusion, and reassertion is a pattern followed by several female mystics during the medieval period in order to legitimize themselves as authoritative sources of God's mystical revelations. While a conservative reading of these texts may suggest a masculinization of the self resulting from mystical annihilation of the feminine self, a close reading reveals that female mystics are not holy because they are becoming more *masculine* – rather, they are holy because they are becoming *Divine*. In seeking to destroy the feminine self, women such as Beatrice of Nazareth, Marguerite Porete, and Margaret Ebner were not attempting to become more manly, but more Godly – and the deification of the female mystic opens up fresh understandings of the ways in which medieval women viewed their embodiment in relation to the Divine.

Frontispiece



Figure 1. Cupio Dissolvi.[1]

Painting on ceiling of Catholic Church in Sonderheim containing the words "cupio dissolvi" with the image of a bird flying up, which a hand is holding on a string. Ceiling painting and stucco from around 1756.

[1] GFreihalter, Sonderheim St. Peter und Paul Deckenmalerei, 1 October 2010, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=11889073.

Dedication

To my mother, Mary Josephine, and my late grandmother, Mary Ellen: the first and most sincere Catholic women I've ever known.

Acknowledgments

This thesis would never have been written – or even dreamt of – were it not for the mentors and scholars who have guided me throughout the years. I owe the most profound gratitude to my undergraduate advisor, Dr. Patricia Donohue. Without her mentorship and her introduction to the women of the Middle Ages, I never would have pursued my studies beyond an undergraduate degree. She modeled for me the kind of woman and scholar that I aspire to be, and her tenacity and perseverance in a male-dominated world of theology has paved the way for me in more ways than I can enumerate here.

It was Dr. Donohue's undergraduate course on St. Catherine of Siena that first introduced me to the scholarship and the works of Dr. Amy Hollywood, who graciously agreed to direct this thesis project. Working with Dr. Hollywood is truly a full-circle experience for me, and though we have known each other for only a short time, her writings have been shaping me, inspiring me, and coloring my imagination since the earliest days of my undergraduate years. Working with Dr. Hollywood has been an opportunity that I never dreamed could become a reality. I am forever humbled by her kindness, perspective, time, sincerity, and care with which she has treated me.

Finally, I cannot thank Dr. Richard Martin, "Ricky," enough. Ricky is much more than a research advisor. He is a role model and a source of light to all who encounter him. His gentleness, generosity, and authentic display of care for his students

is beyond compare. Many panic attacks (on my end) were avoided due to the ample preparation and care that I received from Dr. Martin.

To Dr. Donohue, Amy, and Ricky – thank you for all that you have done for me. Anything successful about this thesis project is ultimately a credit to the mentorship and expertise of each of you. You have each changed my life for the better. This one-time-grad-school-dropout is now staggering across the finish line of her Master's degree from Harvard – *who would have thought?*

Thank you.

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Chapter I.

Introduction

On the morning of March 30th, 1347, it was Good Friday of Holy Week. Dominican nun Margaret Ebner could be heard disturbing the other nuns in her convent by screaming the name of Jesus, "full of heartfelt sorrow and painful misery."[2] Racked with pain from what is described as an invisible stigmata, Ebner recalls: "I felt an inner pain in my hands as if they were stretched out, torn, and broken through, and I supposed that they would always be useless to me thereafter."[3] In the throes of what she believed to be her dying moments, Ebner records the words, "*cupio dissolvi*," or, "*I desire to be destroyed*."[4] This theme of the expressed desire for self-annihilation appears commonly throughout a number of other mystical texts and spiritual treatises in the medieval period, often echoing the same phrase repeatedly: *cupio dissolvi* – a peculiarly specific phrase, since it is a popularized *paraphrase* of the original Vulgate of Paul's Philippians 1:23.[5]

In sharp contrast to the desire for annihilation, one can also see a rival pattern emerge in the writings of these mystics: the assertion of the fully authoritative, subjective "I." Catherine of Siena, for instance, in beginning nearly all of her letters with the Tuscan declaration of "I, Catherine," asserts an authoritative self that stands in sharp contrast to the annihilated self found in many of her other texts. Once the soul realizes its

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[2] Leonard P. Hindsley, trans., *Margaret Ebner: Major Works,* The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, Inc., 1993), 157.
[3] Hindsley*,* 157.
[4] Amy Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia and Other Essays: Mysticism, History, and the Study of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 79.
[5] *Nova Vulgata: Bibliorum Sacrorum Editio,* (The Vatican, n.d.).

need for the mystical annihilation of the self, the self is then built back up as one completely fused and integrated with the Godhead, ultimately resulting in an authoritative reassertion of the self as "I," (though this new "I" is always and at once fused to the Selfhood of God). This process of encounter, annihilation, fusion, and reassertion is a pattern followed by several female mystics during the medieval period in order to legitimize themselves as authoritative sources of theology. As women, their sensory, embodied experience was subject to instant suspicion by the male theologians of the day. Since the time of the Church fathers, "Woman" as a universal essence was associated with the body and its senses, while man was associated with the (supposed) better half of the deal – the mind and its faculties of reason. Philo even goes so far as to argue that "the most proper and exact name for sense perception is 'woman'." [6] In reading the Genesis story of creation as an allegory that proves the superiority of the mind over the senses, for Philo and the early Christians, it was clear that man, in being associated with the mind and reason, is superior to woman. If woman is associated with the sensitive, animal appetites, then she is a living symbol for all temptation and trickery of the flesh. In the words of Rosemary Ruether, woman thus represents "carnality in the disorder of sin." [7]

In order to leverage credibility and authority, a woman would have to "unsex" herself *à la* Lady MacBeth, creating distance between the self who mystically encounters God, and the embodied, female self. Thus, the annihilation of the human self makes way for the resurrection and reassertion of the deified Self who now resides in God almost indistinguishably, showing how the language of annihilation is ultimately aimed at

[6] R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Inventino of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 29.
[7] Bloch, 30.

resisting the marginalization of their voices in the wider theological culture. This tension between the desire for annihilation and the desire for authority can be seen clearly in all of its dynamism in the writings of Beatrice of Nazareth, Marguerite Porete, and Margaret Ebner. While each writer's relationship to her selfhood and embodiment is varied, unique, and as individual as the person, nearly identical literary and spiritual techniques are leveraged by these women in order to assert authority. As women, they were each forced to reckon with the male-imposed image of the ethereal, eternal essence of "Woman" that seeks to erase the subjective narratives of individual women from history. Thus, any project in interpreting and honoring the writings of medieval women must celebrate the individuality and subjective experience of particular women. Here, it becomes necessary to distinguish between categorizing "women's writings" in a way that is naturalistic and essentialist, while still validly taking note of common topoi, images, and rhetorical devices that flourished in their marginalized literary subculture, or what Jane Chance calls the *minor literature.*[8] While I would not go as far as Chance in asserting that women writers were purposely subverting the dominant theological and literary cultures of the time, it rings true that a new genre of minor literature exists, with its own world of devices, images, and patterns.

The misogyny of the Middle Ages was the cultural inheritance from the generations that came before, most notably the early Church fathers. The Catholic Church has a long tradition of fathers who assert that the path to holiness for women is to become more *manly* – to put down the female self and be spiritually reborn as a man. In echoing Philo's claim that "progress is nothing else than the giving up of the female

[8] Jane Chance, *The Literary Subversions of Medieval Women* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 1.

gender by changing into the male," early Church figures such as Basil, Gregory Nazianzus, Jerome, and John Chrysostom impressed upon women that the only way to legitimize their voices was to speak with the authority of one who has renounced their female identity.[9] Thus, the journey of the soul to God was seen as being a masculine ascent that required virility and perseverance. Upon reading the texts of medieval women mystics regarding self-annihilation, therefore, it would be understandable for the reader to assume that these women were complicit with the paradigm of transformation encouraged throughout the ages by the Church to sublimate their own femininity (or, at least that they were certainly distancing themselves from their own femininity or struggling with intense self-hatred, longing with desire for the destruction of the inherently female self).

This research is most pressing, then, in order to correct this view of women's mysticism. This project does not attempt to prove the opposite, either (namely, that women were completely rebellious to this paradigm). Rather, the mystic's attitude is much more complicated than an attitude of pure submission or pure rebellion. In seeking to destroy the feminine self, women such as Beatrice of Nazareth, Marguerite Porete, and Margaret Ebner were not attempting to become more *manly*, but more *Godly* – and the deification of the female mystic opens up fresh understandings of the ways in which female embodiment can function in relation to the Divine.

Since the 1980s, there has been a huge resurgence in the scholarship surrounding medieval women's mystical texts and the kinds of conclusions that can be drawn about women from the period by reading such texts. Thus far, scholarly research seems to be

[9] Bloch*, Medieval Misogyny,* 107.

falling into two different tropes or categories: either female mystical writers were writing texts that colluded with the misogynistic trends of the patriarchal establishment of the Catholic Church, displaying their supposed internalized misogyny, or they were writing texts that were purposely subversive – thus effectively creating a new genre of minor literature that reverses the images and patterns of the dominant, masculine theological culture. On the one hand, scholars point to Hildegard of Bingen as an unfortunate example of a brilliant mind succumbing to the internalized misogyny in her environment, as Hildegard notes: "For woman is weak, and looks to man that she may gain strength from him… as the moon receives its strength from the sun; wherefore is she subject to the man, and ought always to be prepared to serve him." [10] Thus, for scholars such as Dyan Elliott, Hildegard stands at the forefront of a narrative that "is largely a story of constraint, where individuals are often complicit with their constraining forces."[11] On the other hand, Jane Chance, in echoing Judith Butler, argues that due to women's marginalized status in medieval society, those who resisted collusion with the dominant patriarchal theology thus constituted and formed their own subjectivity again and again through "continuing opposition, or subversion" of those power structures. [12] This identification of the self as marginal "carries with it dissonance, alienation within the patriarchal culture that insists on continuing primacy."[13] Such an overly simplistic characterization of the constitution of female subjectivity seems grossly reductive – as the

[10] Bloch, 27.
[11] Dyan Elliott, *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitorial Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 7.
[12] Chance, *The Literary Subversions of Medieval Women,* 2.
[13] Chance, 2.

personality of a woman reduces to nothing more than an intentional effort to subvert what is masculine.

Additionally, what is overlooked in the foray of current scholarship is the reality that most women writers from the 13th and 14th centuries cannot be placed neatly into either category of collusion versus subversion. Women such as Beatrice, Porete, and Ebner seem to occupy a middle ground, blurring the lines between the two poles. What the scholarship produced thus far seems to neglect is the possibility that these female mystics were operating within a hermeneutic of faith, resulting in genuine confusion and tension in their relationships with their own particularly sexed bodies. Through annihilation of the self in God, however, women may have been finding ways to assert authority within the bounds of a hermeneutic of faith, thus resisting a break or rupture from the established patriarchal Church and its theological traditions, while still pushing for spiritual dialogue to be more inclusive of women's mystical and embodied experiences.

