

EMBODYING MYSTICISM: THE UTILIZATION OF EMBODIED EXPERIENCE IN  
THE MYSTICISM OF ITALIAN WOMEN, CIRCA 1200-1400 CE

By

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The purpose of this thesis is to examine the ways in which medieval women mystics gained agency and authorial voice in the face of social patriarchal domination through the practice of mysticism. I selected a cross section of women mystics over two centuries within the area of central Italy, including St. Clare of Assisi, the beatified Angela of Foligno, and St. Catherine of Siena. I employed a variety of methods in this study, including literary rhetorical critique, socio-historical critique, and essentialist feminist theory. I performed close readings of primary texts and I drew from feminist and social commentary in secondary works. With this multifaceted literary, historical, and feminist approach, I hope to expand the concepts of agency and mysticism in the medieval period.

The common strand linking Clare, Angela, and Catherine is their insistence on embodied mysticism, a mysticism that claims the body as a site for redemption. Despite the marginalized status of women within medieval society, these mystics were able to

recapture a sense of holiness and wholeness as they garnered and demanded equal authority based on their experiences of mystical union with God. Indeed, each of these women was an author, leaving behind monastic rules, spiritual and political letters, and rich mystical commentaries. Clare of Assisi fought throughout her life to have her rule, the *Forma Vitae*, approved, and she vocally and radically declared that ascetic poverty was a viable practice for religious women as well as men. Angela of Foligno recorded her mystical visions through contested dictation with her confessor, and her shocking public ecstasies defied the social norms of her era. Catherine of Siena adamantly claimed the status of a reformer called by God, and she produced hundreds of letters, a theological treatise, and counseled popes and ecclesiastics. All three of these women were writers, crafting their own interpretations of God and spiritual understandings. Yet, they also righted their marginalized status as women by claiming their bodies (rather than the institutional church) as the locus for knowledge and right experience with the Godhead. Through ascetic practice and embodied mysticism, Clare, Angela, and Catherine gained the perspective and authority to *write* and *right* themselves in the face of patriarchy.

CHAPTER 1  
GREETING THE AGENTS OF MYSTICISM: AN INTRODUCTION TO CLARE OF  
ASSISI, ANGELA OF FOLIGNO, AND CATHERINE OF SIENA

Mysticism calls us into its utterances and draws us into its web of ethereal relationship. Our fascination with mysticism may very well rest on its paradoxical nature, its double entendre of the wrenching inability to express the ineffable experience and its dynamic between ecstatic union and disparate separation. The medieval period has always held a particular fascination for me, perhaps because of its abundance of religious figures and myriad instances of mystical interpretations. Yet, perhaps this fascination stems from the idea that the medieval period seems so intensely and qualitatively different from our modern world, both in its heightened sense of spirituality and its stark treatment of women. Romana Guarnieri writes about the captivating characteristic of medieval society that captures the feminine imagination in the preface to *Angela of Foligno: Complete Works*.

Here was a period in which for the first time in history, throughout the whole Christian world, an incredible number of women, within a church that had imposed on them almost total silence, now came to the fore, speaking and writing with such authority that they could not be ignored . . . what happened was irreversible, even with all the incomprehension, misunderstanding, suffering, and persecution, which we are only now beginning to understand. Today, as a result of incisive and deep studies especially in the past ten [now twenty] years, we have discovered the immense historic importance of these events.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Lachance, trans. *Angela of Foligno* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 5-6.

This renewed drive to uncover the voices on the margins of medieval society has captured my interest and been translated into a continuous study of feminist elements in medieval mysticism.

With so many prominent and passionate voices to choose from, spanning many centuries and ranging from the challenges of lay Beguines, to anchoress Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*, to the influential work of Teresa of Avila, one may ask how I happened upon a connective study of an obscure Italian mystic and two canonized Italian saints. Upon looking into the mysticism of St. Clare of Assisi, I discovered several other daughters of mysticism, women born of privilege and comfort who had renounced wealth and security to partake in poverty and ascetic practice, trusting in the provision of God for both their spiritual and physical needs. Although these women were separated in time, they shared in a progressive theology and a sense of their transformative role in the social and spiritual conditions of their eras.

St. Clare of Assisi, born in 1193 and passing away in 1253, was a remarkable Franciscan devotee, founding mother of the order of the Poor Clares, and spiritual director.<sup>2</sup> Born in 1248 in Foligno, a tiny Umbrian town near Assisi, Angela of Foligno left a record of a remarkable thirty step journey to mystical union, devoted herself to the poor, and garnered a number of spiritual supplicants.<sup>3</sup> In nearby Siena, Catherine Benincasa was born in 1347 and led a full and prolific life, becoming a Dominican tertiary, serving as a spiritual and political mediator in the papal disputes of her day, and

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<sup>2</sup> Monica Furlong, *Visions and Longings* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1996), 117-119.

<sup>3</sup> Furlong, *Visions and Longings*, 148-149.

penning a theological treatise called the *Dialogue*.<sup>4</sup> These women mystics emerged from the two neighboring regions of Tuscany and Umbria in central Italy, and although they were temporally separated, their close spatial proximity allowed for the transmission of religious texts and the possibility of mutual influences.

The unitive thread in the narratives of Clare, Angela, and Catherine is one of embodiment, of both spiritual and physical presence in the mystical union with the Godhead. With a greater emphasis on embodied experience rather than high theology and institutionalized ritual, these women mystics challenged the church in its own household. Unlike the heretical independent lay groups outside of Italy, Clare, Angela, and Catherine embraced models of orthodoxy, such as their associations with recognized monastic orders, and as a result, they gained the space and authority to convey their unsettling convictions and assert themes of embodiment. Thus they both appropriated authority through their actions *and* challenged notions of identity through the writing of their bodies into mystical experience.

In addition to their emphasis on experiential knowledge of God (rather than theological or institutional), Clare, Angela, and Catherine all practiced *imitatio Christi* in real, grounded ways. Clare focused especially on extreme poverty in her imitation of Christ, and Angela and Catherine embraced the physicality of suffering through drinking the pus of the poor and ill. Their emphasis on raw, physical experience seems to be a particularly feminine medieval concern. Since women were largely denied access to theological treatises and were restricted in agency regarding church doctrine, because of their status and education, they turned to the only avenue available for them to gain

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<sup>4</sup> Furlong, *Visions and Longings*, 157-159.



interpretive authority. In fact, medieval women used their bodies and experiential knowledge gained through the Eucharist and mystical union to shape their own multifaceted spiritual understandings. In the case of Clare, Angela, and Catherine, these spiritual insights were compiled under the auspices of the Catholic Church within their respective orders, but their liberal interpretations of relationship to God and Christ allowed them to assert their own authority and claims to knowledge and sanctity.

I hope to illuminate yet another unitive thread that is found throughout the legacy of embodied mysticism, that of expanded possibilities of spiritual understanding. Although the dualisms of material/physical, body/spirit, female/male, bad/good was alive and well in the medieval period, the embodied mysticism of Clare, Angela, and Catherine seems to both dissolve and invert some of these dichotomies. Certainly, in their imitation of Christ and attuned sensory descriptions and visions, these women mystics were identifying more deeply with their socially marginalized bodies, sinking into their own physicality and mortality rather than attempting to transcend it. For these women, their bodies were not the restrictive prisons that medieval society deemed them to be. The mystical understandings of Clare, Angela, and Catherine found both joy and love in the grotesque body narrative of the passion *and* declared the redemptive power of their own bodies. The body was in fact a site of expansive opportunity to subvert and erase duality, and to experience heightened, nuanced understandings of the sacred, the soul, and of life.

Embodied mysticism allowed these women to find several redemptive strategies, permitting healing, realized redemption through identification with the body of Christ, their own bodies, and the body of humanity. Furthermore, embodied mysticism allowed Clare, Angela, and Catherine to express images of Christ in multifaceted, multigendered

ways, each of them touching on images of Christ as erotic lover, nursing mother, innocent child, and androgynous companion. Instead of merely inverting patriarchy by declaring Christ female, they somewhat subverted medieval patriarchy and dominant church authority by proclaiming Christ's accessibility to everyone. Images of Christ as lover, mother, child, and companion combine to paint a portrait of mutuality and cooperation, subverting the rigidity and hierarchy of medieval authority. I now turn to discussions in the field of medieval mysticism in order to expand the concept of embodied mysticism.

### **The Morphing Field of Feminine Mysticism: An Introduction**

In undertaking this study, I have been guided by the feminist understandings of Bynum, Elizabeth Petroff, Laurie Finke, and E. Ann Matter, among others. The work of Caroline Walker Bynum has been seminal in understanding issues of gender and mysticism in the medieval period. I have been directed by her perceptions of the body and power, and by subsequent critiques of her work. Her many notable works include *Jesus as Mother, Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, and *Fragmentation and Redemption*. Bynum's theories have been transformative in this field, yet they are also contested and have generated a number of critical responses. Reactions of other feminists and gender scholars have subsequently enhanced and opened medieval studies, with research regarding the role men and lay people in the experience and transmission of mysticism. Indeed, "the work of Caroline Walker Bynum in seeking to delineate a distinctive feminine form of piety opened up the possibilities of exploring gendered piety."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> P.H. Cullum, "Gendering Charity," *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women and Saints in Late Medieval Europe* (London: Routledge, 2002) 149.

Bynum's work on control, power, and ascetic practice has enhanced social and historical perceptions of medieval women and inspired many other feminist and gender critiques.

In *Holy Feast, Holy Fast*, Bynum contends that although medieval asceticism that focused around food was a prominent practice for both the male and female religious devotees, "there is clear evidence that it was more important to women than to men."<sup>6</sup> Bynum hopes to recover the connective rubric that considers food-related practices in their totality, instead of handling phenomena such as "eucharistic devotion, fasting, food multiplication miracles, and lactation visions as treated in isolation from one another."<sup>7</sup> She first outlines the background history of medieval holy women, providing context and contrast, and then analyzes "how women were able to use food practices to shape their experience and their place in both family and community and, second, what food-related behavior and symbols actually meant to medieval women."<sup>8</sup> Bynum thus provides a historical reinterpretation of ascetic practice and a model for the study of gender in medieval religion.

Later critics, such as Kathleen Biddick, argue against the unity and essentialism found in Bynum's work. Biddick claims that Bynum's *Holy Feast, Holy Fast* is reductionist and structuralist, naturalizing and fixing gender boundaries in an idealized past as well as reducing women to the maternal. She also asserts that Bynum's essentialist categories of culture and Christendom discourage the study of identity and

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<sup>6</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 74.

<sup>7</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast*, 75.

<sup>8</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast*, 6.

difference and prevent a fluid understanding of culture.<sup>9</sup> Even as she argues that Bynum presents a flat, bounded, idealized medieval culture, Biddick ignores the medieval cultural milieu and dismisses the possibility that culture does have boundaries, although these boundaries may be fluid and expandable, as well as contractive and collapsible. For medieval women, there *were* set boundaries and rules to tow to, but that did not preclude the possibility for myriad, multifaceted, and heterogeneous subcultures and agents to arise and act to counter the dominant culture. Although Biddick attempts to open interpretation in her post structuralist critique, she in fact closes the door on examining the subversive possibilities of medieval mystics. I hope instead to uncover the ways in which women mystics unknowingly challenged and changed dominant culture, adding their seemingly progressive and unorthodox voices to the patriarchal cacophony of the medieval Catholic Church.