A Note on Method

The existence, prevalence, and "repetitive monotony" of misogyny from the time of the Church fathers to the present day is perhaps the most foundational assumption of this project.[14] In the fifteenth century, Christine de Pizan judged that in the history of misogyny, there is a uniformity of discourse which, in the words of R. Howard Bloch, "has hardly varied in almost two thousand years."[15] From the early days of misogyny as expressed in many of the Church fathers from Clement of Rome to Clement of

[14] Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny,* 2.
[15] Bloch, 2-3.

Alexandria, Tertullian, Novatian, Cyprian, Methodius, Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, and Jerome, all the way up to the nineteenth century inheritors of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages – Hegel, Schopenhauer, Michelet, Proudhon, Lombroso, and Nietzsche, to name a few – Christine de Pizan laments that, "it seems that they all speak from one and the same mouth."[16] While the literary and theological misogyny throughout the ages has been expressed in ways that are monotonous, repetitive, uniform, and universal, one must not mistake this universality as an inevitable fact of nature. While universal, misogyny is not natural – it *must* be unmasked for what it is.[17]

The literary, historical, and theological misogyny dealt with in this project consists in any proposed essentialist definition of "Woman." I take my definition of "essentialist" from Bloch's treatment of misogyny in *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*.[18] By universalizing "man" and "woman" into ontological categories that are diametrically opposed to one another (where whatever is "not-man" is deemed "woman"), then "woman" is "continually in the process of negating itself as a universal category."[19] Regardless of the intentions of the definition (positive or negative), it is entirely possible that an unconscious blindness to the prevalence of misogyny in the history of western thought still colors any iteration of essentialist definitions of woman that are meant to be flattering. Put more explicitly, Bloch surmises that one can easily detect an essentialist definition of woman, as it nearly always follows the same formula: "For the effect of a speech act such that woman is the subject of the sentence and the predicate a more general term," the result (whether intended or

[16] Bloch, 3.
[17] Bloch, 3.
[18] Bloch.
[19] Chance, 3.

unintended) is "to make of woman an essence, which, as essence is eliminated from the world historical stage."[20] Any concept of "Woman" as a mystery, enigma, or ethereal essence – though not blatantly demeaning – still meets this definition of misogyny.

Thus, the purpose of this research is not to treat "women's spirituality" or "women's writing" in the medieval era as a monolith. Additionally, to merely note the misogyny of the Christian tradition without correcting it is to fruitlessly repeat a litany of woes, the likes of which has already been accomplished time and again. To actively combat this misogyny requires a precision of language when discussing women's writing – a precision that demands treating women as individuals rather than as a category of thought. Only individuals can be real actors on the historical stage of events. Any imposition of the essence of "Woman" in place of the actions of a *particular woman* erases the woman's agency from history. In erasing the subjective, unique identities of individual women, misogynistic frameworks essentially silence the female voice by reducing subjectivity to the realm of archetypal tropes.

In particular, the image of the woman as Bride of Christ has taken pride of place in the Church throughout the centuries, as she "remained for the Christian community something of a living allegory, inhabiting two realms simultaneously, and was socially construed as such."[21] The danger in placing "Woman" in the realm of the allegorical sense is that it denies the literal history of particular women, as their lives and works fade into the realm of abstraction, imprisoned by the imagery of the bride in the Song of Songs. At times demeaning and at other times falsely flattering, "the debilitating

[20] Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny,* 5.
[21] Dyan Elliot, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell: Metaphor and Embodiment in the Lives of Pious Women, 200-1500* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 3.

obsession with woman as the source of all evil became inverted into a coconspiring obsession with woman as the source of all good," as "negative and positive fetishizations of the feminine work to identical effect" in erasing agency and subjectivity.[22] Thus, any use of the term "Woman" or "woman" is meant as a reference to this history of misogynistic thought, while the term "women" more appropriately represents the individual actors in history who will be explored in this project, namely, Beatrice of Nazareth, Marguerite Porete, and Margaret Ebner – for it is only in honoring the memories of *particular women* that the shadow-figure of the eternal Woman will fade into the status of a long-forgotten fever dream.

[22] Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny,* 11.

Chapter II.

The History of Misogyny in Christian Thought

The skepticism and suspicion surrounding women's spirituality and embodiment in the Middle Ages was the fruit of many centuries of misogynistic thinking seamlessly intertwining itself with the theology of male patriarchs, saints, and Church fathers. In order to fully appreciate the pressure of being a medieval woman, one must follow the long historical trajectory of misogyny from the beginnings of Christianity to its culmination and full expression in the Middle Ages. The topic of anti-woman speech "participates in a vestigial horror practically synonymous with the Middle Ages."[23] From the time of the Hebrew testament to ancient Greece, the Hellenic and Roman periods through to the fifteenth century, misogyny "dominates ecclesiastical writing, letters, sermons, theological tracts, and discussions and compilations of canon law; scientific works, as part of biological, gynecological, and medical knowledge, folklore and philosophy."[24] Put more simply by Barbara Newman: "From the earliest years of Christianity, the Church has had a problem with women."[25] This "problem" appears repeatedly throughout history as an ancient hydra with many heads – ever-multiplying in its resistance to defeat.

To fully understand the well-developed misogyny of the Church in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, one must start with the themes that were initially developed in

[23] Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny*, 7.
[24] Bloch, 7.
[25] Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 1.

Late Antiquity during the time of the desert ascetics and early Church fathers. Across the fathers, several themes stand out as heads of the hydra. First, there is the problem of female authority versus submission; second, there is the association of woman with embodiment, the senses, and the cosmetic; lastly, there is a demonization of woman as the source of all temptation and evil. In no other place in history can one see the picture of misogyny painted with such blatant vitriol.

In Late Antiquity, the lifestyle choice of perpetual virginity was becoming increasingly popular – especially among women. Independent communities of virginal women living together without the authority of a father or husband became a great source of contention in the early Church, and it is clear that with all of the debate surrounding gender roles in the first several centuries of Christianity that "women in particular expected more from the virginal lifestyle than simple freedom from the chains of marriage: there is every reason to believe that they sought to transform the unequal relationship that supported the institution."[26] While St. Paul clearly argues that the differences between male and female are abolished in Christ, the early Church fathers certainly displayed a reluctant attitude toward the practical execution of Paul's mandate – and Paul himself sends mixed signals regarding the practical execution of his theology. Both Paul and Tertullian, in insisting that virginal, single women should wear veils, see it as not only a sign of "female subjection, but as a marker of gender differentiation" as well.[27] Tertullian's goal was to eradicate any notion that women could claim androgyny, and he did so by "asserting their ineradicable womanhood, a case symbolically advanced

[26] Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell*, 10.
[27] Elliott, 10-11.

by the imposition of the veil."[28] The virgins, however, seem to have adopted the lifestyle in the hopes of living in androgynous harmony with their male counterparts. This inspiration largely comes from the famous Pauline passage in Galatians, and there may in fact be recent evidence that the Pauline formula of the abolition of race, class, and sex may not in fact have originated with Paul at all – but may actually be part of the baptismal formula of the day.[29] Thus, "the virgin's sexual abstinence might have anticipated a blissful abolition of gender" in a new, Christian utopia founded on the essential equality of all believers.[30]

In being baptized into a new, androgynous life in Christ, it is clear that women began to associate androgyny with power – as an androgynous, angelic being prefiguring the heavenly state need not be subjected to the dictates of men. In the second century, Tertullian felt that action needed to be taken against this growing community of independent women. Thus, he becomes the first of the Church fathers to deploy the image of woman as the Bride of Christ – and in weaponizing an inherently feminine symbol, he reasserts the existence of gender differentiation in Christianity.[31] For Tertullian, androgyny has no place in the practical life of the Church, for to claim androgyny would be for women to wrongly deny their sex, which he describes as establishing a "third generic class, some monstrosity with a head of its own."[32] He therefore "insist[ed] that these virgins were not only women but matrons of a sort, who must wear veils as a sign of their submission to their celestial bridegroom, Christ."[33]

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[28] Elliott, 10.
[29] Elliott, 12.
[30] Elliott, 26.
[31] Elliott, 3.
[32] Elliott, 20.
[33] Elliott, 20.

However, in insisting that the virgins of Carthage were not really single women, but Brides of Christ, Tertullian had successfully submitted women to a new male authority – the authority of the priesthood standing *in loco Christi* for their divine bridegroom.

Inevitably, other questions of practice arose immediately. Also in Carthage, the bishop Cyprian famously dealt with a case involving a group of consecrated virgins who were living in the house of a male deacon, attempting to realize the eschatological destiny of androgyny in Christ through their peaceful cohabitation.[34] Echoing Tertullian's image of woman as the Bride of Christ, Cyprian accused the virgins of a kind of spiritual adultery, declaring: "If a husband should come and see his wife lying with another man, is he not indignant and maddened, and doth he not in the violence of his jealousy perhaps even seize a sword? How indignant and angered then must Christ our Lord and Judge be."[35] Ruling that the consecrated virgins could no longer live in the deacon's house, he also subjected the women to full gynecological exams to ensure that they were not lying about the state of their physical virginity.[36]

While it was clear that women were being discouraged from attempting to live an un-sexed, androgynous (even *angelic*) life, there was abundant and blatant theological pressure for women to deny, subjugate, and even annihilate their own femininity or female-ness in favor of a masculine spiritual identity. If women could not leverage any power as angels, then many of them would attempt to do it as *men*. Afterall, as Newman and others have pointed out, the "psychic and social meaning" of the categories of man and woman are simply "too heavily laden with…meaning to wither away."[37]

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[34] Elliott, 32-33.
[35] Elliott, 33.
[36] Elliott, 33.
[37] Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist,* 3.

In Late Antiquity, "the women who renounced their sexuality are described as being spiritually transformed into men, a clear promotion in a patriarchal world."[38] Many sources contain these themes, with some being accepted by the Church as orthodox, and others being rejected as heretical. The Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, for instance, put the very words into the mouth of Christ himself: "For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of Heaven."[39] Likewise, in the social circles of Jerome, the virtuous and ascetic women in his company were given the honorary title of "men."[40] In speaking of the utilitarian function of the female body in the production of children, Jerome claims that if no desire to reproduce is found in the female, and she "wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman, and will be called man."[41] In hagiographical accounts that mimic the stories of the early desert fathers, female ascetics are often depicted in crossdressing scenarios – undergoing various transformations whereby their physical bodies no longer appear female to the outside observer, whether through extensive fasting, dress, or other penances. In later centuries, hagiographical accounts abound of crossdressing saints who adopt masculine identities in order to live their vocations within the confines of an all-male monastery. In some of these fantastic tales, the true identity of the female monk is only discovered upon her death, when her body is prepared for burial.[42] As Dyan Elliott points out, whether or not the women truly *perceived* themselves as male is up for scholarly debate, as few testimonies written by women are available from this period. In one of the few surviving

[38] Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell,* 11.
[39] Elliott*,* 11.
[40] Elliott*,* 11.
[41] Newman*, From Virile Woman to WomanChrist,* 4.
[42] Elliott*, The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell,* 11.

texts, *The Passion of Perpetua,* the female Roman of patrician heritage describes the tale of her conversion and eventual imprisonment leading up to her martyrdom in the Roman Colosseum. In the days leading up to her death, Perpetua had a dream that she was transfigured into a man – a gladiator. As a gladiator, she did battle with the devil, who was portrayed as a fierce Egyptian opponent in the showdown.[43] At the same period of time, she was also dealing with the physical repercussions of postpartum motherhood – as she was nursing her newborn infant in prison shortly before her death. While Perpetua does not offer much insight into her own conception of herself, her sexuality, or her body, it is telling that her imagination transforms her into a heroic man when she needed an empowering image for comfort, as she faces the greatest spiritual and physical test of her life. Important to keep in mind, however, when reading accounts of "manly" women such as Perpetua, is Newman's observation that this particular topos "functioned best in hagiography where the subject was safely dead."[44] The physical, virginal body of the living woman, however, remained as a threat to orthodoxy – constantly teetering on the edge of falling into sin or heresy.

The superiority of man over woman as ingrained in this western tradition has its roots in the metaphysics of antiquity. Through a symbolic reading of the Genesis account that renders very real, practical metaphysical applications, the chronological priority of Adam over Eve sets in motion a series of dichotomies leading up to the Fall of mankind, which, in the eyes of early Christian theologians, would ontologically justify the misogyny of the Middle Ages.[45] Adam, representative of male-ness in general, possesses

[43] Elliott, 11.
[44] Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist,* 5.
[45] Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny,* 25.

substance and an essential nature.[46] Eve, in being derived from the essential (Adam), becomes, by nature, accidental.[47] This analogous relationship of substance-accidents for man-woman has several metaphysical corollaries, all implying a relationship of superiority-to-inferiority. Man, in being substantial in himself, comes to represent Idea or Form, while woman represents all things corporeal and material.[48] The association of woman with matter leads to "a devaluation of the corporeal that is specifically gendered," where man comes to also represent the mind, while woman represents the senses.[49] This correlation between woman and the body and its senses versus man and the mind and its intellect necessarily implies the subjugation of the woman to the man, as the virtuous man is called to subject his senses and passions to his intellect in the pursuit of virtue and wisdom.[50] Additionally, this association of man with form and mind, according to the 19th century inheritors of antique thought, such as Hegel, makes man more suitable to pursuits of the mind that require abstraction, such as philosophy – whereas woman is engaged with the frivolity of detail, ornamentation, and garrulousness.[51] It is precisely this insult lobbied at the woman – her inane wordiness – that leads to the association of silence with subjugation. In an attempt to hush the childish chatter of the inferior woman, man must institute a rule of silence over the woman, following suit with John Chrysostom's advice that women should show a silent appreciation for learning all that she can from the speech of man, thus they must "show submission by their silence."[52] Conveniently, Athanasius exhorts women to remain silent even in the face of slander,

[46] Bloch, 25.
[47] Bloch, 25.
[48] Bloch, 27.
[49] Bloch 27-30.
[50] Bloch, 30.
[51] Bloch, 28.
[52] Chance, *The Literary Subversions of Medieval Women*, 6.

"addressing herself to God alone, so that 'her eyes are doves in addition to [her] silence.'"[53] Eerily foreshadowing the stony silence of Marguerite Porete during her inquisitorial questioning in the early 1300s, a woman's virtuous silence can backfire – bespeaking her supposed guilt rather than her innocence. In maintaining her silence, what was supposed to speak to her virtue left Marguerite defenseless in the face of male accusations of heresy, thus leading to her eventual death by fire.

Such a metaphysical reading of the Genesis account is not confined to the moment of creation of man and woman, but extends to their fall from grace as well. Eve, in being the tempter of Adam, comes to stand in the place of all women as temptation, flesh, matter, and sin, doomed to return to the dust of the earth. In channeling his anger towards the biblical Eve and redirecting it towards all women in general, Tertullian derides all women by declaring: "*You* are the devil's gateway: *you* are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: *you* are the first deserter of the divine law: *you* are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. *You* destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of *your* desert – that is, death – even the Son of God had to die."[54] As a result, Clement of Alexandria concludes, "every woman should be overwhelmed with shame at the thought that she is a woman."[55]

In the medieval period, women's claim to authority must lie in distancing themselves from the feminine self, and re-asserting their own prophetic and spiritual authority from the perspective of the deified self – the self that is now fused and one with

[53] Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell,* 40.
[54] Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny,* 40.
[55] Richard Woods, O.P., "Conclusion: Women and Men in the Development of Late Medieval Mysticism," in *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete,* ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1994), 149.

the Godhead. According to Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, because women lacked natural authority in society due to their sex, it was critical for them to establish themselves as credible via divine sanction, as "authority to write came directly from God."[56] Often, this authority is coupled with the mystic's union or oneness with God achieved through the contemplative life.

This theme of spiritual union or deification in Christianity first appears in Paul's letter to the Galatians. In his move for establishing his own theological authority and legitimacy after his own persecution of the early Christian movement, Paul himself puts forth a model for justification in the eyes of men. Insisting that his own preaching is not of "human origin," he rather asserts that he is simply a mouthpiece for the Divine – an unlikely messenger who has been "entrusted" with a message not necessarily his own (Galatians 1:11; 2:7).[57] Paul, in being "crucified with Christ," becomes a living moment of Incarnation, as he attests, "yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God" (Galatians 2:19-20).[58] Despite what his flesh tells him, Paul insists that he no longer lives as Paul – rather, he is a living vessel for the Incarnate Word – a Word that he is entrusted with from on high; a Word that demands to be spoken.

In like manner, medieval women, by nature of the inferiority of their sex in an increasingly clericalized Church, are put in a position where their spiritual authority is questioned by their audience. Following the Pauline model of establishing authorization to teach on behalf of Christ, medieval women cite God's voice (rather than the

[56] Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Body & Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 4.
[57] *New American Bible, revised edition* (Washington, D.C.: Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, 2010).
[58] *New American Bible*.

uniqueness of their own voices) as being the nexus of the revelatory message. Through faith and mystical union with God, the mystic's own identity is swallowed up in the Divine in a oneness that transcends the limits – and even the physical sex – of the mystic's body.

While some women seemingly met with great success when asserting themselves as spiritual authorities, their authority was confined to matters that fell within the bounds of what was already deemed doctrinally sound by the clerical authority of the Church. Thus, women often needed male advocates to plead the case of their sanctity and authority to the establishment. While Catherine of Siena gained a noteworthy reputation for advising men with power, even the Pope himself, her own spiritual director and hagiographer needed reassurance of her credibility due to her sex. In a cultural climate that "urged women to become virile, masculine in rising to God," the presence of masculine characteristics and an abandonment of outward femininity often gained the trust of male authorities.[59] Thus, as Caroline Walker Bynum points out, when doubting the authenticity of Catherine of Siena's visions, Raymond of Capua could only be comforted by his own vision from God depicting Catherine's face with a beard.[60] Upon seeing Catherine as male (and therefore, supposedly, conformed to the identity of Christ himself), Raymond felt that Catherine's mysticism was indeed an act of God. The beard *proved* her to be legitimate. Thus, it is not *only* divine sanction that gives women authority – but masculinity.

[59] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 166-167.
[60] Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 167.

Chapter III.

Becoming Like God: Beatrice of Nazareth

Around the year 1200, a young girl was born to a middle-class family east of Leuven.[61] Bright and curious, the girl who would come to be known as Beatrice of Nazareth received an education from her earliest years, until her mother's death when Beatrice was around seven years old. It is at age seven that her father sent her to live with a group of beguines in Zoutleeuw. By age ten, Beatrice was an oblate at Bloemendaal, and by age sixteen she had begun her novitiate as a Cistercian nun.[62] She remained a Cistercian for the rest of her life.

Exceptionally gifted, she was sent to the Cistercian community of Rameya to learn the art of manuscript writing. It is here that Beatrice kindled a friendship with the more spiritually advanced Ida of Nivelles, who began to mentor Beatrice in the ways of prayer.[63] After various moves around different Cistercian communities, Beatrice was eventually sent to a new community in Nazareth where she served as prioress for more than thirty years. It was towards the end of her life that she composed her great treatise: *Seven Manieren van Minne.*[64] She died in August of 1268.[65]

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[61] Roger DeGanck, trans., and John Baptist Hasbrouck OCSO, trans., *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1991), xiii.
[62] DeGanck, xiv-xvi.
[63] DeGanck, xvii.
[64] DeGanck, xix.
[65] DeGanck, xvii.

The *Vita* of Beatrice was written by an unknown author shortly after her death in 1268.[66] The author mentions his ministry to the nuns in Beatrice's community, though he concedes that he never knew Beatrice herself. It can be gathered from his many references to the community at Nazareth that he was a chaplain of sorts at Nazareth, and was very likely among the monks of St. Bernard's abbey near Antwerp.[67] The biographer composed the *Vita* using a combination of Beatrice's own diary (now lost), some later notes on her life, her treatise on *Minne*, and eyewitness accounts from the nuns who lived with her.[68] In compiling the narrative of her life, the author admits, however, that he is also acting as a critical editor and redactor in order to create a narrative that will be suitable and instructive for his intended audience.[69] As Jessica Barr points out, "Such remarks are reminders that this is a constructed narrative" where the author acts as "mediator between Beatrice and the reader" in order to "present a coherent story of saintly exemplarity," (whether accurate or not).[70] In this way, it is not in Beatrice's life and example, but "the text of the *Vita* is where she becomes holy."[71] It is not those who knew her personally, but "the readers" who "are the witnesses to her sanctity."[72] In this way, the sanctity of the one who is studied is constructed through a collaborative and dynamic project of the hagiographer and the reader imposing popular structures for pious narratives onto the life of the subject.

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[66] DeGanck, xxii.
[67] DeGanck, xxii-xxiii.
[68] DeGanck, xxi.
[69] Jessica Barr, "The Secret Chamber of Her Mind: Interpreting Inner Experience in the *Vita* of Beatrice of Nazareth," *Exemplaria* 23, no. 3 (2011): 239.
[70] Barr, 239.
[71] Barr, 239.
[72] Barr, 239.