Laurie Finke adds a crucial dimension to the study of medieval women mystics, with her valuation of a nuanced understanding of identity and power. Finke contends that dialogism [an ongoing conversation that was fluid and continuous] existed among mystical religious women despite temporal difference or physical distance. Indeed, she wants “to insist upon this dialogism – this ‘intense interaction of one’s own and another’s voice’” that she perceives “as central to the visionary experience.”<sup>10</sup> Finke also highlights a portrait of a complex and vocal woman of the Middle Ages, drawing focus

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<sup>9</sup> Kathleen Biddick, “Genders, Bodies, and Borders: Technologies of the Visible,” *Speculum* 68, no. 2 (April 1993): 393-94.

<sup>10</sup> Laurie A. Finke, “Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision,” *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Mystics* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 29.

away from the oversimplified and polarized stereotypes of Eve and Mary.<sup>11</sup> She adopts the idea of women speaking *through their bodies*, in contrast to the idea of uncovering women's power through their silence.<sup>12</sup> Like Finke, I hope to convey that Clare, Angela, and Catherine were all both adamant and complex in their mystical utterances.

Elizabeth Petroff adds another insight with her exploration of the apparent contradiction between a misogynist, repressive society and the proliferation of women religious visionaries and authors. She quotes Ann R. Jones, noting that despite systematic repression, ““resistance does take place in the form of *jouissance*, that is, in the direct reexperience of the physical pleasures of infancy and of later sexuality, repressed but not obliterated by the Law of the Father.””<sup>13</sup> As we will see, the images of Christ as erotic lover and as nursing life-giver emerge upon closer examination of the experiences and texts of these three mystics. Clare, Angela, and Catherine prominently employ these motifs in their mystical texts and letters. These vibrant images survive in their works despite both admonitions and attempts on the part of their confessors to encourage more orthodox forms of expression and despite later redaction. Indeed, the power dynamic within the confessor/penitent model was challenged as these women mystics either defied or openly schooled and corrected their monastic mentors. As Petroff claims, a feminist lens that focuses on the rhetoric of power and writing can help explain why “in spite of cultural repression... some women did succeed in becoming

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<sup>11</sup> Finke, “Mystical Bodies,” 31.

<sup>12</sup> Finke utilizes Foucault's sense of the centrality of the body in gaining knowledge. Finke, “Mystical Bodies,” 28-31.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 205.

writers.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Clare, Angela, and Catherine did succeed in becoming writers; they did not merely dictate or dryly report their visions, but actively shaped interpretation of their experiences through embodied metaphors and by struggling with their confessor scribes to push the boundaries of acceptability and orthodoxy.

Finke utilizes an important argument that bodily experience is “organized by cultural representations” and that “two antithetical representations of the body [classical and grotesque] structure discursive norms in any culture.”<sup>15</sup> The medieval distinction between the classical body in opposition to the grotesque body provides a useful lens with which to understand medieval women’s own perceptions. The classical body was a medieval ideal, a spiritualized representation that never existed apart from its cultural construction. The grotesque body was material and was most often a representation relegated to women and other marginal social groups. The grotesque body’s “discursive norms include heterogeneity, disproportion, a focus on gaps, orifices, and symbolic filth.”<sup>16</sup> It seems that medieval women did not strive to transcend their grotesque bodies, but sought to validate and identify them in and with the body of Christ.

Finke’s concluding remarks offer a useful understanding of how women in the Middle Ages shaped and wielded power. Although women could claim little institutional authority from the church, the spiritual authority of female mystics lay in a claim to

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<sup>14</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 205.

<sup>15</sup> Finke borrows Mikhail Bakhtin’s distinction between the classical and grotesque body, noting that “two antithetical representations of the body structure discursive norms in any culture.” Given the limited scope of this study, I have chosen to rely on Finke’s interpretation of Bakhtin’s distinction and will hereafter cite Finke. Finke, “Mystical Bodies,” 36-37.

<sup>16</sup> Finke, “Mystical Bodies,” 37.

divine inspiration, as instruments of divine will.<sup>17</sup> However, women like Angela of Foligno were not nearly as secretive and unassuming as they had to appear “in order to win the church’s toleration and acceptance.” Indeed,

Any visionary experience made public is always, *ipso facto*, a revisioning of that experience, an attempt to represent the unrepresentable. These women claimed the power to shape the meaning and form of their own experiences. Their words, and even their bodies when necessary, became the sites of a struggle to redefine the meaning of female silence and powerlessness.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, even though these female mystics seemed to be in a culture that left little space for feminine power, they gained agency by writing their bodies through mysticism.

In the history of scholarship on medieval female mystics, there has been much speculation and contestation over the role of hysteria in religious experience. Cristina Mazzoni takes up this issue with a lengthy examination and deconstruction of the conflation of hysteria and women’s mystical experience. She implicates the concept of hysteria not as a “popular neurosis” (that eventually became inextricably linked with women), but as “a way of posing the problematic of ‘constructing,’ even more than ‘representing,’ the feminine.”<sup>19</sup> Mazzoni claims to examine hysteria as “a mimetic modality, a manipulable representational strategy, rather than a univocally referential diagnostic term.”<sup>20</sup> Thus she seeks to recapture notions of helpless hysteria and transform them into sites of agency. This re-structured concept of hysteria is noteworthy

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<sup>17</sup> Finke, “Mystical Bodies,” 44.

<sup>18</sup> Finke, “Mystical Bodies,” 44.

<sup>19</sup> Cristina Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria: Neurosis, Mysticism, and Gender in European Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 5.

<sup>20</sup> Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria*, 5.

for this study, as I argue that women mystics exuded agency even through the strange and erratic behavior that came with their food and body asceticism.

In particular, Mazzoni takes issue with Simone de Beauvoir's dismissive analysis of female mysticism as emotional and hysterical. Mazzoni claims that Beauvoir "wants to have her (materialist) cake and eat it too; that is to say, she wants to deny the epistemic validity of the mystical experience (because of her explicit atheism and existentialist ethic), while appropriating great figures such as Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Siena for women's history."<sup>21</sup> Beauvoir makes qualitative distinctions between the contemplative life and the active life, and she implies that contemplative life is only justified by action. Mazzoni continues her analysis of Beauvoir by noting that the only great women mystics are those who moved beyond their adherence and "allegiance to the patriarchal order" by embracing characteristics of asexuality or masculinity. Female mystics (such as Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila) could express themselves in a masculine manner by being active and by focusing on theological rather than sensory ecstatic understandings of God.<sup>22</sup> Mazzoni disagrees with Beauvoir's qualitative removal of Catherine and Teresa from their socio-historical context because "her ideological move colludes with the patriarchal order she is seeking to overthrow."<sup>23</sup> According to Mazzoni, Beauvoir buys into the very patriarchal dichotomy she is trying to undermine. Beauvoir values the best mysticism as essentially intellectual and virile, while attributing "the worst mysticism – the love displayed for a God that does not exist, a God that is for

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<sup>21</sup> Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria*, 52.

<sup>22</sup> Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria*, 52-53.

<sup>23</sup> Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria*, 53.



Beauvoir ‘an unreality’ – is particularly feminine.” Thus, Mazzoni wishes to avoid Beauvoir’s materialist critique where “women mystics are not only criticized for being the mouthpieces of a patriarchal religious establishment but also, ironically, for their lack of masculine attributes.”<sup>24</sup> Like Mazzoni, I hope to steer clear of materialist fallacies and to uncover the instances where perceived passivity is really vocal, violent, embodied activity. Indeed, I intend to show that even as these mystics appeared to be nonthreatening or submissive, they were in fact challenging traditional and institutional religion. Furthermore, I assert that these women mystics redeemed their “lacking” bodies through mystical experience, in their imitation of Christ and, somewhat counter-intuitively, in their body and food mysticism.

In contrast to her analysis of Beauvoir, Mazzoni embraces Luce Irigaray’s examination of mysticism and alludes to Bynum’s work. Indeed, Mazzoni notes that “through Christ’s painful death, for Bynum as well as for Irigaray, the mystic’s wounds, her spiritual or physical stigmata, gain the salvific possibility of becoming holy instead of unspeakably abject.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, “the pleasure the mystic derives from her vision of the crucified Christ is caused not by the (painful) sight of his physical torments but rather by the redemption of the body – hence, especially of woman – which this sight represents and even brings about.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, mystical identification with the crucified Christ, or with the eucharistic host, provided medieval women with the opportunity to *right* and *write* their bodies, that is to redeem their socially marginalized bodies and to inscribe their own

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<sup>24</sup> Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria*, 53.

<sup>25</sup> Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria*, 154.

<sup>26</sup> Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria*, 154.

expressions and understandings of piety. This theme of *righting* and *writing* the body became even more apparent as I studied the lives and works of Clare of Assisi, Angela de Foligno, and Catherine of Siena.

### **Methodological Considerations in the Study of Embodied Mysticism**

Throughout this essay, I hope to weave a multifaceted critique of women's power, religious conviction, and theological perceptions from socio-historical critical sources and close readings of primary texts. Thus, I rely on both the mystical treatises of the three figures I am studying and their genre of correspondence in order to determine their theological attitudes and innovations. My literary analysis of these mystic texts is taken from reliable English translations, notably those of Paul Lachance and Suzanne Noffke.<sup>27</sup> I also employ commentary from secondary sources, such as the socio-historical and gender critiques discussed above, to contextualize mystical experience, and to locate women mystics in their respective milieu. Thus my methodological approach incorporates literary rhetorical critique, socio-historical critique, and feminist theory.

While much work has been done on both the sociological and historical factors of female mysticism, and much literary research has been conducted to probe the theology of the extant texts of these mystics, I have not been able to locate a study that unites these methodological approaches. Caroline Walker Bynum does an excellent job cataloging both male and female ascetic and food practices and analyzing socio-historical factors of mystical experience. Yet, her study lacks a thorough examination of how these bodily practices were relayed and purposefully written into mystical treatises and texts. I try to

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<sup>27</sup> Most of these mystical texts are preserved in Latin, and at times the extant texts are loaded with fragmented linguistic phrases in dialect as well as idiomatic expressions. Due to availability and language restrictions, as well as the scope and brevity of this thesis, I have chosen to rely on English translations of primary sources.

bridge this gap, both building on and expanding upon Bynum's work with the help of gender and body analysis.

Through this survey, I hope to convey a more holistic and complete sense of female mysticism by focusing on its experiential relationship with the body. That is to say, I claim that these female medieval mystics reasserted the value of their bodies through mystical experience and the insights gained therein. Women mystics, in attempting to unite with the divine, were not entirely denying or renouncing their bodies, but were using them as a space to encounter God and reclaim worth. That is not to say that male mystics did not engage in similar mystical pursuits and expressions. Indeed, many studies have been conducted about male mystics (St. Francis in particular) and their extreme food and body asceticism. However, medieval women had the additional obstacle of a socially constructed grotesque female body to overcome.