In a rhetorical move to vouch for his own credibility, the author maneuvers himself behind Beatrice's constructed narrative of credibility, acting as the only one who can access the true mind of Beatrice via her original materials (that were then promptly destroyed after the *Vita* was written).[73] Because of this unfettered access to what remains of the mind of Beatrice after her death, the author of the *Vita* is able to claim privileged knowledge of the things that Beatrice kept hidden during her lifetime – things that require skillful interpretation in order to understand their true nature.[74] Thus, Barr concludes, the problem with the *Vita* is that these "efforts to translate her thoughts and actions into a form that would be legible to his readers indicates an interpretive approach that Beatrice herself is unlikely to have taken."[75] While the intentions of the author here do not necessarily need to be interpreted in a way that is purposely insidious, he certainly employed certain rhetorical strategies in order to convey Beatrice's "spiritual strength" despite her "female weakness."[76] To fit this narrative, Beatrice's life story needed to be centered on events that showcase how she was unable to control her behaviors, overly emotional, constantly plagued by illness and fatigue, excessive in her ascetic practices, and mostly passive in "receiving" ecstasy from God.[77] In this way, what Beatrice herself describes as primarily inner, private experiences are made external through the constructed narrative of physical, bodily episodes. It is in this regard that Hollywood surmises that "the visionary woman becomes a vision…a spectacle for the viewing pleasure of her contemporaries," (or readers, for that matter).[78] Of course, there is also

[73] Barr, 222.
[74] Barr, 222.
[75] Barr, 222.
[76] Barr, 223.
[77] Barr, 224.
[78] Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia,* 204.

the possibility that the careful construction of the *Vita* and the destruction of Beatrice's own vernacular autobiographical diary may have been an attempt on the part of the *Vita*-author to protect Beatrice's memory, as the Inquisition was heavily present in the diocese where Nazareth was located, opening up the tantalizing possibility that Beatrice's own description of herself may have been interpreted in a way that was antithetical to the *Vita*-author's orthodox intentions.[79]

The phrase *cupio dissolvi* is referenced a total of three times in the *Vita* by Beatrice's hagiographer – a phrase that Amy Hollywood translates as, "I desire to be destroyed."[80] This concept of self-dissolution or self-destruction thus brings up the issue of translation. What did the hagiographer mean by use of the Latin word "dissolvi," and how else might it be translated?

Historically, it has been said that *cupio dissolvi* is a Latin translation of Paul's Greek in Philippians 1:23. However, this isn't precisely the case, as the Vulgate translation of Philippians 1:23 actually reads: *disederium habens dissolvi.*[81] The original Greek word used by Paul in Philippians 1:23 that is translated to the Latin *dissolvi* is ἀναλύω, which is most commonly translated as to be *unloosed* or *undone*.[82] Interestingly, the Latin verb *dissolvo* also implies other connotations, such as *dissolving* or *destroying* – some of the more common English translations of the Latin. Thus, the term "dissolvi" can include all of the nuances and subtleties of meaning here mentioned – unloosing, undoing, dissolving, separating from, and destroying the ego. What is peculiar about the phrase *cupio dissolvi* and its popularity in the later Middle Ages is the

[79] DeGanck*, The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth,* xxix.
[80] Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia*, 4.
[81] *Nova Vulgata: Bibliorum Sacrorum Editio*, (The Vatican, n.d.).
[82] Gregory R. Crane, ed*.,* "Philippians 1:23," in *Persesus Digital Library.* Accessed February 21, 2021.

fact that it is not a direct quote from the Vulgate, but is a popularized paraphrase of it. The popularity of this particular paraphrase of Philippians 1:23 suggests that it may have been a phrase that was popular in the preaching of the day, or in commonly circulated theological texts that large populations of people would have been familiar with.

The first reference to this phrase in Beatrice's *Vita* occurs in Book Two, Chapter Sixteen: "The Grave Inconvenience She Suffered from Weariness of the Present Life."[83] Describing her spiritual state at the time, the hagiographer claimed that "she grieved at being assigned to this world as if she were held in a gloomy prison," and that she desired "with the apostle to be dissolved and to be with Christ" (cum apostolo dissolui cupiens et esse cum Christo).[84] Here, neither Philippians 1:23 is quoted directly, nor is the popularized phrase *cupio dissolvi* used, but another paraphrase is used instead: *dissolui cupiens*.

The verse is not referenced again until the ending appendix to the hagiographer's *Vita:* his own Latin translation of Beatrice's treatise, *The Seven Ways of Minne.* Interjecting his own aside in the text, the hagiographer claims in the midst of Beatrice's exposition of the seventh way that "those words of the apostle: 'I long to be dissolved and to be with Christ', were constantly present in her heart" (cupio dissolvi et esse cum Christo).[85] Again, one page later, Beatrice is describing the torment of the seventh way, when "the soul greatly longs and strongly desires to be freed from this exile and loosed from the body. With afflicted heart it then says with the apostle: 'I long to be dissolved and to be with Christ'" (cupio dissolvi et esse cum Christo). Beatrice, being well-versed

[83] DeGanck, *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth,* 185.
[84] DeGanck, 185.
[85] DeGanck, 322-323.

in the popular Latin manuscripts of her day, likely learned this phrase from other popular devotional treatises that came across her desk during her time at Rameya. We will now turn to one likely source that may have influenced Beatrice's understanding of Pauline annihilation.

Annihilation in the Victorine Tradition

There are clear similarities between Richard of St. Victor's *On The Four Degrees of Violent Love* and Beatrice's *Seven Manners of Minne.* Richard's *Four Degrees of Violent Love* was widely circulated, popular, and influential by the later Middle Ages, and is even credited for its impact on Latin and vernacular writers alike.[86] The reasons for its popularity may be understandable, as Travis Stevens describes it as being a work of "painful longing" where "the stuff of troubadour song is initiated into the heart of Christian theology."[87] For this troubadour, however, the love between two mortal humans is a lesser, more toxic love when compared to the higher, most exalted and perfect love between the mortal man and his immortal Creator God.[88] Key to the treatise is the theme of lovesickness, as the path for the believer is to follow and love God through progressively more violent degrees of lovesickness, which then culminates in the believer's ability to truly love their neighbor.[89]

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[86] Andrew B. Kraebel, trans., "Richard of St. Victor: On the Four Degrees of Violent Love," in *On Love: A Selection of Works of Hugh, Adam, Achard, Richard, and Godfrey of St. Victor,* ed. Hugh Feiss, OSB (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012), 271.
[87] Travis Stevens, "Christian Lovesickness: Richard of St. Victor's *The Four Degrees of Violent Love*," *The Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 47, no. 1 (2021), 21, 40.
[88] Marius Talos, "How Can Love Be Violent? Reflections on Richard of St. Victor's *On the Four Degrees of Violent Love*," *Agathos: An International Review of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 3, no. 1 (2012), 66.
[89] Stevens, "Christian Lovesickness," 39.

The first degree of violent love is what Richard calls wounding love. In this stage, when one has been "pierced by love's darts" in an allusion to the mythical Cupid, then one is on fire with desire to obtain the object of this new yearning.[90] It is also described as one beginning to thirst for God.[91] The second degree of violent love is called binding love, and one is plagued by thinking constantly of the beloved, imprisoned by these thoughts.[92] Rather than thirsting *for* God, Richard describes this love as thirsting *toward* God.[93] In the third degree of languishing love, not only does one think about the beloved constantly, but the soul can *only* think about the beloved. All other things in reality begin to be seen in terms of that object of love.[94] In this stage, the soul thirsts *into* God.[95] It is during this degree that the soul begins to desire an unmediated experience of God, melting into God, like iron melting.[96] The soul returns from this experience as a changed person – they are now completely conformed to the will of Christ, and become another Christ.[97] In this conformity, the will of God and the will of the soul become one and the same will.[98] The soul becomes forgetful of itself, and passes away into God.[99] In this stage, the soul is described in terms that are feminine, as God, the masculine lover, "penetrate[s]" the soul.[100] The fourth and final degree of violent love is weakening love, whereby the soul is dissatisfied, even after obtaining its heart's desire. The soul is

[90] Kraebel, "Richard of St. Victor," 263.
[91] Kraebel, 266.
[92] Kraebel, 263.
[93] Kraebel, 266.
[94] Kraebel, 263.
[95] Kraebel, 266.
[96] Kraebel, 267.
[97] Kraebel, 268.
[98] Kraebel, 271.
[99] Kraebel, 291.
[100] Kraebel, 292.

constantly straining for new ways to satisfy its desire.[101] Here, the soul is thirsting in accordance with God.[102] It is in regards to this fourth degree that the soul desires to be destroyed – for the soul in this stage, "to live is Christ and to die is gain," and the soul "desires 'to be dissolved and to be with Christ.'"[103] Thus, a reference to the phrase *cupio dissolvi* is in fact present in this popular treatise. Importantly, Richard still refers to the soul as something that is feminine, and so his approach to the annihilated self is a feminine approach – it is the feminine soul that desires to be destroyed. His use of feminine pronouns and images to describe his own soul is pointed, and he employs a number of feminine analogies to illustrate his point, including marriage and childbearing.[104] Once again, the language of penetration is employed, where God penetrates the feminine soul, causing the soul to dissolve and be destroyed in God.[105] After the soul is destroyed, there is nothing left of the self – all that remains is the will of God in the self.[106]

It is not until the feminine soul is destroyed and dissolved in God that the self is now referred to as masculine, as Richard employs a very pointed shift in his pronoun usage, as "this type of man becomes a new creature… in this degree the soul is made in some way immortal and impassible."[107] Eventually, however, even the masculine soul sees its need for destruction before God, and strives to become something "more than a man."[108] Pointedly, there is one final shift from masculine pronouns to gender-neutral

[101] Kraebel, 263.
[102] Kraebel, 266.
[103] Kraebel, 284.
[104] Talos, "How Can Love Be Violent?," 66.
[105] Kraebel, "Richard of St. Victor," 292.
[106] Kraebel, 293.
[107] Kraebel, 294.
[108] Kraebel, 296.

pronouns, as the soul moves from he/him identification to it/itself, suggesting a deification that surpasses gender entirely.[109]

In sum, Richard's journey of the soul through the four degrees of violent love follows a trajectory of feminine transformation into masculine, then masculine into gender-neutral deification. First, the feminine aspects of the soul are completely destroyed and dissolved in God. The heroic virtue of such an act of love is referred to as being an act of masculine heroism, prompting God to transform this male hero into something "more than a man" – into a deified self that is truly like God in that it is altogether without a physical sex.[110] The "vehemence" and "violence" of love consists in that it can make us hate our own soul.[111] Could it be intentional that the soul, during these moments of self-hatred, is described in Richard's system as feminine? One could argue that it is not hatred for the self that Richard is referring to so much as it could be hatred of the feminine aspects of the self – the animal appetites and flesh. In this sense, Bloch summarizes that a hatred of the body and "mistrust of the senses" is always, in some sense, "fear of the woman as body, the body as woman. In other words, it is the fear of the woman in every man's body."[112]

Richard's most popular contemporaries, Bernard of Clairvaux and William of St. Thierry, echo this abandonment of the feminine aspects of the self in their theological systems as well.[113] In William's trajectory of the spiritual life, one journeys progressively from the animal, to the rational, and then the spiritual aspects of the self –

[109] Kraebel, 296.
[110] Kraebel, 296.
[111] Kraebel, 275.
[112] Kraebel, 263.
[113] Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny,* 40.