Thus, it may be reiterated that female mystics *right* and *write* their bodies; their marginalized bodies are "righted" (made whole, cleansed, renewed) by the Godhead manifest, and are "written" by themselves, through the power of interpretation and authority gained in unmediated mystical experience.<sup>28</sup> By engaging elements of both an historical and theological nature, I intend to enhance perceptions of how mysticism worked for women. It seems that the mystical experiences of certain women indeliberately functioned as a way out of patriarchal domination; not only could they rise above oppressive institutional orders by claiming the authority of the unmediated presence of God, they could also read Jesus as embodied in multiplicitous, and often multigendered, ways (e.g., Angela of Foligno identifies with Christ as a nursing mother, a

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<sup>28</sup> I continue to utilize Finke's idea of writing and righting the body throughout this study, but since it has been discussed here in the introduction, I will no longer cite the terms.

young boy, and a genderless loving companion). Without explicitly declaring an independence from patriarchal authority, women mystics seemed to be able to transcend social marginality by claiming authority through experience and redeeming their bodies as sites of encounter with power and holiness. I now turn to the ways in which women mystics from central Italy *right* and *write* their bodies into mystical experience.

CHAPTER 2  
THE LITTLE PLANT BLOSSOMS OUT ON HER OWN: THE EMBODIED  
MYSTICISM OF CLARE OF ASSISI

I, Clare, a handmaid of Christ, a little plant of our holy Father Francis, a sister and mother of you and the other Poor Sisters, although unworthy, ask our Lord Jesus Christ through His mercy and through the intercession of His most holy Mother Mary . . . and all His men and women saints, that the heavenly Father give you and confirm for you this most holy blessing in heaven and on earth.<sup>1</sup>

Any number of beatific descriptions may be assigned to Clare of Assisi, but perhaps the most prominent and powerful of those are active spiritual guide, adamant monastic founder and reformer, and vibrant mystic visionary. Clare left behind several texts from which scholars can reconstruct her theology and expressions of spirituality, including her four letters to Agnes of Prague, her *Forma Vitae* (Form of Life, or Rule), her *Testament*, and her *Blessing*.<sup>2</sup> Born into a wealthy family in 1196, Clare of Assisi died in 1253, having finally accomplished her lifelong struggle to gain the right of evangelical poverty for her order of Poor Clares at San Damiano.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, “St. Clare’s success tells us she was a spirited and innovative religious leader, not merely the sweet and pious follower of St. Francis.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Blessing attributed to St. Clare. Furlong, *Visions and Longings*, 146-147.

<sup>2</sup> The latter of the two texts are accepted by a majority of scholars as Clare’s own work. Catherine M. Mooney, “Imitatio Christi or Imitatio Mariae? Clare of Assisi and Her Interpreters,” *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1999), 56.

<sup>3</sup> Her death followed twenty-seven years after St. Francis of Assisi’s death. Furlong, *Visions and Longings*, 117.

<sup>4</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 67.

Clare of Assisi's agency and adamancy emerge from the details of her life despite her restriction within a cloister. Her written *Regula* is distinctive because it was the first rule written specifically for women, in contrast to other rules for nuns that were adapted from monastic orders.<sup>5</sup> Clare herself was uncomfortable with the unilateral term "Rule," and instead referred to her guidelines as *Forma vitae*, or "a form or pattern of life."<sup>6</sup> Even the term "Abbess" was given a new, less hierarchical sense by Clare; the Abbess should be elected by the sisters and "the Abbess [should] be the servant of all the sisters."<sup>7</sup> The *Forma vitae* is especially significant in light of the historical obstacles and institutional challenges Clare battled during the foundational period of her order of the Clarisses (or Poor Clares) and during the composition of her guidelines. Clare protested a number of imposed papal rules throughout her cloistered life.<sup>8</sup> She clamored against the papacy to maintain the *privilegium paupertatis* and thus insisted on "remaining faithful to the absolute poverty demanded by Francis."<sup>9</sup> Francis's poverty was already a radical idea, and Clare pushed the notion further by demanding that women were both strong enough and possessed the desire and conviction needed to share equally in the vow of absolute poverty. Additionally, Clare managed to secure papal approval for her rule at

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<sup>5</sup> E. Ann Matter, "The Commentary on the Rule of Clare of Assisi by Maria Domitilla Galluzzi," *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy: A Religious and Artistic Renaissance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 202.

<sup>6</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 66.

<sup>7</sup> From Rule X: The Admonition and Correction of the Sisters. Furlong, *Visions and Longings*, 143.

<sup>8</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 66.

<sup>9</sup> Giulia Barone, "Society and Women's Religiosity, 750-1450," *Women and Faith: Catholic Religious Life in Italy from Late Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 57.

a time when there was a papal ban on the creation of any new religious orders<sup>10</sup> (the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 forbade the establishment of new religious communities).<sup>11</sup>

Clare's convictive leadership style attracted immediate attention and adherents. As early as 1217 (a few years after their founding), Clare's Poor Ladies were spreading from Assisi and the church of San Damiano into neighboring cities; Clare named her companion Marsebia abbess of a convent she founded on a tract of land in Foligno that she acquired.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Clare attracted many followers with her "innovative, living model of self-abasing female piety," including her sister Agnes, who closely followed Clare to cloister, and eventually her mother Ortolana dei Fiumi.<sup>13</sup> Clare's charisma and ability to attract followers despite the hardships of radical poverty lent credibility and a greater sense of authority to her spiritual convictions.

Clare's *Forma Vitae* directly challenged the structures of patriarchal society and medieval conceptions of women in two ways. First, the rule's demand to live as ascetically as possible, e.g., to fast continually, go barefoot, and to do manual labor, "asserted the belief that women were as strong as men" and thus disrupted societal notions about the weaker female sex.<sup>14</sup> The *Forma vitae* also allowed Clare to declare

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<sup>10</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 67.

<sup>11</sup> Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 201.

<sup>12</sup> Clara Gennaro, "Clare, Agnes, and Their Earliest Followers: From the Poor Ladies of San Damiano to the Poor Clares," *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 42.

<sup>13</sup> Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 125-126.

<sup>14</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 75.

economic independence from male patrons and relatives through its call to extreme poverty. Clare retreated from the language of hierarchy in her guidelines and implemented models based on the mutuality of relationships, such as sister to sister, daughter to mother, etc.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Elizabeth Petroff proclaims that Clare's *Forma vitae* was a utopian vision, bound by a gospel poverty that was economic, social, and spiritual in nature.<sup>16</sup> "Clare saw the possibility for men and women to work together toward the same spiritual goals, each serving the other."<sup>17</sup> Her utopian ideal is evident in her desire for a community that is horizontal, not vertical, where collaboration, not hierarchy, is fundamental.<sup>18</sup> From all accounts, it seems that "Clare and her companions were not only the most rigorous and fervent interpreters of the marrow of Francis's message, but also reaffirmed within the thirteenth century church and society the revolutionary and highly contested value of poverty in all its radicality."<sup>19</sup> Clare's desire to live on the margins of society through poverty was both an assertion of independence and a declaration of solidarity with the poor and Christ.

### **Spiritual Interdependence and Mutual Poverty: Revisiting Clare and Francis**

To some extent, it is safe to postulate that Francis and Clare mutually relied on one another. We have seen how Francis's message was taken an extra step and expanded upon by Clare to include women in vows of extreme poverty. Institutional papal bulls may have emphasized the treatment of Francis and Clare as exemplary religious figures,

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<sup>15</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 69.

<sup>16</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 68.

<sup>17</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 70.

<sup>18</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 70.

<sup>19</sup> Gennaro, "Clare, Agnes, and their Followers," 52.



but their preaching of moral values and solidarity with the poor are testaments to their roles as “bearers of a new spirituality.”<sup>20</sup> Clare’s Franciscan spiritualism, her emphasis that “poverty was the richly meaningful symbol of the incarnation of Christ,” eventually evoked papal recognition, granting Clare’s order its status and connection through the “principle of *minoritas*, which united her with Francis and made her his ‘little plant.’”<sup>21</sup> The status of *minoritas* was a crucial formative step in the order of the Poor Clares; it allowed the order to flourish under the guidance of empathetic Franciscan brethren, rather than be hindered by institutions less sympathetic to the ideals of radical poverty. Although Clare and the Poor Clares may have been officially recognized as offshoots of the Franciscan tree, Clare and her order also sowed their own legacy, as the “little plant” blossomed out to assert her own spiritual canopy.

Franciscan theology translated into both Clare’s personal practices and her established rule. She embraced the Franciscan ideals of mutuality and communality in organizing and governing of her order. Her sisters testified at her canonization that Clare acted “as the spiritual mother and servant to all her sisters,” and that she tenderly cared for them “in her everyday actions, which revealed her concrete and tangible love, her personal attention to each of them, and above all, her mercy.”<sup>22</sup> Given the cloistered social constraints of her historical era, Clare did as much as she could to effect change within her order, replacing hierarchies with more democratic processes. When she made

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<sup>20</sup> Barone, “Society and Women’s Religiosity,” 61.

<sup>21</sup> Gennaro, “Clare, Agnes, and their Followers,” 46-47.

<sup>22</sup> Gennaro, “Clare, Agnes, and their Followers,” 50.

her initial decision to follow Francis on Palm Sunday in 1212,<sup>23</sup> Clare “managed to renounce her noble family, shedding her jewels and her hair,” but “she was never able to live the full mendicant life she so desired.”<sup>24</sup> Due to social inhibitions and resistance, as well as Francis’s insistence, Clare accepted enclosure.<sup>25</sup> Despite hindrances to her radical desire to live a life of poverty in public, Clare managed a revolution within the cloister. She always strove to fulfill the Franciscan ideal, and finally succeed in doing so with the recognition and ratification of her *Forma Vitae* right before her death.

Knowledge and interest in Francis’s mystical and spiritual insights were widespread and shared by men and women alike, yet the ideal of his radical poverty seemed to resonate in the hearts of women. Giulia Barone explains that Francis’s stigmata “confirmed his role as *alter Christus*, as the new Christ, perfect in his imitation of Christ’s poverty, obedience and humility, and made him the particular object of female piety.”<sup>26</sup> Barone argues that the female ability to more adequately express a love of Christ, through mystical marriage or in embodied mimesis, may have “made these women more faithful to the message of Saint Francis than many of his friars, stuffed with university doctrine and lacking in humility.”<sup>27</sup> However, Barone also notes that Franciscan forms of women’s piety contain a certain ambiguity. She identifies a lack of Francis’s “perfect idea of joy” in female Franciscans, which may be attributed to their

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<sup>23</sup> Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*, 199.

<sup>24</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 42.

<sup>25</sup> Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*, 200.

<sup>26</sup> Barone, “Society and Women’s Religiosity,” 61.

<sup>27</sup> Barone, “Society and Women’s Religiosity,” 61.

harsh ascetic practices. However, Clare hardly falls into Barone's model of ambivalence. Despite Clare's extreme fasts and penitential asceticism, she embraces the concept of joy full force in her mystical experiences and visions of God. One may even speculate that Clare draws also on Francis's joy, as seen in her intimate vision of suckling Francis's breast.<sup>28</sup>

P.H. Cullum provides an interesting interpretation of Francis and his spiritual implications. Cullum argues that "saints had to conform to gender stereotypes in order to be recognized for their sanctity," and he finds it surprising that Francis was so recognized since he refused "markers of masculine authority."<sup>29</sup> Rather, Francis adopted the central female virtue of obedience and he avoided direct association with clerical authority through his solidarity with the marginal and the poor. Cullum claims that Francis thus seems to subvert patriarchal authority by culling out a model for a "transgendered sanctity."<sup>30</sup>

Cullum's model may be applied to Clare's religious understandings as well. Clare crossed gender stereotype boundaries by her vocal disobedience, e.g., by her refusal to accept an outside Rule that did not include a model for poverty. Her disobedience and insistence on gospel piety may be seen as a mirrored move to that of St. Francis. While Francis moves from a male position into a more nuanced stance by renouncing authority, Clare mirrors his move by moving from a female restrictive position into the same nuanced stance by engaging in disobedience and claiming the higher authority of God's

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<sup>28</sup> Barone, "Society and Women's Religiosity," 63.

<sup>29</sup> Cullum, "Gendering Charity," 146.

<sup>30</sup> Cullum, "Gendering Charity," 146.

gospel. In any case, the result is a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of gender identity and mutuality. Both Francis and Clare refused to be bounded and controlled by socially assigned gender roles, and instead insistently challenged dominant authority by embracing qualities usually assigned to the opposite sex. Despite these heterodox moves on the part of Clare and Francis, they were still recognized for their spiritual sanctity and were quickly canonized following their deaths. It seems that the act of inverting some gender roles lends credibility and authority. Indeed, Clare employed that tactic with the sole purpose of gaining acceptance for her work, the *Forma Vitae*, but an unintended consequence was empowerment through agency, an unwitting challenge to the patriarchal establishment of her day.

### **Mystical Marriage, Holy Food, and Embodied Piety: The Consequences and Implications of Clare's Mysticism**

Although the idea of mystical marriage was utilized by both male and female spirituals of the twelfth century, it was found far more commonly in women's communities, since women could "more readily (that is, without a change of gender) envision themselves as the spouse of Christ" and "by such mystical marriages they also acquired prestige, a status superior to that of ordinary women."<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Clare of Assisi adopted the concept of mystical marriage and conveyed it in her letters to Agnes of Prague, urging her "to think of herself as a bride, a mother, and a sister of Jesus Christ" and resist secular marriage.<sup>32</sup>

When you have loved [Him], You shall become chaste; when You have touched [Him], You shall become pure; when You have accepted [Him], you shall be a

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<sup>31</sup> E. Ann Matter, "Mystical Marriage," *Women and Faith: Catholic Religious Life in Italy from Late Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 35.

<sup>32</sup> Matter, "Mystical Marriage," 36.

virgin . . . Whose power is stronger . . . Whose appearance more beautiful . . . In Whose embrace you are already caught up. Who has adorned Your breast with precious stones and has placed priceless pearls in Your ears and has surrounded You with sparkling gems as though blossoms of springtime and placed on Your head a golden crown as a sign [to all] of Your holiness.<sup>33</sup>

Clare's words are "explicit and strong in their immediacy: caresses, possession, sexual union, virginity, and also the physical and material beauty of the body and its ornaments."<sup>34</sup> This passage emphasizes her attention to mystical marriage embodied in both "physical beauty and the radiant pleasure this union evokes from Clare's bewildered soul." Additionally, the roles of spouse and mother that Clare names in the letter invoke Christ's humanity and embodied presence. Virginity, understood in the context of the Virgin Mary, offers another example of "a type of deep physical union" and further solidifies the focus on Christ's embodied aspects.<sup>35</sup> Yet, this passage offers something even more than images of humanity, presence, and bridegroom; Clare is instructively stating that the site of redemption is located in the body, and the process of redemption is mystical union. The images she invokes of chastity, purification, and power reinvigorate the cast aside, grotesque, marginalized body of woman. The purification occurs not only spiritually, but also materially in the body of woman; it allows for the possibility of both the suffering and glorification in the Godhead that characterizes both the harsh asceticism and ecstatic effervescence of embodied mysticism.

Caroline Walker Bynum highlights the centrality of food in the thought and life of Clare of Assisi. Clare's rule required that "the sisters are to fast [take only one meal a

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<sup>33</sup> Furlong, *Visions and Longings*, 122 (from Clare's first letter to Agnes).

<sup>34</sup> Mariateresa Fumagalli Beonio-Brocchieri, "The Feminine Mind in Medieval Mysticism," *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy: A Religious and Artistic Renaissance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 22.

<sup>35</sup> Beonio-Brocchieri, "The Feminine Mind," 22.

day] at all times.”<sup>36</sup> Her contemporaries called attention to Clare’s extreme food asceticism; both Thomas of Celano’s hagiographic *Vita* of Clare and Clare’s canonization bull emphasize her thrice weekly complete fasts. The fact that Francis admonished and forbade Clare her thrice weekly total fast “makes it clear that Clare – unlike Francis, who desired to be indifferent to food and never made a point of eating nothing – found it important to keep a ‘perfect fast,’ that is, to close her body entirely to food.”<sup>37</sup>

Such extreme fasting may have been the result of Clare trying to control her bodily experience and express solidarity with the poor even though she was physically cloistered. Or perhaps, in terms of Finke’s analysis, Clare was attempting to identify with the grotesque body and inflict pain like that of Christ’s. Rudolph Bell applies the term “holy anorexia” to Clare’s excessive fasting, and he identifies her as the first Italian holy anorexic.<sup>38</sup> However, Clare’s behavior cannot be reduced or explained away as merely a psychological illness or a coping mechanism to regain some sense of control. Bell’s analysis of Clare’s practices is too simplistic, failing to take into account her eucharistic piety and her mystical understandings of embodiment. Clare’s food asceticism was actually (and somewhat counterintuitively) a way of embracing her body and welcoming its capacity to hold more of God in mystical union.

Other reasons for Clare’s extreme food asceticism become clear in her struggle over autonomous authority for her order. Bynum suggests that the abundant food motifs that are found throughout Clare’s hagiographic *Vita* highlight the theme of serving,

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<sup>36</sup> From Clare’s Rule III.7 Furlong, *Visions and Longings*, 133.

<sup>37</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 100.

<sup>38</sup> Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 123.

especially in feeding, others.<sup>39</sup> These include Clare's iconographic motif of the monstrosity of the host, her miracle of the multiplication of bread, and her threat of a hunger strike in opposition to a papal bull, which would have resulted in less interaction with the Franciscans and fewer visits to her convent. Clare thus instituted an analogy "between 'food for the soul' (i.e., preaching) and earthly bread: if the pope forbade preachers to come, she said, the sisters would refuse to accept the mundane bread provided by the begging brothers."<sup>40</sup> Thus Clare issued a claim to authority over her own body (as well as those of her sisters) in a political maneuver designed to secure the sisterhood's respect and right to Franciscan identity.

Perhaps Clare's most powerful holy food image, which also has implications for the concept of embodiment, comes in a vision of a lactation miracle between her and Francis. In her vision, Clare served Francis by bringing him hot water and a towel, and upon nearing him, "he bared his breast and gave her suck, and the substance was 'sweet and delightful' and 'such pure shining gold that she saw her reflection in it.'"<sup>41</sup> Bynum concludes that "nonetheless, the appearance of such a vision to Clare rather than to Francis's male followers, together with other evidence of Clare's emphasis on serving and feeding others while herself not eating, suggests that food was to Clare what clothing and money were to Francis: a basic symbol of both sacrifice and service."<sup>42</sup> In comparison to Francis's preaching and begging, "Clare, both miraculously and

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<sup>39</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 101.

<sup>40</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 101.

<sup>41</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 101.

<sup>42</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 101.

prosaically, served and fed her sisters in the cloister.”<sup>43</sup> Despite her self and worldly denial, Clare worked very much within this world, embodying the incarnate Christ through poverty and service.

Catherine Mooney conducts an informative inquiry into Clare’s mystical understanding of *imitatio Christi* and subsequent interpretations of Clare’s mysticism. Mooney argues that an emphasis on Clare’s supposed association with and devotion to Mary, *imitatio Mariae*, has overshadowed Clare’s affiliation to and identification with Christ in *imitatio Christi*. The origins of Clare’s connection to Mary are difficult to trace, but the earliest report stems from the canonization process that occurred two years after her death, and was subsequently elaborated upon by hagiographers.<sup>44</sup> The fact that hagiographers chose to describe Clare as following in the footprints of Mary<sup>45</sup> seems disconnected to Clare’s own understanding given in her second and third letters to Agnes of Prague of walking in the footsteps of Christ.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, in her third letter to Agnes, Clare encourages Agnes to follow “the footprints of the poor and humble Jesus Christ,” and implores her to work with God to “transform yourself entirely through contemplation into the image of divinity itself.”<sup>47</sup> For Clare, walking with Christ was an embodied experience that entailed embracing a suffering Christ and a transformative union. Catherine Mooney concludes that

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<sup>43</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 102.

<sup>44</sup> Mooney, “Clare of Assisi,” 58-59.

<sup>45</sup> Mooney, “Clare of Assisi,” 59.

<sup>46</sup> Mooney, “Clare of Assisi,” 60.

<sup>47</sup> Mooney, “Clare of Assisi,” 62.



Clare's understanding of herself as a follower and imitator of Christ is so consistent throughout her writings that few medieval texts focused on her could ignore it. It is also clear, however, that hagiographic texts and iconography tended increasingly to portray Clare as a follower of Mary. This evolving portrayal of Clare and the correlative depictions of her female followers as imitators of Mary and Clare served to distance them from the centrally important Christian motif of *imitatio Christi* and consequently reinforced their secondary position vis-à-vis Francis and his male followers.<sup>48</sup>

A re-examination of Clare's own writings show an independent tendency to radically favor *imitatio Christi*. Thus, upon a closer examination of Clare's letters and texts, the layers of hagiographic and political agenda may be peeled back to expose Clare's raw voice, resolutely proclaiming embodied imitation of Christ.

In her fourth and final letter to Agnes of Prague, Clare reveals a powerful sensory understanding of mystical union with Christ. She invokes rich sensory description and encounters God in through the language of touch and contact, so that Clare communicates her union with God as embodied and erotic love.

Draw me after You! We will run in the fragrance of Your perfumes, O heavenly Spouse! I will run and not tire, until You bring me into the wine-cellar, until Your left hand is under my head and Your right hand will embrace me happily [and] You will kiss me with the happiest kiss of Your mouth.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, Clare yearns for the physical presence of her spiritual Bridegroom. The perfumes, bodily sensation of running, coolness of the cellar, and caressing touch are described with such care that it seems as if Clare is in fact smelling, moving, shivering, and responsively touching. Her vision of union with Christ is both transcendent and terrestrial, in and out of this world in one unitive moment. Despite her sharp and punishing asceticism, Clare does not deny her body altogether, but reserves it for union

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<sup>48</sup> Mooney, "Clare of Assisi," 76.