organizing his spirituality around the tripartite divisions of the soul.[114] This move from the animal to the rational and then the spiritual parts of the self parallels Richard's progressive journey from the feminine to the masculine and finally divine aspects of the self, wherein the feminine aspects of the soul are associated with the flesh and its senses, and the masculine aspects of the self are associated with reason. Thus, William advises that "the beginning of good in the animal way of life is perfect obedience; progress for it is to gain control of the body and bring it into subjection, perfection for it is when the habitual exercise of virtue has become a pleasure."[115] Here, the body and its senses are called to be in obedience to the rational will; so too the woman in Christian theology is called to be obedient to the man. In this way, the subjection of the body to the will in Christian spirituality is a mirror image of woman's subjection to man. It is telling, then, that according to Beatrice, "her soul cannot control her body," as her body vies for escape from the careful check of her mind by giving in to her "outbursts" that "disrupt" the careful control her mind has over her body.[116] In Richard's system, however, even the heroic masculinity of reason and the mind must ultimately be left behind in deification, because "love exceeds reason," and thus, in exceeding reason, exceeds masculinity.[117]

Annihilation in Beatrice's *Seven Ways of Minne*

The Seven Ways by Beatrice of Nazareth is one of the oldest works of prose written in Middle Dutch.[118] For many years, the author of the surviving manuscripts was

[114] Stevens, "Christian Lovesickness," 23.
[115] Stevens, 23.
[116] Barr, "The Secret Chamber of Her Mind," 228.
[117] Stevens, "Christian Lovesickness," 23.
[118] Joanna Dunham OCSO, trans., *The Minne Journey: Beatrice of Nazareth's "Seven Ways of Minne." Mystical Process and Mystagogical Implications*, ed. Jos Huls (Leuven, Paris, Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2013),1.

unknown, and even caused speculation that perhaps Hadewijch of Brabant was the author.[119] It wasn't until a researcher for the Ruusbroec Society discovered Beatrice's *Vita,* which included a shorter version of *The Seven Ways* in Latin, that the authorship could finally be attributed to Beatrice.[120] Written near the end of her life, this treatise contains unmistakably Cistercian themes, such as self-knowledge of one's creation in the image and likeness of God. In Cistercian spirituality, it is only in "abandoning ourselves to the love of God" that we are "transformed into His likeness."[121] In other words, to find oneself, one must not be afraid to lose oneself in the abyss of love. Beatrice's understanding of deification is also uniquely Cistercian in its flavor, as her understanding of deification is intimately intertwined with her understanding of the Incarncation. Else Marie Wiberg Pederson summarizes that "Analogicallly, she stresses the soteriological point that God through this birth has incarnated himself for humankind's salvation, that he has made himself human in order that human creatures may become god-like."[122] For Beatrice, once she has "reached the level where such boundaries as sex do not exist," then "the authorization to teach, reflect, and write on theological and spiritual matters, that she cannot get from the Church she gets directly from the triune God, in whose image and likeness she was created."[123] In *becoming like* God, Beatrice positions herself authoritatively to be able to *speak about* God. For many medieval women like Beatrice, deification (and the move beyond the feminine self) is equal parts spiritual reality and rhetorical device for leveraging credibility, and for resisting the marginalization of her

[119] Dunham, 1.
[120] Dunham, 1.
[121] Dunham, 11.
[122] Else Marie Wiberg Pedersen, "Image of God – Image of Mary – Image of Woman: On the Theology and Spirituality of Beatrice of Nazareth," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 2, (1994), 213.
[123] Pedersen, 220.

voice in the face of the Inquisition. Thus, according to Hollywood, Beatrice had a "desire for a shortcut to perfection in her attempt to return to that state in which she was before she was created."[124] Pedersen describes this desire to return to her uncreated state as a "recreation of her soul, which also means the union of her soul with the uncreated, eternal and true God." [125] Once created with a specific body that is gendered, Beatrice's soul seeks the annihilation of itself as it is swallowed up in *Minne*, ultimately being recreated in Christ through a deification that is altogether above gender. What's interesting, however, is that the very God that Beatrice is striving for union and likeness with is described with feminine nouns – God is *misericordia*, *clementia*, *dilectio*, *consolatio*, and *gratia*.[126]

Unlike the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux and the established hallmarks of bridal mysticism as a genre, Beatrice only uses the term "bride" and "bridegroom" in her treatise one time each – as though she is purposely avoiding association with that tradition of texts, while still appreciating the utility of bridal imagery.[127] Pedersen notes that "One cannot preclude the possibility that Beatrice's avoidance of gender-specific terms and choice of gender-free or gender-transcending terms could be interpreted as a *modus vivendi* in relation to the post-gregorian theology of ministry that deprived women of still more rights."[128] While sparing in her bridal imagery, Beatrice is completely silent regarding images of the Fall, especially for a writer who is centrally concerned with the themes of creation and recreation. Beatrice "never discusses the question of male

[124] Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia,* 198.
[125] Pedersen, "Image of God," 213.
[126] Pedersen, 213.
[127] Pedersen, 212-213.
[128] Pedersen, 219-220.

superiority versus female inferiority in the order of creation and salvation, or any distribution of guilt."[129] This illustrates that Beatrice is not interested in assigning blame to femininity specifically, and thus, her desires for self-annihilation do not strike the reader as particularly gendered. She is not annihilating the feminine in any sort of blatant way, as Richard of St. Victor seems to be doing. While she does refer to her own soul as feminine, Beatrice refrains from using the "weak woman" literary conventions and rhetorical moves that were so prevalent in her female contemporaries.[130]

Beatrice's spiritual journey is conveyed through the progression of seven manners or ways that love moves within the soul. Here, love as *Minne* becomes a dynamic, all-encompassing concept that can refer to love in general, the love of God for his creation, God-as-love, the love within the soul for God, and eventually, even the soul itself that is united in God-as-love. As Hollywood explains, "at times it becomes impossible to distinguish between the soul's love for God and God as love, marking the absorption of the soul into the divine."[131] In the first way, one experiences a desire that proceeds from God to acquire the virtues of purity, nobility, and freedom in order to fully realize the soul's identity as the image of God.[132] The soul seems to experience a kind of boldness at this stage, demanding of God the way of perfection so that the soul can become like God.[133] The soul, therefore, must "exert itself strenuously here" in order to [obtain] such a state of being from God."[134] The soul also seems to be exclusively referred to as feminine in this stage.

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[129] Pedersen, 215.
[130] Pedersen, 217-218.
[131] Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia,* 199.
[132] Dunham*, The Minne Journey,* 21-23.
[133] Dunham*,* 23.
[134] Dunham*,* 25.

The second way of *Minne* is about serving the Lord without a "why."[135] The soul here is referred to as a lady who is a servant of a great Lord. The lady does not need to understand why she needs to perform her tasks – she just does it out of devotion to her Lord. This kind of service comes "only out of intense love / and without any reward."[136]

The third way is the experience of pain, as the soul is in "total service / in complete obedience, / and in unqualified submission to *Minne*."[137] The goal of this way (and hence, the source of the soul's pain) is the violent desire "to endure everything and to bear everything / …to satisfy *Minne*, / sparing nothing and without measure."[138] The most painful part of the experience is the soul's feeling that it will never do enough for *Minne*. The realization for the need for deification in the soul occurs when the soul concedes "that doing this / exceeds human capacity / and is beyond its power."[139] This experience for the soul is so painful that it becomes a kind of living death – even a living hell.[140]

In the fourth way of *Minne*, the soul experiences an oscillation between great delight and great sorrow. In this stage, the soul is described as being "wholly and completely vanquished by *Minne*."[141] Union with *Minne* eventually occurs through a vivid process of being "in" *Minne*, then "deeply submerged" and "swallowed up" by *Minne*, before it "has completely become *Minne*."[142] The different attributes of *Minne* acting upon the soul are given different verbs, as the soul is "consumed," "submerged,"

[135] Dunham, 27.
[136] Dunham, 27.
[137] Dunham, 29.
[138] Dunham, 31.
[139] Dunham, 31.
[140] Dunham, 33.
[141] Dunham, 35.
[142] Dunham, 37.

"swallowed…up," "embraced," "adorned," and "drawn…on high" by *Minne's* beauty, power, sweetness, righteousness, nobility, purity, and highness, respectively.[143] This process of union with *Minne* where one eventually "becomes" *Minne* is described as an annihilation or torturous death.[144] The "body collapses, / its heart melts away, / and all its strength is reduced to nothing" as it is "vanquished" by *Minne*, reminiscent of the violence of Richard of St. Victor's depiction of love.[145]

In the fifth way, *Minne* moves the soul to acts of charity, while *Minne* threatens to "break the heart with violence."[146] While *Minne* sometimes arouses strength and vigor in this stage, at other times, *Minne* becomes, once again, the source of one's misery, to the point that "the soul thinks / that its heart is wounded time and time again / and that every day the sounds become more aggravated / in painful sorrow / and new presence."[147] The body also experiences a very real somatic agony, as the soul recognizes that it's body's blood vessels feel as though they are bursting, and that the blood is literally boiling within one's veins – melting the bone marrow and causing a sensation of burning in one's chest. The throat feels parched, and one can physically feel the heat of love inside their body.[148] Like Richard, Beatrice describes the love in this stage as "violent."[149] There is a "shooting pain" and "devouring fire" within the body, as love "consumes" the body, "torments" it, and "wounds" it.[150] In a sudden turn of events, however, Beatrice notes

[143] Dunham, 37.
[144] Dunham, 39.
[145] Dunham, 39.
[146] Dunham, 39.
[147] Dunham, 43.
[148] Dunham, 43.
[149] Dunham, 43.
[150] Dunham, 45.

that "what most / provokes [the body] and wounds it / is also what most / heals it and pacifies it."[151]

In the sixth way, the soul is referred to as a bride.[152] Now that the soul is a bride, *Minne* has taken full power over it, and the soul no longer offers any opposition to *Minne,* as *Minne* is like an eager husband enjoying the spoils of his wedding night.[153] It is now "effortless" for the soul to practice *Minne*, and in rhetorical move that reverses the roles and genders, *Minne* has now become like a housewife due to the steadiness, stability, and peace enduring in this stage.[154] Instead of associating *Minne* with destructive forces upon the soul, in the sixth way, *Minne* "guides," "orders," "protects," and "guards" the soul.[155] However, it is clear that the soul has still not achieved full union with *Minne*, as *Minne* hides its full "tremendousness" from the soul until the soul progresses and becomes "tremendouse" itself.[156]

It is in the seventh way that the reader sees the achievement of full deification, as the soul is "drawn / above its human nature in *Minne*, / and above its human senses and reason."[157] Curiously, in a move away from the Victorine tradition, Beatrice does not portray the annihilation of senses and reason as being a progression from the lower powers to the higher, but annihilates them both simultaneously, in one fell swoop. It is possible that Beatrice is subtly placing the feminine and masculine on a level playing field, as both must be annihilated in *Minne*, as *Minne* is altogether exalted above sex. In Beatrice's model, there is no advantage to approaching *Minne* from a masculine ego

[151] Dunham, 47.
[152] Dunham, 47.
[153] Dunham, 49.
[154] Dunham, 49.
[155] Dunham, 51.
[156] Dunham, 53.
[157] Dunham, 55.

rather than a feminine ego. All egos must be dissolved in *Minne*, until nothing but *Minne* remains. Pedersen notes, "a careful study of Beatrice's text does not reveal her to have any specific image of woman apart from man. Beatrice unfolds her theology without linking it to any definite understanding of 'the feminine' or 'the masculine.'"[158]

The soul then enjoys the eternity where *Minne* resides, as "it is exalted / above human ways in *Minne* / and above its own nature."[159] It is at this point (since literal, bodily death has not actually occurred) that the world is now perceived as "a great exile for the soul."[160] As a result, in echoing Richard of St. Victor, the soul "often says, / with an aching heart, / what the apostle said: 'Cupio dissolvi et esse cum Christo.' / That is: / 'I desire to be [destroyed] / and to be with Christ.'"[161] In the words of Hollywood, it is here that we see "a return of mad love and the soul's desire to be fully absorbed into God, a desire that can only be fulfilled by death."[162]

[158] Pedersen, "Image of God," 217.
[159] Dunham, *The Minne Journey,* 59.
[160] Dunham, 61.
[161] Dunham, 63.
[162] Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia,* 199.