<sup>49</sup> Furlong, *Visions and Longings*, 126.

with Christ. She thus exhibits a sense of value, mutuality, and interdependence in her bodily, and embodied, experience of God. Clare righted and redeemed her body through mystical union, and she wrote the female body into the mystical declarations of her letters. Clare also wrote herself, her material, enduring legacy into her progressive *Forma Vitae*, with the utmost conviction that despite the marked gender boundaries of her era, men and women could live together in an equal, cooperative community on Earth, not just in heaven. Like Clare, fellow Umbrian penitent Angela of Foligno declared her mystical convictions with unwavering force and set an example for her contemporaries. It is toward Angela's expressions of embodied mysticism that I now turn

CHAPTER 3  
ANGELA DE FOLIGNO: UMBRIA'S PREMIERE MYSTICAL DEVOTEE

The first sign of true love is that the lover submits his will to that of the Beloved. And this most special and singular love works in three ways. First, if the loved one is poor, one strives to become poor, and if scorned, to be scorned. Second, it makes one abandon all other friendships which could be contrary to this love . . . third, one can keep nothing hidden from the other. This third action, in my opinion, is the highest one and completes all the others. For in this mutual revelation of secrets, hearts are opened and bound more perfectly to one another.<sup>1</sup>

Thus declares Angela de Foligno in her *Instructions*, number six, concerning the sign of true love. Indeed, this declaration embodies Angela's paradoxical understanding of devotion, her mysticism characterized by both transcendent and terrestrial qualities. Angela, focused on the other world, nonetheless left a wealth of transcription behind, and despite her desire to hold fast to her secrets, she imparts instruction and guidance through her memoirs. Although little personal information is known about Angela, we have her *Liber de vere fidelium experientia*, or *Book of the Experience of the Truly Faithful*, which she dictated to her scribe, kinsmen, and confessor Brother Arnaldo.<sup>2</sup>

Angela of Foligno was perhaps one of the greatest female mystics of her era. Born twenty-five years after the death of St. Francis,<sup>3</sup> she did much to adopt and perpetuate the Franciscan model of penitence and piety. The life of Angela mirrored and followed the life of St. Francis of Assisi in many ways. These included her public stripping,<sup>4</sup> her

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<sup>1</sup> Lachance, *Angela of Foligno*, 258.

<sup>2</sup> Furlong, *Visions and Longings*, 148.

<sup>3</sup> Lachance, *Angela of Foligno*, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 212.

commitment to poverty, and her solidarity with the poor, the sick, and the lepers.<sup>5</sup> Her stripping in the church at Foligno “was both an imitation of the Poverello, whom she saw as a mentor, and a sign of throwing herself, just as she was, on God’s mercy.”<sup>6</sup> Her spiritual conversion began in 1285 after experiencing a vision of St. Francis, yet prior to that, Angela was “a busy matron and mother, but a vain, lukewarm Christian.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, what we do know of Angela’s early life was that she was born into a prosperous family in Umbria. She married at age twenty and “led a life of fashion and social pleasure.” Yet, “troubled by a sin, perhaps sexual, that she felt to be mortal, she received Communion without making a confession, knowing very well that she was not in a state of grace; as a result, she was troubled by fears of damnation.”<sup>8</sup>

Angela entered the Franciscan Third Order in 1291 following the deaths of her husband, children, and mother. She dictated her spiritual experiences that occurred between 1285 and 1296 in Umbrian Italian to her confessor Fra Arnaldo, who transcribed them into Latin. Her spiritual journey that is recorded in the *Memoriale de fra Arnaldo*, or the *Memorial*, was approved by a number of Franciscan theologians in 1297 and validated by Cardinal Giacomo Colonna in 1310.<sup>9</sup> Angela’s thirty steps to perfection were “patterned on the hidden years of Christ’s life” and were a series of visions and

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<sup>5</sup> Furlong, *Visions and Longings*, 149.

<sup>6</sup> Furlong, *Visions and Longings*, 149.

<sup>7</sup> Valerie M. Lagorio, “Medieval Continental Women Mystics: An Introduction,” *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 178.

<sup>8</sup> Furlong, *Visions and Longings*, 148.

<sup>9</sup> Lagorio, “Medieval Continental Women,” 179.

ecstasies that sought to console and to elucidate mystical experience.<sup>10</sup> Angela later dictated<sup>11</sup> her *Istruzioni Salutifere*, i.e. her *Instructions* to fellow mystical seekers, generated many letters of spiritual counsel, and condemned the Free Spirit heresies.<sup>12</sup>

Much consideration has been given to the determination of Angela's authentic voice within the *Memorial*, and scholars hotly contest the extent of Fra Arnaldo's role in the text. The organizational structure and the extended commentary with orthodox clarifications of Angela's visions indicate that "Brother A." (as he identifies himself in the text) played a significant part in interpreting Angela's work even as he recorded and translated it.<sup>13</sup> Although the choice of the Latin term *passus*, or step, was Angela's own, she envisioned thirty steps on her spiritual journey, which Brother Arnaldo condensed into twenty-six steps.<sup>14</sup> The first twenty steps Angela clearly identifies, but the twentieth step is interpreted as a significant pivot point by Fra Arnaldo, because it marked the beginning of his relationship to Angela as confessor and scribe.<sup>15</sup> Fra Arnaldo found the remaining eleven steps Angela related to him difficult to discern, so he condensed them into seven supplementary steps, the first one overlapping with the twentieth step,

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<sup>10</sup> Lagorio, "Medieval Continental Women," 179.

<sup>11</sup> Some scholars speculate that late in life, Angela managed to learn how to write in Latin. This speculation is based on the fact that there is no reference to a scribe or secretary in the correspondence of the *Instructions*. Lachance, *Angela of Foligno*, 16.

<sup>12</sup> Lagorio, "Medieval Continental Women," 179.

<sup>13</sup> Catherine M. Mooney, "The Authorial Role of Brother A. in the Composition of Angela of Foligno's Revelations," *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy: A Religious and Artistic Renaissance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 36.

<sup>14</sup> Cristina Mazzoni, *Angela of Foligno's Memorial* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999), 11.

<sup>15</sup> Mooney, "Authorial Role of Brother A.," 55.

Angela's "embarrassing" screaming vision in the basilica of Assisi.<sup>16</sup> Angela, upon pilgrimage to the Basilica of St. Francis, witnessed a vision of Christ's eternal love for her within the basilica, and upon leaving the church, and perceiving that her bridegroom Christ was withdrawing from her, she erupted into a writhing shrieking fit.<sup>17</sup> Fra Arnaldo, possibly convinced that Angela was possessed by demons, undertook the role of confessor in an attempt to examine and validate her visions.

Scholars have argued for the authenticity of Angela's voice based on the *Memorial*'s strange colloquialisms and its awkward Latin. It is impossible to determine with any certainty whether Brother Arnaldo "simultaneously translated her Umbrian vernacular into a simple and often stylistically flawed Latin"<sup>18</sup> or if he compiled the text in vernacular first and then transcribed it into Latin.<sup>19</sup> Catherine Mooney argues that Brother Arnaldo played a significant role in shaping Angela's transmission and interpretation of her experience, with his directive questions and organizational structure.<sup>20</sup> She claims that medieval religious authorship "frequently lacked the individualistic cast evident in modern writing" and "emphasized instead collective truths shared by a community of believers."<sup>21</sup> If the *Memorial* was collaborative, then the relationship between Angela and Fra Arnaldo certainly seemed fluid and open to mutual criticism and frustration. Though Brother Arnaldo attempted to direct Angela's narrative

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<sup>16</sup> Mazzoni, *Angela of Foligno*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Lachance, *Angela of Foligno*, 60-61.

<sup>18</sup> Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria*, 178.

<sup>19</sup> Mazzoni, *Angela of Foligno*, 10.

<sup>20</sup> Mooney, "Authorial Role of Brother A.," 53.

<sup>21</sup> Mooney, "Authorial Role of Brother A.," 57.

with questions, she continued to expound upon her visions so that he found it difficult to keep up. Indeed, Angela often complained about Fra Arnaldo's inability to express her experiences, "saying that his rendition was 'dry and without gusto.'" <sup>22</sup> In this interchange of collaboration, we see the dialogic process that Laurie Finke claims is central to understanding women's voice. Although Fra Arnaldo played an important role in transmission of the *Memorial*, Angela's voice emerges from the conversation of "the textual and extratextual" evidence we have for her authorship. <sup>23</sup>

### **Eucharistic Piety and the Embodied Host: A Close Reading of Angela's Supplementary Steps**

Angela's preoccupation with the Eucharist characterizes much of her insight in *Memorial*. In fact, the insights and revelations from each of her seven supplementary steps in her *Memorial* center around holy food, whether in the Holy Communion or in reference to it. For example, in her first supplementary step, as she contemplates upon the Body of Christ, she often links the image of the host with her visionary experience of Christ on the cross. "Sometimes I see the Host – just as I saw His throat or neck – full of splendor and beauty which seems to come from God; and its splendor surpasses that of the sun." <sup>24</sup> Angela also perceives in the Host both a "vision of Christ as a young boy" and "two very splendid eyes which are so big that only the perimeter of the Host remains visible." <sup>25</sup> Angela seems to rely on and communicate with the Host as inspiration for numerous visions.

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<sup>22</sup> Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 104.

<sup>23</sup> Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria*, 179.

<sup>24</sup> Mazzoni, *Angela of Foligno*, 46.

<sup>25</sup> Mazzoni, *Angela of Foligno*, 47.

Aside from the visionary images Angela describes, she also relays her experiences through other sensory modes, including the sensations of touch and taste, which are in turn crucial to the concept of eating and ingesting holy food. In her third supplementary step, Angela and her companion first feed and then wash poor people, including a leper, at a local hospital. Angela relates the complementary bitterness and sweetness of serving Christ through the example of this encounter with the leper.

And we drank from the water that we used for washing. And the sweetness was so great that it lasted all the way home – it felt as if we had received Holy Communion. In fact, because of that intense sweetness it seemed to me that I really had received communion. And when a scab from the leper's sores had become lodged in my throat, I tried to swallow it; and my conscience kept me from spitting it out – just as if I had received Holy Communion . . .<sup>26</sup>

Here Angela reiterates the paradoxical character of devotion to Christ. She tastes and feels both bitterness and sweetness, intense suffering and extreme joy. Her actions in this example echo those of St. Francis, who also encountered a leper and imbibed his bodily fluid.<sup>27</sup> Angela's experience with the leper shows her reliance on embodied mysticism as her primary mode of spiritual knowledge. Unlike the trained, male clergy of her era, Angela does not rely on or relate to theological treatises or church doctrine, but relates and mediates spiritual knowledge through experiences of raw physicality. She imbibes the suffering of the leper, relates it to Christ, and recognizes her body as the crucial site where the material world meets the ethereal Godhead. Angela *points out* the confluence of the spiritual and the material, and *points into* the crux, the meeting of paradoxical elements in her own body; she essentially writes and rights her body in this way.

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<sup>26</sup> Mazzoni, *Angela of Foligno*, 53.

<sup>27</sup> Mazzoni, *Angela of Foligno*, 53 n. 68



Other examples of Angela's rich sensory description are found in her remaining supplementary steps. In her fourth supplementary step, she describes the peace and blessings of the host in terms of fullness, satiation, and ecstatical pleasure. For, upon hearing the Host bless her with the words "indeed I am within you; and although you are receiving me you have already received me," Angela describes an overwhelming joy that "settled within me" and uses terms of satisfaction and fulfillment to transmit her affectionate and moving encounter with Christ.<sup>28</sup> Angela continues to expound upon the sense of touch, noting instances of paralyzing ecstatic trances<sup>29</sup> and describing the playful nature of contact and encounter with God. "For example, my soul all of a sudden is lifted up in God with such joy that, if it were to continue, I think my body would instantly lose all sensation and all use of its limbs. But God often plays this game in and with the soul: He withdraws the instant the soul desires to take hold of Him."<sup>30</sup> This passage could be attributed to a common theme found in mystical literature, that of an erotic flirtation, characterized by alternately hiding and being present.<sup>31</sup> In any case, Angela skillfully utilizes the language of touch and thus concretizes her experience of the intangible and transcendent presence of the divine.