Chapter IV.

The Death of Reason: Marguerite Porete

Very little is known about the life of Marguerite Porete outside of her status as a beguine, and her eventual trial and execution in Paris in 1310.[163] In 1308, Marguerite and her vocal defender, Guiard de Cressonessart, were imprisoned under the Inquisitor, William of Paris.[164] Though imprisoned under the indictment of excommunication since 1308, the case against them was not organized until March of 1310.[165] Other than the vocal support of her fellow-condemned heretic Guiard, Marguerite's status as a beguine left her without any sort of establishment in place (such as a religious order) to protect her against the charges of the inquisition. Thus, as Maria Lichtmann points out, Marguerite's trial is a chilling example of "head-to-head combat between a noncredentialled, nonacademic mystic and the scholastic theologians at Paris."[166] While noncredentialled, Marguerite was clearly perceived as a very real, institutional threat, and "as religious experience becomes more defiant of boundaries, it becomes less conceptual and systematic and more free to explode the old scholastic categories of thought."[167] Because of her refusal to debate theology using their frameworks of understanding, the

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[163] Ellen L. Babinsky, trans., *Marguerite Porete: The Mirror of Simple Souls,* The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 5.
[164] Babinsky*,* 20.
[165] Babinsky*,* 20-21.
[166] Maria Lichtmann, "Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart: The Mirror of Simple Souls Mirrored," in *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete,* ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1997), 66.
[167] Lichtmann, 67.

inquisitors did not have the perceived upper-hand that they were used to wielding due to their educational prowess.

Prior to her arrest in 1308, Marguerite had been commanded by the inquisitor to appear before the commission multiple times, but she kept refusing to appear.[168] Once she was forcibly brought before William's commission in 1308, she refused to swear the oath that was required of her, leading to her year-and-a-half imprisonment over charges of major excommunication.[169] Between 1308 and 1310, Marguerite was given several opportunities to accept the absolution that was being offered her by William, as long as she would relent and swear the oath. She refused -- and thus, the proceedings against her began in April of 1310.[170]

The canon lawyers consulted by William of Paris found her to be "contumacious, rebellious, and deserving to be condemned as a heretic and to be given over to the secular authorities unless she should repent immediately before or after the sentence," in which case she would be granted life imprisonment rather than execution.[171] After the threat of death was apparent, Guiard ultimately took the oath and confessed to heresy.[172] Marguerite, however, persisted.

On April 11, William of Paris gathered 21 theologians to judge the content of Marguerite's book. While unusual that such a large commission of theologians was called to analyze the text, William acknowledged that he had a hurdle to overcome. Godfrey of Fontaines, a highly respected doctor at the University of Pairs, had already

[168] Babinsky*, Marguerite Porete: The Mirror of Simple Souls,* 21.
[169] Babinsky*,* 21.
[170] Babinsky*,* 21.
[171] Babinsky*,* 21.
[172] Babinsky*,* 21.

judged Marguerite's book to be sound – though complicated and potentially misleading for the general public to read.[173] Nevertheless, the 21 commissioners judged that 15 extracted articles were heretical, and as a result, the book as a whole should be deemed heretical.[174] Unfortunately for Marguerite, the theologians on the commission were never given her text in its entirety. Rather, these 15 passages were pulled from the text in isolation and given to the inquisitors.[175] Predictably, what the commission had a problem with is the fact that Marguerite's system "bypasses appeal to any sacerdotal (that is, male) intermediary such as a priest or confessor."[176] Additionally, they were troubled by her charge that "the soul annihilated in love of the Creator, without blame of conscience or remorse, can and ought to concede to nature whatever it seeks and desires."[177] However, what the commission seemed to ignore was Marguerite's clear belief that, "This will not lead to sin, however, for the Soul is so transformed into divine Love that everything she requires is innocent."[178] Hollywood explains that at this point in Porete's spirituality, "the law is so internalized that she can give to nature anything it wants and all that it wants will be licit."[179] The problem for the inquisitors, however, is that "they are unable to conceive of reason outside of those forms embodied by the institution of the church itself."[180] Another source of contention in *The Mirror* was Marguerite's insistence that once the Soul is united to Love, it then becomes the mistress of the virtues, and virtues live to serve the soul, rather than the Soul serving virtue.[181] For Marguerite,

[173] Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia,* 136.
[174] Babinsky*, Marguerite Porete: The Mirror of Simple Souls,* 22.
[175] Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia,* 136.
[176] Chance, *The Literary Subversions of Medieval Women,* 65.
[177] Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia,* 135.
[178] Hollywood, 141.
[179] Hollywood, 143.
[180] Hollywood*,* 143.
[181] Hollywood, 140.

"the greatest suffering a creature could suffer…would be to live in Love and to be still in obedience to the Virtues."[182] Ultimately, this union with Love leads to an authority that bypasses the hierarchal Church, and this inner authority empowered Marguerite to live boldly on the margins. Lichtmann summarizes: "Marguerite's Beguine spirituality was thus both vernacular and lay, a deliberate move away from the center and towards the margins. Hers became a mysticism of the margins, which yet laid claim to authenticity and spoke with the authority of its own experience."[183]

On May 9, 1310, the Inquisition found Marguerite Porete guilty of relapsed heresy, as she had maintained her silence, refused to answer questions, and refused to take the oath of the Inquisitor.[184] They also noted that Marguerite had continued to spread the text of her book after she had been commanded to cease by the Bishop of Cambrais.[185] On May 31, 1310, Marguerite and Guiard were officially condemned by William of Paris. Guiard, since he repented, was sentenced to life in prison, while Marguerite was handed over to be executed.[186] She was burned at the stake the next day, June 1, 1310, at the Place de Grève in Paris.[187] At the scene of Marguerite's demise, reports by those who witnessed it relay a scene that seems to mirror the death of Joan of Arc a century later, as many tears were shed and hearts were moved by the way Marguerite carried herself with such dignity and silence at the moment of her death.[188]

While the Inquisition's intention was to wipe the disgraced heretic's memory from the face of the earth for all posterity, many later thinkers and movements were

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[182] Babinsky, *Marguerite Porete: The Mirror of Simple Souls,* 86.
[183] Lichtmann, "Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart," 69.
[184] Babinsky, *Marguerite Porete: The Mirror of Simple Souls,* 23.
[185] Babinsky, 23.
[186] Babinsky, 23.
[187] Babinsky, 5.
[188] Babinsky, 5.

seemingly inspired by *The Mirror.* She (unknowingly) inspired the movement known as the Free Spirit heresy, and the Dominican Meister Eckhart's controversial thoughts on union with God are strikingly similar to Porete's.[189] To this day, there is much scholarly debate surrounding the assessment of Porete's heresy versus orthodoxy.[190]

The chronicler of Marguerite's trial and execution, William of Nangis, famously labels Marguerite, the condemned heretic, a *"pseudo-mulier"* – a sham of a woman.[191] Initially, one may be shocked at this indictment – as, in some ways, Marguerite responded in a way that could be characterized as *ultra-femme*: she ultimately submitted silently to her execution and death at the hands of the Church. However, her stubbornness and disobedience is likely what disturbed her male contemporaries. According to Barbara Newman, women tended towards one of two different tropes in this period: they either fit the bill of the virgin, modeling the Virgin Mary herself, or they fit the image of the *virago* – the virile woman.[192] The virago is treated as "an honorary male, aspiring to the unisex ideal, while the virgin aspired to a highly gendered ideal embodied in the Virgin Mary."[193] Marguerite, then, appears to be the dark shadow of the virago – a woman who uses her masculine boldness for disobedience against the Church.

Annihilation in *The Mirror of Simple Souls*

For around six centuries, the book seemed to have been successfully destroyed by the inquisition, until it was rediscovered by Romana Guarnieri in 1946 in Latin at the

[189] Babinsky*,* 5.
[190] Babinsky*,* 5.
[191] Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia*, 135.
[192] Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist,* 5.
[193] Newman, 5.

Vatican.[194] Further study proved that the book was not wiped out at all during the Middle Ages – in fact, it was copied and translated many times – albeit anonymously.[195] In its essence, Marguerite's treatise *The Mirror of Simple Souls* is, according to Petroff, a journey about "the return of the soul to its true nature, becoming God in God."[196] In this journey, the soul goes through seven stages, with three deaths permeated throughout the treatise: the death of sin, of nature, and of the spirit.[197] It is an allegorical dialogue between Love, Soul, Reason, and other more minor characters on the topic of what Marguerite calls "the annihilated soul."[198] Love represents the Divine, and is the primary authoritative figure in the text, while the Soul oscillates between what Marguerite calls "encumbered" and "unemcumbered" states.[199] For the Soul to truly become unencumbered, the Soul must embrace its total nothingness compared to Love, rather than being like those who "believe that they can attain salvation through their prayers, fasts, vigils – even their extraordinary experiences of divine Love."[200]

Reason serves as the main interlocutor with Love, and is portrayed as being rather simple and oblivious, constantly misunderstanding Love's explanations, and failing to pick-up on Love's double meanings. Thus, in an ultimate sense, "Reason must die if the Soul is to apprehend and become one with divine Love."[201] Allegorically, this could be read as Marguerite's charge against men in general – that men, rejecting their passions

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[194] Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia,* 136-137.
[195] Hollywood, 137.
[196] Petroff, *Body and Soul,* 15.
[197] Amy Hollywood, "Suffering Transformed: Marguerite Porete, Meister Eckhart, and the Problem of Women's Spirituality," in *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete,* ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1997), .
[198] Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia*, 133.
[199] Hollywood, 133.
[200] Hollywood, 141.
[201] Hollywood, 133.