In her fifth supplementary step, Angela's experience of receiving the Host is transformative and is explained in terms of taste and touch. She describes the Host as being like "a meat that has a most flavorful taste . . . it goes down sweetly in one piece,

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<sup>28</sup> Mazzoni, *Angela of Foligno*, 55.

<sup>29</sup> Mazzoni, *Angela of Foligno*, 58.

<sup>30</sup> Mazzoni, *Angela of Foligno*, 57.

<sup>31</sup> Mazzoni, *Angela of Foligno*, 57 n. 74.

not in little pieces as it used to.” After ingesting the Host, “when it is down inside my body, it gives me an extremely pleasant sensation, which, as can be observed, causes me to tremble so violently, that I can drink from the chalice only with a great effort.”<sup>32</sup> Here, Angela is bodily transformed by the Host, whose power and vitality resonates and reverberates in her so that she trembles. Again, it is her body that is the locus of contact, emphasizing an embodied mysticism that is present the experiences of other women mystics.

Another instance of powerful sensory imagery comes in Angela’s sixth step as she describes the power of the sign of the cross upon her. When she makes the sign of the cross quickly and is careless not to put her hand on her heart, she does not feel God’s presence. “But when I touch my forehead when I say, ‘In the name of the Father,’ and then touch my heart and say, ‘and of the Son,’ then immediately I feel a special love and consolation, and I seem to find the one I’ve named, there where I touch.”<sup>33</sup> This touching communicates her indwelling and affinitive presence with God. Through touch, her body is claimed as place for the connection to a special and redemptive love.

### **Writing and Bodily Considerations in Angela’s First Twenty Steps**

Elizabeth Petroff employs the concept of “writing the body” in her analysis of Angela of Foligno’s life work. Petroff claims that “writing the body” includes “the notion that in putting body into writing, by the use of bodily imagery along with the rhythms and cadences of speech, a writer allows repressed contents to emerge from the

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<sup>32</sup> Mazzoni, *Angela of Foligno*, 61.

<sup>33</sup> Mazzoni, *Angela of Foligno*, 62.

unconscious into the light of the text.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, despite the medieval culture of misogynistic repression, many women visionaries effectively resisted such oppression by becoming writers, and Petroff believes that feminist theory can help uncover these moments of resistance.<sup>35</sup> Even though Angela’s work was dictated and somewhat collaborative, Angela’s “writing” emerges in her graphic and intimate bodily and embodied visions. Angela’s insistence on relating her visions to Fra Arnaldo without theologically expounding upon them or correcting them displays her adamant sense that she was writing her body and in control of her own expressions. She wanted her experiences recorded and left open for interpretation, fresh and vibrant, not diluted and diminished by adding the weight of explanation of orthodox doctrine.

Indeed, Petroff explores the numerous ways in which Angela “writes” her body. During her crucial eighth step in the Franciscan church in Foligno, we witness an “intimate transformation” as Angela “publicly bares her body and ritualistically points to each of her ‘members,’ promising for them not to sin . . . she writes her body by speaking her body’s gestures.”<sup>36</sup> In Angela’s own words, “I promised him then to maintain perpetual chastity and not to offend him again with any of my bodily members, accusing each of these one by one.”<sup>37</sup> Here, Angela echoes St. Francis’s dramatic public stripping and renouncement at the beginning of his religious life.<sup>38</sup> Angela announces her agency both through her dramatic, graphic bodily gestures and by her adopting and mimicking

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<sup>34</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 204.

<sup>35</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 205.

<sup>36</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 212.

<sup>37</sup> Lachance, *Angela of Foligno*, 126.

<sup>38</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 212.

the authoritative figure of St. Francis. Thus, in Finke's analytical terms, Angela appeals both to the classical body of clerical authority and rewrites her own marginalized, grotesque body, commanding its obedience to God only.

Petroff also notes the contrasting body metaphors that Angela invokes to describe her spiritual journey. The heaviness implied by Angela's thirty penitential steps is countered by her bodily lightness in her ninth step as she strips so that "I would be lighter and naked I should go to the cross."<sup>39</sup> Angela also lightens both her soul and body by letting go of all her social and physical attachments, including possessions, such as her "best garments, fine food, and fancy headdress,"<sup>40</sup> that characterized her standing as a noblewoman. Thus, Angela must first physically and socially marginalize herself to align with *the* grotesque body (i.e., the poor and the female) before she can unite with the *most* grotesque and marginalized body, the downtrodden crucified Christ. Pushed to the outside of his own society, executed as a criminal, asymmetrically wounded in the side, dissonantly flagellated, vulnerably exposed, and pockmarked with nails, Christ's crucified body surely takes the form of the grotesque body. Angela's need to obtain closeness with that body leads her to strip herself of trappings that would conceal her grotesque body, i.e. social status, wealth, and bodily health, in order to best identify with Christ's body and to offer her own grotesque body up for redemption.

Elizabeth Petroff notes that Angela's preoccupation with her body is paralleled by her contemplation of Christ's crucified body in her tenth step. As she grieves for Christ's suffering and wounds, Christ asks, "what indeed can you do for me that would satisfy

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<sup>39</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 212.

<sup>40</sup> Lachance, *Angela of Foligno*, 126.

you?’ I wept much, shedding such hot tears that they burned my flesh [and] I had to apply water to cool it.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, “here her bodily description tells of a real body that cried real tears and also reveals metaphorical tears of the soul. Fire and water are not in opposition; the flame that consumes her makes her tears like fire too.”<sup>42</sup> Upon the death of her family and her final resolve to renounce everything but God,<sup>43</sup> Angela enters into “a kind of symmetry in her imitation of Christ.”<sup>44</sup> She requests that she be able to shed her “blood for love of him just as he had done” for her, and she prays that her “body suffer a death not like his, that is, one much more vile.”<sup>45</sup> Indeed, Angela’s steps and visions are reflexive mirrors, whereby Angela and Godhead suffer and accept each other. Petroff claims that

. . . In these passages is the writing of body and of speech, of two bodies and two speaking voices, whose manifestations are symmetrical, mirroring each other. Angela is seeking to imitate Christ; in her mimesis of his nakedness and his suffering, she mimes nakedness and suffering for us as readers. For her, Christ is not a text to be read, but a role to be acted, and so she acts out her understanding of his experience, acts out of her understanding.<sup>46</sup>

I would like to suggest, however, that the mimesis, is twofold. Not only does Angela mime Christ physically on her spiritual journey, but she also mimes the actions of Francis and sets another social precedent. She follows the spiritual role model of Francis, but in doing so, she goes against cultural norms. This is evidenced by her scribe’s

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<sup>41</sup> Lachance, *Angela of Foligno*, 127.

<sup>42</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 213.

<sup>43</sup> Lachance, *Angela of Foligno*, 127-128.

<sup>44</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 213.

<sup>45</sup> Lachance, *Angela of Foligno*, 128.

<sup>46</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 214.

apologetics and his shock and dismay at Angela's vocal and dramatic display in the basilica at Assisi.

Laurie Finke suggests an additional revolutionary and socially resistant element in Angela's work. Here she employs the distinction between medieval literature and medieval society's understanding of embodiment, i.e., between the homogeneous, harmonious, and proportionate "classical body" and the heterogeneous, dissonant, and disproportionate "grotesque body." Indeed, "this sketch [between the classical and grotesque body] describes accurately the writings of many female mystics whose emotionalism and intense personal involvement, polyglot mixture of genres, and open-endedness contrasts markedly with the monumental rationalism and harmonious proportion of classical theological writing by men."<sup>47</sup> Finke claims that the emotional and affective character of female devotional writing is often "expressed through violence on the body," such as tears, injuries, screams, and howls.<sup>48</sup> Angela's example fits this model well; her wish to sustain a more violent and suffering death than Christ, and her intense bouts of screaming followed by paralysis, attest to this bodily violence.<sup>49</sup> Angela's accounts echo the identification with the grotesque body in other instances as well. Her desire to do penance by treading naked through town with rotting fish and meat hanging about her neck "invokes the grotesque body paradoxically to exorcise it."<sup>50</sup> Angela, to some extent, has internalized these medieval discursive norms; however, her

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<sup>47</sup> Finke, "Mystical Bodies," 37.

<sup>48</sup> Finke, "Mystical Bodies," 37.

<sup>49</sup> Lachance, *Angela of Foligno*, 131.

<sup>50</sup> Finke, "Mystical Bodies," 38.

embrace of violently writing the body also defies the norm through its vocal passion and shocking value.

Furthermore, Finke suggests that this form of writing the body is particularly female; in hagiographies of female saints written by men, “the elaborate inflicting of bodily pain often leaves the saint’s body miraculously untouched.”<sup>51</sup> Thus it seems that the bodily classical/grotesque distinction may prove useful and substantiated; male hagiographers sought to raise holy women above their female cultural bracket to make their representations more “classical,” i.e. impenetrable, unwounded, and harmonious.

Thus we have seen how essential sensory and bodily understandings are in Angela’s visionary experiences. As she demonstrates in her fourteenth step, she does not shrink from graphic physical description when she is called to “place my mouth to the wound in his side” and seemingly drinks the blood of Christ to be cleansed.<sup>52</sup> In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, parallels between blood and milk, and suffering and nursing, were common images that mystics related, so that “an association of Christ’s wounds with woman’s body and of woman with the food of the eucharist” was established.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, “the mystic’s own body becomes the site of contested discourses about the body – and about culture,” as the “grotesque bodies that open up and spill forth their contents – blood, milk, excrement” – are described.<sup>54</sup> Indeed it seems that “from a dichotomy in which human food was negative and divine food a replacement, Angela

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<sup>51</sup> Finke, “Mystical Bodies,” 38.

<sup>52</sup> Lachance, *Angela of Foligno*, 128.

<sup>53</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 271.

<sup>54</sup> Finke, “Mystical Bodies,” 38.

seems to have moved to a notion that one must eat the blood of suffering, a food both earthly and divine.”<sup>55</sup>

### **Angela’s Understandings of Embodiment in the Context of Medieval Literature**

Caroline Walker Bynum reports that this focus on embodiment might well be attributed the “humanation” of God theme found in hagiographies and devotional texts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Angela’s work seems a good example of such a theme. “‘Thus it [the soul] discovers both God ‘humanated’ and God uncreated, Christ the creator and Christ the creature, and in that Christ it discovers soul with flesh and blood and with all the members of his most sacred body;’” that is why “‘the human soul sees the soul of Christ, his eyes, his flesh, his body.’”<sup>56</sup> As we have seen in her sensory descriptions of Christ’s eyes, throat, and side, Angela’s piety and focus on all of Christ’s members was “seen as testimony to his humanation, and the devout soul responded to this enfleshing with all its bodily capabilities.”<sup>57</sup> For Angela, it is in the encounter with the body of Christ that she finds her most connective, ecstatic, and ineffable union.<sup>58</sup> “In no way whatever can I be sad concerning the passion; on the contrary... all my joy now is in this suffering God-man; at times it seems to my soul that it enters into Christ’s side, and this is a source of great joy and delight... [that] in no way can I express it and put words to it.”<sup>59</sup> Bynum claims that this type of piety, this “humanation,” allows the body to be “the instrument upon which the mystic rings changes of pain and of delight” and

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<sup>55</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 144.