(associated with femininity) in the name of Reason (associated with masculinity), are blinding themselves from the true wisdom that Love requires in order to understand Beatrice's book. Unless men die to Reason – die to themselves – they will not understand her book. We see this drama play out during Marguerite's trial, as the reasonable theologians ask her again and again, like simple-minded Reason in the dialogue, what her true meaning is. Marguerite, in her loftiness, remains silent – as if indicting the men of being unable to understand her explanation, anyways. In the beginning of her treatise, Marguerite lays out a warning: "Theologians and other clerks, / You will not have the intellect for it, / No matter how brilliant your abilities."[202] As Grace M. Jantzen surmises, Marguerite serves as a "dangerous [memory]" that Church history seeks to repress, as "women have indeed been speaking, women have been naming the divine and finding their own subjectivities; but men have refused to listen."[203]

Marguerite's silence at her trial can also be read as critique of her accusers in that "those who will attain the state of simplicity and freedom recognize each other without words."[204] Thus, in being misunderstood in her silence, Marguerite is condemning her accusers to judgment as well – the judgment that they have not yet reached the state of comprehending her freedom and simplicity. They do not recognize freedom and simplicity because they do not *have* it – they are still encumbered souls. Ultimately, it is telling that one of her twelve names for Love is "The Not Understood," and "Her last

[202] Lichtmann, "Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart," 68.
[203] Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Publishing, 1999), 183.
[204] Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia*, 144.

name is: Oblivion, Forgotten," as Marguerite's memory is forced into temporary oblivion by her Inquisitors, in their attempt to destroy her, her book, and her legacy.[205]

While Marguerite does not talk about gender explicitly in her treatise, it is telling that all of the main interlocutors of her courtly dialogue are female. "Externally, the notion of 'gender,' insofar as Marguerite entertained such a notion, was not a matter of traits or of social roles, but of the prophetic possibility of dissent from and subversion of the predominant patriarchal order."[206] The only explicitly male character in Porete's treatise is FarNear, who comes to represent the Trinity. Michael Sells argues: "Though Love is female and FarNear is male, though Love speaks and FarNear holds his peace, in the work within the annihilated soul they are one," achieving a sort of divine androgyny in the Soul.[207]

Newman describes the annihilated soul as being "a naught in the infinitude of God."[208] The Soul is truly annihilated once it has abandoned and surrendered its reason, will, and affection. Then, and only then, can the reader hope to arrive at a proper understanding of Marguerite's text.[209] In her list of criteria for annihilation, Porete explains that the soul, which is saved by faith and not works, "is only in love," "does nothing for God," "leaves nothing for God to do," "cannot be taught," "from whom nothing can be taken…or given," and "has no will," must then be united to the All in the absence of all.[210] The soul is defined with this nothingness and simultaneous allness. [211]

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[205] Babinsky*, Marguerite Porete: The Mirror of Simple Souls,* 88.
[206] Lichtmann, "Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart," 75.
[207] Michael Sells, "The Pseudo-Woman and the Meister: 'Unsaying' and Essentialism," in *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete,* ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1997), 118.
[208] Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist,* 12.
[209] Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia*, 137.
[210] Hollywood, 138.
[211] Hollywood, 138.

As long as the Soul truly learns to long for nothing, then the Soul can experience being alone with God, without the self. For Marguerite, this is described as true freedom – the complete loss and annihilation of the self, to the point where one is forgetful of the self. Freedom is then lost when one is once again conscious of the self.[212] Marguerite explains: "There the free soul 'lives and remains and was and will be without any being'…'where she was before she was.'"[213] There is a clear parallel in desire to Beatrice of Nazareth, who also longed for the state she had with God before she was created. This state of primordial void is captured in Marguerite's "pervasive concept of nothingness, *le nient*, is a metaphor of the primal maternal ground of being and seedbed of all possibilities."[214] Thus, "the annihilated soul returns to her precreated state."[215] In this way, Love declares, it is most fitting that the Soul is destined to be conformed to the deity, because the Soul retained her "true form" from God, which was given to her "without beginning" from the God who loves the Soul.[216] Also, like Beatrice, Marguerite's vision for the trajectory of the Soul can only be completed after bodily death. While three of the deaths referred to in *The Mirror* are purely spiritual, there are another seven modes of being only available after bodily death and the Beatific Vision in eternity.[217] Early on in the Soul's journey, "She no longer wants anything which comes by a mediary," suggesting that any earthly, and hence mediated, experience of Love will never be enough to satisfy the earthbound Soul.[218] Only death can satisfy the Soul.

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[212] Hollywood, 139.
[213] Hollywood, 139.
[214] Lichtmann, "Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart," 73.
[215] Hollywood, "Suffering Transformed," 104.
[216] Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia*, 139.
[217] Hollywood, 139.
[218] Babinsky, *Marguerite Porete: The Mirror of Simple Souls,* 83.

Chapter V.

The Holy Death Wish: Margaret Ebner

Margaret Ebner was born around 1291 in Donauwörth to a noble family that was politically prominent and actively involved in the life of the city.[219] At fifteen years old, Margaret entered the nearby Dominican convent. By all accounts, her parents seemed supportive of her decision, as Margaret was one of several relatives who had joined the Dominicans.[220] Not much is known about Ebner's early life, as (by her own account) she believed that she did not have adequate knowledge of herself for the first 20 years of her life – thus, she did not feel the need to record anything from that period.[221]

In February of 1312, Margaret was overcome by a mysterious illness that caused her to suffer greatly until 1325.[222] While she would enjoy intermittent period of recovery, her suffering would always return – renewing itself with a vengeance. She endured this inexplicable illness for the rest of her life. Yet, those around her noted that "at the same time interior consolations, happiness, and enlightenment increased, so that despite the meticulous descriptions of all her painful conditions, Margaret shines forth as a character of great veracity and increasing spiritual power and ability to love."[223] Throughout the years, she spent periods of time completely bedridden, with another nun in the convent taking care of her. The eventual illness and death of Margaret's friend and

[219]Hindsley, *Margaret Ebner: Major Works,* 12.
[220]Hindsley, 12.
[221]Hindsley, 15.
[222]Hindsley, 13.
[223]Hindsley, 13-14.

caretaker was one of the greatest emotional hurdles in Margaret's life, and she expresses her despair over the loss of this sister in great detail.[224]

It is shortly after this devastating loss that Margaret first meets the man who would become her dearest friend, Confessor, and spiritual confidant: the secular priest, Henry of Nördlingen in 1332.[225] At this point in her life, Margaret was around 41 years old, and was extremely depressed and withdrawn. It seems that Henry was sent to counsel Margaret in her depressed state, and the two immediately kindled a friendship that would last for the rest of Margaret's life, as "in Henry she had found [a] spiritual partner."[226] Despite their differences, the two seem to have remained on good terms for the duration of Ebner's life. In a time of great political turmoil and the constant threat (and actualization) of war, Margaret and Henry occasionally found themselves on opposite sides of the skirmish, with Margaret supporting the Emperor, and Henry backing the pope.[227] Yet, their friendship remained unruffled.

What is known of Margaret's life can be pieced together through the collection of letters between Margaret and Henry, her spiritual autobiography, *Revelations,* and her *Pater Noster.*[228] Arguably, were it not for Henry's insistence, Margaret may have never undertaken the task of writing her *Revelations.* In an interesting turn of events for an era that is littered with hagiographies, Margaret attempted to convince Henry to write her biography for her, showing no interest in the project herself. In an unusual act of ecclesiastical restraint, Henry refused, and insisted that Ebner should write about her

[224]Hindsley, 15.
[225]Hindsley, 15.
[226]Hindsley, 15.
[227]Hindsley, 14.
[228]Hindsley, 10.

experience from her own perspective.[229] As a result, the manuscript that the reader is left with today is raw, honest, and at times, disjointed. However, the authenticity of its authorship shines forth in Ebner's simple, unadorned writing style that some criticize as being dry and overly repetitive.[230] Her frequent grammatical errors speak to the genuine effort it took for her to compose, and perhaps explains her desire for Henry to write it for her.[231] For a mystical account from this period, it offers the reader an unfiltered look into the mind of a female mystic, without the flourishes of a formal hagiography.

After a life littered with illness, pain, and the ebbs and flows of extreme spiritual joy and sorrow, Margaret Ebner died around the age of 60 on June 20, 1351.[232] Unlike Marguerite Porete, Ebner enjoyed what seems to be immediate popular support for canonization after her death. Her fellow nuns dedicated a chapel in the convent to Margaret immediately upon her passing, and even erected a special tomb for her, apart from the other sisters.[233] The popular piety surrounding the cult of the Dominican Margaret Ebner culminated in the declaration of her official status as "Blessed" in Rome on February 24, 1979.[234] As of yet, she has not been declared a Saint.

Annihilation in the *Revelations* of Margaret Ebner

In 1344, Henry of Nördlingen managed to convince Margaret Ebner to begin writing her spiritual autobiography.[235] The content of her *Revelations* spans the years

[229]Hindsley, 11.
[230]Hindsley, 12.
[231]Hindsley, 12.
[232]Hindsley, 15.
[233]Hindsley, 15.
[234]Hindsley, 10.
[235]Hindsley, 11.

1312-1348.[236] In it, her inner life is revealed, "expressing a bridal and passion mysticism coordinated to the liturgy of the church year."[237] She explores many themes throughout the years of her life, including her numerous experiences of inner conversion, gifts from God and moments of grace amidst the near-constant presence of illness, details on her relationships with her sisters in the convent, with Henry, and with her religious Superiors, her veneration for the Saints of old and the souls suffering in purgatory, and the firsthand accounts of her many mystical experiences.[238]

One cannot help but notice, however, that there are two very different pictures of Margaret that emerge in the narrative. One side of Margaret comes across as timid, sentimental, fragile, and ultra-feminine while the other side of Margaret strikes the reader as emboldened, authoritative, and even prophetic in a strikingly masculine way. At times throughout their letters, Henry seems to catch on to this shifting in cadence, as he at one time exclaimed: "Your prophetic voice makes me speechless. Therefore, instead of any speech, I thank God for the heavenly treasure which he has granted to us through you and will grant us even more."[239] This voice of prophetic authority seems to come directly from God, as Margaret details one vision where she saw "ambassadors" from God carrying a large document with golden seals.[240] She then says: "Power was to be granted to me, which I might give to anyone whom I wished on earth and also in purgatory."[241] It is shortly after this that Margaret's spiritual response is to conform herself to the body of the crucified Jesus, reflecting: "I desired that my whole body would be full of the signs of

[236]Hindsley, 11.
[237]Hindsley, 11.
[238]Hindsley, 11.
[239]Hindsley, 36.
[240]Hindsley, 95.
[241]Hindsley, 95.