<sup>56</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 90-91.

<sup>57</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 91.

<sup>58</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 192.

<sup>59</sup> Lachance, *Angela of Foligno*, 176.



provides the opportunity for (rather than hinders) the soul's mystic union with God.<sup>60</sup>

Indeed, the body may be the central focal point for spiritual experience, but the humanation of God has greater implications for the body than just to serve as tool and vessel. The body is itself redeemed in the humanation of God, through the recognition of Christ's likeness to *his* grotesque body, crucified and marred, to *a* grotesque body, e.g., the medieval woman, and to *the* grotesque body, the fallen body of humanity, poor, sick, outcast, and stigmatized. Thus, the theological implications of embodied mysticism span several redemptive possibilities.

Although Angela could not write (though she may have been able to read),<sup>61</sup> she, with other women "on the margins of the institutions of high culture, had learned a culture of their own."<sup>62</sup> Indeed, "this culture was replete with a language rich in emotion and specific meanings, irreplaceable, a language that cannot, of course, be found in contemporary magisterial and scholastic treatises."<sup>63</sup> As Mariateresa Beonio-Brocchieri argues, Angela is well aware that her descriptive ideas of feeling and experiencing God are somewhat dissonant from traditional biblical and theological interpretations, as evidenced by Fra Arnaldo's continuous objections. Angela's agency stands out in her "singular attitude, her violent passion and strength, which leads her often to highlight the contradictory aspects of her experience."<sup>64</sup> Her descriptions in her visions are complex

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<sup>60</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 194.

<sup>61</sup> Beonio-Brocchieri, "The Feminine Mind," 23.

<sup>62</sup> Beonio-Brocchiere, "The Feminine Mind," 23.

<sup>63</sup> Beonio-Brocchieri, "The Feminine Mind," 27.

<sup>64</sup> Beonio-Brocchieri, "The Feminine Mind," 24.

and contradictory, so that Angela embraces a multidimensional experience of presence and absence, love and emptiness. For example, Angela says that

When I am in darkness I do not remember anything about anything human, or the God-man, or anything which has a form. Nevertheless, I see all and I see nothing. As what I have spoken of withdraws and stays with me, I see the God-man . . . When I am in the God-man my soul is alive. And I am in the God-man much more than in the other vision of seeing God with darkness. The vision with darkness, however, draws me so much more that there is no comparison.<sup>65</sup>

Angela attempts to capture her osmotic experience of God with apparent contradictions, including the dynamic between presence and absence, form and formlessness. At a time when only the institution of the Catholic Church held the power of spiritual intercession, Angela declares her agency and her unique osmotic connection to the Godhead. For, “I am in the God-man [the humanity of Christ] almost continually. It began in this continual fashion on a certain occasion when I was given the assurance that there was no intermediary between God and myself.”<sup>66</sup> The fact that Angela’s use of language here parallels Beguine mystics and Meister Eckhart<sup>67</sup> indicates its powerful subversive possibilities. Thus Angela’s mystical language was nuanced and fluid as well as resistant and adamantly declarative.

Angela’s meditations on the image of the crucifix and her visions stemming from viewing the depiction of St. Francis being held by Christ show “how important images were as an aid to mystical meditation, and it is no surprise that an icon or crucifix was

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<sup>65</sup> Lachance, *Angela of Foligno*, 205. Note that this revelation comes in Angela’s seventh supplementary step, the last step that Fra Arnaldo, through his inability to sort through her final eleven steps, designates as supplementary.

<sup>66</sup> Lachance, *Angela of Foligno*, 205.

<sup>67</sup> Lachance, *Angela of Foligno*, 384 n. 131.

often the focal point of an episode either narrated in words or represented visually.”<sup>68</sup>

Angela had many visions upon contemplation of the cross, but one of her more poignant ones is likened to an expression of the Pieta. “I desired to see at least that small amount of Christ’s flesh which the nails had driven into the wood . . . I bent over and sat down; I stretched out my arms on the ground and inclined my head on them. Then Christ showed me his throat and his arms.”<sup>69</sup> Frugoni notes that “the erotic violence of this reflection . . . was not simply the consequence of repression (even if this was particularly marked in these women), but an aspect of that potent condensation of feelings that enabled her to . . . reach heights of sublimity and deification.”<sup>70</sup> Angela’s obsession with the image of Christ’s body, particularly his neck and throat that she sees repeatedly in the Host, allows for a connection between bodies and an embodiment in God.

### **Presence in the Embodied World: Angela’s Sphere of Influence and Consequences of Her Mysticism**

Angela’s sphere of influence was not merely contained in her visionary experience. Her acts of charity and her charismatic leadership extended well beyond her township of Foligno. Holy women like Angela of Foligno “were often endowed with penetrating prophetic insight – the counterpart to their capacity for introspection – which enabled them to see people’s hearts, inducing them to confession... these insights were supported, guided and confirmed by their visions.”<sup>71</sup> Indeed, Angela acquired quite a following, as evidenced by her *Instructions*. The effects of Angela’s visions and experiences were felt

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<sup>68</sup> Chiara Frugoni, “Female Mystics, Visions, and Iconography,” *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 138.

<sup>69</sup> Lachance, *Angela of Foligno*, 146.

<sup>70</sup> Frugoni, “Female Mystics,” 138.

<sup>71</sup> Frugoni, “Female Mystics,” 152.

by fellow mystics, like Ubertino of Casale, as far away as Paris.<sup>72</sup> Angela's work also had affinities to, and possible influence on, a lay anchoritic movement, called the *bizzochi* movement, in the late thirteenth century.<sup>73</sup>

Angela's works achieved widespread popularity a century after her death. For instance, in the fifteenth century, nuns in nearby Perugia "copied and disseminated biographies and writings by Franciscan holy women, [most] notably Angela of Foligno."<sup>74</sup> Although her works were reasonably well known during her era (as evidenced by the scrutinization of her *Book* by Franciscans and Cardinal Colonna), Angela has not yet been canonized.<sup>75</sup> P.H. Cullum notes that "despite being otherwise obedient daughters of the Church," figures such as Angela of Foligno and Clare of Montefalco "all failed to be canonized because of their supposed connections with the Spiritual Franciscans and their uncompromising line on poverty."<sup>76</sup> Once again, even in the auspices of charity, female mystics had a delicate balance to maintain. Religious women had to at once "demonstrate excessive levels of religiosity compared to men . . . yet if they did behave 'excessively,' whether charitably or in other respects, they risked aligning themselves with representations of women as unbalanced or unreasoning, which

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<sup>72</sup> Mario Sensi, "Anchoresses and Penitents in Thirteenth and Fourteenth Century Umbria," *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 65.

<sup>73</sup> Sensi, "Anchoresses and Penitents," 65.

<sup>74</sup> Katherine Gill, "Women and the Production of Religious Literature in the Vernacular, 1300-1500" *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy: A Religious and Artistic Renaissance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 67.

<sup>75</sup> Barone, "Society and Women's Religiosity," 63.

<sup>76</sup> Cullum, "Gendering Charity," 148.

might themselves bring their sanctity into question.”<sup>77</sup> Cullum points out that “the practice of charity was a gendered one in the Middle Ages,” whereby men balanced their own charitable contributions *and* directed the contributions of their female dependents and relatives.<sup>78</sup> Thus Angela’s widowhood may be identified as a position of blessing outside of the restrictions of the traditional system, which allowed her to perform radical works of charity.

However, Angela’s charity work, like that of other late medieval women mystics, may also be placed in connection with her feminine theological understandings of devotion to God. As in the vitae of other Italian women mystics, women’s characteristic “abstinence from food and devotion to the eucharist are connected to the feeding and serving of others.”<sup>79</sup> In Angela’s case, this connective theology is evident from her encounter with the leper’s wash water. She “came to express this *imitatio crucis* by feeding and caring for the sick” and “because she cared for their bodies as a substitute for Jesus’ own, she used metaphors of eating quite literally.”<sup>80</sup>

Elizabeth Petroff claims that Angela’s *Book* demonstrates repeatedly that “the truly beatific vision is expansive, not contractive.”<sup>81</sup> As we have seen, Angela’s visions of the eucharist and crucified Christ provide a number of insights on embodiment. Her devotion to the eucharist emphasizes bodily elements and sensory experience, so that her ecstasies seem to occur in both the physical and spiritual realms. Her identification with,

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<sup>77</sup> Cullum, “Gendering Charity,” 138.

<sup>78</sup> Cullum, “Gendering Charity,” 148.

<sup>79</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 145.

<sup>80</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 144.

<sup>81</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 34.

and her devotion to, the body of Christ in its myriad of gendered forms indicates Angela's complex understanding of union with God. Rather than merely invert the patriarchal paradigm by relating to God as female, Angela unknowingly seems to subvert patriarchal theology by relating to God in multifaceted ways, as erotic lover, nursing mother, innocent child, or androgynous companion. Indeed, "Angela of Foligno's imitation of Christ is a self-consciously transgressive practice that defies and exceeds the limits of human language."<sup>82</sup> In this sense, Angela's mystical insights and experiences are expansive and open up endless possibilities of embodied relation to the divine.

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<sup>82</sup> Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria*, 190.

## CHAPTER 4

### AGENT OF GOD: THE MYSTIC CALL OF CATHERINE OF SIENA

The fire of holy desire was growing within me as I gazed. And I saw the people, Christians and unbelievers, entering the side of Christ crucified. In desire and impelled by love I walked through their midst and entered with them into Christ gentle Jesus. And with me were my father Saint Dominic, the beloved John, and all my children. Then he placed the cross on my shoulder and put an olive branch in my hand, as if he wanted me (and so he told me) to carry it to the Christians and unbelievers alike. And he said to me: “Tell them, ‘I am bringing you news of great joy!’”<sup>1</sup>

In a letter from April 1376, Catherine of Siena declared her great commission from God to act as his agent of reform and servant to the church in an era of political strife and ecclesiastical turmoil. Her brief but tumultuous life was loaded with activity and experience, and her influence was extensive. Catherine expanded the boundaries assigned to women tertiaries, acted as a political mediator, produced a distinct theology found in her book and letters, and developed an embodied mysticism with redemptive possibilities.

Born in 1347 amid the horror and destruction of the Black Death, Catherine di Giacomo di Benincasa was the twenty-fourth child of twenty-five children born into her lower class family.<sup>2</sup> Catherine of Siena was a seemingly unusual and odd child by modern standards. Reportedly, her first vision occurred when she was a child of seven,<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Letter T219/G87/DT65. Catherine here relays her experiences in prayer concerning the unity of the Church to Raymond of Capua and his company, who are in Avignon, in a letter from early April 1376, prior to Catherine’s own mission to Avignon. Suzanne Noffke, ed., *The Letters of Catherine of Siena Volume II* (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000), 92.

<sup>2</sup> Furlong, *Visions and Longings*, 157.