love of the holy cross."[242] This desire for physical suffering results in an inner annihilation of her happiness: "I experienced immeasurable sorrow often thinking, 'I can never be happy again.'"[243] It is then that Jesus appears to her, but a full reversal of genders has occurred. While Margaret desires to take on the beaten, suffering, bleeding, and male body of Christ, Christ appears to Margaret like a nursing mother, while Margaret nurses eagerly from his breast: "my Lord Jesus Christ bent down from the cross and let me kiss His open heart and gave me to drink of the blood flowing from His heart."[244] This is but one example of the complexity with which gender serves as a fluid image for spiritual encounter in Margaret's visionary experiences. While many are quick to describe Ebner's spirituality as traditionally feminine and bridal, Henry occasionally attributed masculine attributes to her, calling Margaret "the penetrating truth of God…in me."[245]

What is even more complicated and intricate is analyzing Margaret's desire for annihilation in tandem with her fluid gender-shifting imagery. Early on in her reflections, Margaret admits to longing for annihilation in order to be freed from the suffering of the present life. After the death of the nun who served as her caretaker, Margaret expresses: "I was anxious now to know where I should turn in order to flee from the whole world."[246] During bursts of intense emotional suffering, it seems that her only comfort is the thought of death. She mused: "Sometimes I think God will perhaps take me home from this world. To me that would be the most joyous death."[247] She even

[242]Hindsley, 95.
[243]Hindsley, 95.
[244]Hindsley, 95.
[245]Hindsley, 39.
[246]Hindsley, 92.
[247]Hindsley, 103.

goes so far as to remark, "At all times, I desire to die in His love."[248] For Margaret, her desire for self-annihilation is real, and embodied – she desires the physical, actual death of her body. During one of her several Lenten periods of suffering, the bodily pain alone was enough for her to long for death, as she reflected: "Until that time, I had never yet perceived true suffering in my whole life… it was so painful for me that I would have given myself up to death: indeed nothing in the world seemed more desirable and delightful to me than to die."[249]

On one particular Good Friday, towards the end of the *Revelations,* Margaret experienced the physical pains of the Passion. After feeling the invisible nails being driven through her hands, she notes: "I perceived the same painful brokenness in all my members especially on both sides and on my back, arms, and legs, so that it seemed to me I was in the last throes and that all this suffering would continue until death, if it were the will of God. I hoped for this, '*cupio dissolvi*.' …I fainted from the bitter suffering that was upon me."[250] Like Beatrice of Nazareth, Margaret seems to couple the desire for annihilation with an inner conformity to the Will of God in place of her own will, as not long after this spiritual death, God addresses Margaret: "Give me all your will, then I can prepare a place for you."[251] In Margaret's ecstatic union with God, His presence becomes so all-pervasive – becomes her very being. She could not escape His presence, even if she tried. In her self-annihilation, even the absence of God becomes full of His

[248]Hindsley, 111.
[249]Hindsley, 113.
[250]Hindsley, 157.
[251]Hindsley, 159.

presence. Margaret once reflected: "Even at the thought of hell I have no fear because the presence of God could be as little taken from me there as in heaven."[252]

Hollywood points out how meticulously Ebner shows how her meditative practice leads to incorporation in her bodily experiences, saying she "explicitly articulates the way in which her intense meditation on Christ's Passion leads to her inability *not* to see, hear, and feel Christ's Passion and ultimately to experience it in and on her own body."[253] Instead of this being problematic for Ebner's gender, Hollywood notes that "this cross-gender identification" could actually suggest "a gender fluidity that renders culturally plausible the valorization of women's suffering bodies."[254] Hollywood then points out that some men seemed to discourage this kind of spirituality in women – arguing that they should not transgress gender boundaries by identifying with Christ, but should identify more closely with Mary, the Virgin, watching at the foot of the Cross.[255] I would argue, however, that Ebner's approach to Christ crucified does not seem to be an explicitly feminine approach, where she is consciously taking on the nature of Christ with a female body – but seems to be an identification that is altogether free of the concept of gender – at least on an explicitly conscious level. Ebner, in these instances, seems completely forgetful of her "female" identity as a category of thought, perhaps due to her years of meditation on self-annihilation.

Despite the pressures in Margaret's environment that pushed for an explicitly feminine spirituality in a particularly reproductive way (such as encouraging women in

[252]Hindsley, 108.
[253]Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia,* 246-247.
[254]Hollywood*,* 247.
[255]Hollywood*,* 247.

cloisters to have physical dolls of the infant Christ, complete with ornate baby cribs),[256] Margaret's desire to assimilate the body of Christ seems to be an image where the concept of gender is left behind – at least for a moment. While at times known for having somatic experience of feeling as though she is pregnant with Christ, where Margaret comes to embody the Virgin Mary,[257] Margaret's approach to the crucified God and assimilation of his crucified flesh is strangely silent on the issue of physical sex.

[256]Caroline Walker Bynum, *Dissimilar Similitudes: Devotional Objects in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2020), 71.
[257]Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell,* 226.

Chapter VI.

Conclusion

Since the 1980s, there has been a noticeable resurgence in the scholarship surrounding medieval women's mystical texts and the kinds of conclusions that can be drawn about women from the period by reading such texts. In many ways, the foray of scholarship tends toward one of two groups: either female mystical writers were writing texts that colluded with the misogynistic trends of the patriarchal establishment of the Catholic Church, or they were writing texts that were purposely subversive – thus effectively creating a new genre of literature with its own world of devices, images, topoi, and patterns. However, a close reading of certain texts shows that there are certainly many female mystical writers who do not fall neatly into either category, and that their texts are far more nuanced than one would initially suppose. The void in the scholarship produced up until this point requires a subtler way of looking at medieval women's mystical writings. By analyzing the tension between the themes of annihilation-of-self and assertion-of-self in these writings, new patterns emerge, blurring the lines between collusion and subversion. Many seem to overlook the possibility that some of these women were trying to operate within a hermeneutic of faith, resulting in genuine confusion and tension in their relationships with their own particularly sexed bodies, as their own affective and somatic experiences of life and the divine do not always line up neatly with what the Church desires of women. Through annihilation of the self in God, however, women may have been finding ways to assert a prophetic

authority within the bounds of a hermeneutic of faith, thus resisting a break or rupture from the established patriarchal Church and its theological traditions, while still progressing the theology of spirituality to be more inclusive of women's spiritual and embodied experiences.

What, then, is one to think of Marguerite Porete? In Marguerite, there is a clear case of someone who, whether intentionally or not, ruptured her relationship with the hierarchal Church. Is it possible for one to still argue in favor of a hermeneutic of good-faith, even with regards to women who have been condemned by the Church as bad-faith actors? The suffering of Marguerite Porete is a suffering that, in a sense, all who experience the mystical, the numinous, and the supernatural share – it is the pain of being grossly misunderstood in one's melancholy pursuit of the One who has been lost. Michel de Certeau captures this notion so beautifully:

> One sole being is lacking, and all is lacking. This new beginning orders a sequel of wanderings and pursuits. One suffers the pangs of absence because one suffers the pangs of the One…the absent one who is no longer in heaven nor on earth inhabits a strange third region (neither one nor the other). His 'death' has placed him in that limbo. Speaking in approximate terms, this is the region the mystic authors designate for us today.[258]

In this sense, the reader can learn to empathize with Margaret Ebner's longing for release from this confusing life where one is only afforded glimpses of that One who is desired above all else. In this agony, "they articulate…the foreignness of our own place, and therefore a desire to return to our native land."[259] The mystic, then, is the one who is perpetually misunderstood in her "wakeful awareness of nameless rumors, an infinity of

[258]Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable,* Michael B. Smith, trans., 1: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, Religion and Postmodernism (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 2.
[259]Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell,* 226.

the Other, the certainties of which, nights of the body, no longer had any points of reference on the level of signifiers."[260] In a land where there is no land and a time without time, the mystic wanders, until snatched out of the reverie by the immediacy of life in the body, within time, as a mortal. This central experience of mourning is one that transcends the categories of thought that orthodoxy maintains, and blurs the line between the Saints and the heretics. Until the desire for annihilation – the desire to be dissolved and to be with Christ – is satisfied, then the mystic must walk on a tightrope between binaries being held in constant tension: between heresy and doctrine, interior and exterior, female and male. What categories such as "heresy" reveal is the historical "repetition of the gesture of exclusion" for the sake of the illusion of homogeneity, belonging, and safety.[261] But, in a much more real sense, we must ask ourselves: is it even possible to really *exclude* someone who no longer considers themselves a citizen of this realm? Can these labels still hold with people who reject them as categories of thought? Some categories of thought appear to be so "natural" that we begin to tell ourselves that nature itself must have established them.[262] With Marguerite Porete, we must practice a close-reading of her silence for our answer.

While the loss of some female voices from history has been due to simple neglect, at other times, there seems to be a concerted effort to erase any traces of powerful women from the drama of human history.[263] It is this more insidious effort that makes our ability to listen to forgotten voices even more important. If Luce Irigaray is correct in her

[260]de Certeau, *Mystic Fable,* 6.
[261]de Certeau, 18.
[262]Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), xvii.
[263]Frances Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1992), 1.

assessment that mysticism requires the twofold movement of recognizing the difference of the other and simultaneously "overcoming boundaries between the self and that other,"[264] then perhaps, by definition, our act of reading and attempting to make the mystic "other" heard and seen and understood, participates in some small act of mysticism in itself. Are we not, also, trying to make some sort of contact with some "other" who is absent from our realm?—someone separated from us by many hundreds of years, whose voice we are still trying to hear, if only as a distorted echo?

In the annihilation of the self and conforming oneself to God's will, medieval women were able to approach God from the perspective of an androgynous, annihilated soul that leaves behind one's own will, desires, and even a consciousness of one's gender in union with the divine. There is a rival voice, however, to this annihilated voice – the voice of prophetic authority that comes after union with God. This prophetic authority comes as a natural response to annihilation of the self – as it is no longer the mystic speaking from the standpoint of their own will, but from the perspective of the divine will – from the perspective of their united will. This deified authority allowed women to assert credibility via their mystical union, rather than arguing on the grounds of justifying their own femininity. In Beatrice of Nazareth, one sees the simultaneous annihilation of the senses and reason, implying that the approach to God is not a progression from the feminine to the masculine, but from embodiment to pure spirit. In Marguerite Porete, we see the specific annihilation of the masculine essence of Reason in the pursuit of Love, acting as a passive critique of the male-dominated scholastic theology of the hierarchal Church. In Margaret Ebner, we are immersed in the occasional fluid gender-shifting of

[264]Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 5.

not only Ebner, but also Christ. While frequently cast as the typical bridal mystic, Ebner's passion mysticism often remains devoid of explicitly gendered images in her desire to assimilate the wounded body of Christ. What is clear is that the story of medieval mysticism is always more nuanced than a surface reading of the situation would suggest. These women live in the blurred territory that lies between collusion and subversion, demanding a more thorough exploration of their lives and experiences as we push toward a more inclusive understanding of women in the Middle Ages.

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