<sup>3</sup> Furlong, *Visions and Longings*, 157.

she played at becoming a hermit and an ascetic flagellant,<sup>4</sup> and she vowed her virginity before she was fifteen in a vision of mystical marriage with Christ.<sup>5</sup> By the age of fifteen, she was vehemently denying her parents' insistence that she marry, and she was put under a type of house arrest, punished by being reduced to the status of a servant among her family.<sup>6</sup> Catherine resisted with the only thing that she could control: her own body. She refused or limited intake of food, cut off her hair, and intentionally burned and scalded herself in hot baths when taken on vacation with her family.<sup>7</sup> At the age of seventeen, Catherine endured a bout of smallpox that left her scarred and which diminished her prospects for marriage. Catherine seized the opportunity to convince her mother to allow her to join the Dominican Sisters of the Third Order, an active group of widows who focused on good works for the poor who were also known as the Mantellate. Indeed, despite the Mantellate's hesitancy to accept the young and vulnerable Catherine to a life of public ministry, she "was so disfigured by the smallpox and so sober in speech that she became the first virgin tertiary in the Dominican order."<sup>8</sup> She joined the tertiary group around 1364, but lived in relative isolation in her parents' home until a mystical vision of complete espousal with Christ marked a change into public, active ministry in 1367.

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<sup>4</sup> Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 36-37.

<sup>5</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 18.

<sup>6</sup> Furlong, *Visions and Longings*, 157.

<sup>7</sup> Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, 217-218.

<sup>8</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 18.



In 1370, Catherine experienced a four-hour long, paralyzing ecstasy of mystical death in which Jesus and Catherine exchanged hearts.<sup>9</sup> Catherine perceived this vision as a command from God to actively pursue souls and to expand her mission to the worldly conflicts of the Church and papacy.<sup>10</sup> Writing letters and visiting dignitaries, Catherine of Siena attempted to mediate the fracturing church. In April of 1375, she received the stigmata and prophesied the Great Schism of the church four years prior to its occurrence. She convinced Pope Gregory XI to return from Avignon, and by 1378, she was living in Rome, serving as Pope Urban VI's advisor and writing her book, the *Dialogue*.<sup>11</sup> In a desperate attempt to protest the politics of schism in the church and force reconciliation, Catherine undertook an extreme fast on January 1, 1380 in which she vowed to drink no water.<sup>12</sup> Although she ended her hunger strike on January 29 after collapsing, she never fully recovered.<sup>13</sup> On April 3, 1380, Catherine Benincasa of Siena died in Rome at the age of thirty-three.<sup>14</sup>

### **Garnering the Authority of Agent and Author: Catherine's Prolific Career as a Reformer of the Church**

Catherine wrote or dictated close to four hundred letters, twenty-six *Prayers*, and penned her very own *Dialogue* (or as she called it *Il Libro*), a conversation between her

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<sup>9</sup> Furlong, *Visions and Longings*, 158.

<sup>10</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 18.

<sup>11</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 19.

<sup>12</sup> Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 49.

<sup>13</sup> Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 50.

<sup>14</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 19.

and God.<sup>15</sup> The *Dialogue*, her major theological treatise, was created in a complex synthesis of dictation and Catherine's writing and editing in her own hand after she learned to write late in life.<sup>16</sup> Catherine's letters are no less crucial to understanding her influence as an author; over sixty of her three hundred and eighty-two letters relate to the Schism, appealing to the protagonists of the conflict and offering mediation.<sup>17</sup>

Catherine's great efforts at preventing fracture, from her visit to Avignon to convince Pope Gregory XI to return to Rome to her 1378 exhortations to the Florentines to end their war with the Papacy, are seen in her epistles. Her letters demonstrate her commitment to her "apostolic endeavors, her self-image as a person called to travel and preach 'for the honor of God and the salvation of souls,' and her dictation of letters as a means of furthering her political and ecclesiastical causes."<sup>18</sup> Employing the genres of both oral culture (through dictation) and *epistolario* allowed Catherine "to enter the public sphere and to communicate with political and ecclesiastical leaders on a footing of equality."<sup>19</sup> Catherine was canonized in 1461, named Patroness of Italy in 1939, and was promoted to the status of Doctor of the Church (along with Teresa of Avila) in 1970.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to the influence of Catherine's written work, she also garnered a dedicated following of disciples known called the "*bella brigata* (beautiful group), or

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<sup>15</sup> Lagorio, "Medieval Continental Women," 185.

<sup>16</sup> Suzanne Noffke, ed., *Catherine of Siena: The Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 14.

<sup>17</sup> Karen Scott, "'Io Catarina: ' Ecclesiastical Politics and Oral Culture in the Letters of Catherine of Siena," *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 87.

<sup>18</sup> Scott, "Io Catarina," 88.

<sup>19</sup> Scott, "Io Catarina," 106.

<sup>20</sup> Lagorio, "Medieval Continental Women," 185-186.

*Caterinati*, of the *dolcissima mama* [sweetest mother].”<sup>21</sup> Members of her devoted group included her Dominican confessors (Tommaso della Fonte, Bartolomeo di Dominici, and Raymond of Capua), her secretaries (Barduccio Canigiani, Stefano Maconi, and Neri di Landoccio de’Pagliaresi), and her later hagiographer Caffarini.<sup>22</sup> Catherine’s influence and example was far reaching, stretching even into the church hierarchy. Cardinal Giovanni Dominici and other ecclesiastics recognized her as a spiritual guide and “adopted her as the inspirational model for their reformation of the Dominican order.”<sup>23</sup> Her own confessor Raymond credited his rise to the position of Dominican master general to Catherine’s spiritual patronage,<sup>24</sup> thus giving credit to Catherine’s influence and authority. His acknowledgement also serves to shift the power dynamic between confessor and penitent, admitting that Catherine guided and enhanced his spiritual understanding. Indeed, “in this manner, from a position of structural weakness and ideological subordination, Catherine was able to exercise a profound influence on religious beliefs and ecclesiastical institutions.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, the extent of Catherine’s active and inscribed influence has stretched from the political and ecclesiastical order of her time to her adoration and admiration as saint and church doctor in modern times.

The figure of Catherine of Siena seems to be the quintessential example of a woman mystic who asserts her spiritual creativity and her unsettling expressions of piety

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<sup>21</sup> Lagorio, “Medieval Continental Women,” 184.

<sup>22</sup> Lagorio, “Medieval Continental Women,” 184.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Bornstein, “Women and Religion in Late Medieval Italy: History and Historiography,” *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 6.

<sup>24</sup> Bornstein, “Women and Religion,” 6.

<sup>25</sup> Bornstein, “Women and Religion,” 6.

within a standard hagiographic model. It should be noted that though “these models were crafted by men for women [they] should not blind us to the active role of women in generating these models or the manifold ambiguities inherent in the process of modeling.”<sup>26</sup> Although Catherine’s work was accepted by the church and male hierarchy, she often diverged from traditional models of spiritual understanding and action. She actively shaped and developed her own model of piety, sometimes in contradiction to that of her hagiographers. For example, Catherine focuses on her loving passion and hope for the church in her *Dialogue* and letters. Raymond’s *Legenda*, on the other hand, seems to emphasize more of her supernatural struggles, visions, and miracles, in continuity with other male confessors and the hagiographic genre.<sup>27</sup> Catherine’s emphasis on her God-given call, her devotion to the church, and her personal piety, in contrast to hagiographic reports, show her wielding agency and blossoming into a writer. Through her difference in emphasis, she declared her own authority, and she crafted her legacy of reform and mysticism through her letters and *Dialogue*.

Catherine’s relationship with her confessor Raymond of Capua seems unusual and inverted from a standard penitent to confessor model. Raymond’s *Legenda maior*, written after Catherine’s death between 1385 and 1395, contains indications of a mutual rather than domineering relationship between Catherine and Raymond.<sup>28</sup> The *Legenda* cites numerous instances of role reversal, where Catherine chides Raymond for belittling

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<sup>26</sup> Bornstein, “Women and Religion,” 5.

<sup>27</sup> Karen Scott, “Mystical Death, Bodily Death: Catherine of Siena and Raymond of Capua on the Mystic’s Encounter with God,” *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1999), 161.

<sup>28</sup> John Coakley, “Friars as Confidants of Holy Women in Medieval Dominican Hagiography,” *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 234.

her sins, rebukes him for falling asleep during her explanations, instructs him on how to retreat within his mind and to resist arguing with Satan.<sup>29</sup> The ultimate example of the inverted role relationship between penitent and confessor comes when Raymond doubts Catherine's revelatory visions and asks for a sign from her. Raymond witnesses Catherine's face transfigured into that of a bearded man, and, terrified, he asks the question "who is this, looking at me?" The transfigured Catherine replies, "He who is."<sup>30</sup> Raymond includes this story of Catherine's transfiguration into Christ to emphasize her unique relationship with and commission from God, to justify her actions, and to highlight her piety to speed the process toward canonization. However, Raymond also could have been using a typical hagiographic model whereby male hagiographers sought to elevate or authenticate women saints by assigning male qualities.<sup>31</sup>

However, there is something more significant underlying this vision than just an imposed hagiographic device. Catherine could have asked for a different sign, or Raymond could have received a more personal vision. Instead, the story underlines the idea that God selected Catherine's body, that of a woman, to clear the doubts of her male confessor and to display Catherine's close emotional and physical bond with God. Catherine's transfiguration into Christ emphasizes both her intimacy with God and her embodied experience of that intimacy. The selection of Catherine's body as a vessel and message for God indicates Catherine's higher spiritual understanding and receptivity to mystical experience. Catherine assumed the role of spiritual guide as she related her

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<sup>29</sup> Coakley, "Friars as Confidants," 236.

<sup>30</sup> Coakley, "Friars as Confidants," 237.

<sup>31</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 166-167. See also p. 39.

experiences to Raymond, and Raymond in turn accepted his role as student and eventually extolled Catherine to prepare the way for her canonization. Thus, the relationship between Catherine and Raymond seemed to fall outside of traditional, institutional boundaries and may be described as a cooperative, symbiotic, and mutual partnership.

Catherine used her divinely inspired authority to work within the church, supporting its teachings and to some extent its hierarchy. Indeed, “her enormous charismatic power not only did not challenge but also specifically served the sacramental ministry of the church.”<sup>32</sup> For instance, when Catherine converted sinners, she sent them immediately to a priest for confession.<sup>33</sup> However, she was also able to identify Raymond’s sins and turn his error to penitence, displaying a role reversal where Catherine acts the model of the priest. Thus, there are some instances where Catherine does challenge traditional notions of ministry. Not only does the *Legenda* affirm Catherine as a locus of “supernatural favor and power” in her own right, but it also presents the authority of the church as being “in a harmonious and momentous partnership with the saint’s charismatic power.”<sup>34</sup> As in her relationship with Raymond, Catherine’s relationship with the church is one of mutuality. However, a role reversal can also be seen here. Even as Catherine worked within the structure of the church, recognized by bishops and respected by popes, she also criticized the stubborn and misled

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<sup>32</sup> Coakley, “Friars as Confidants,” 238.

<sup>33</sup> Jo Ann McNamara, “The Rhetoric of Orthodoxy: Clerical Authority and Female Innovation in the Struggle with Heresy,” *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 18.

<sup>34</sup> Coakley, “Friars as Confidants,” 234.

brethren who were fracturing the church, and she pushed structural boundaries by joining a tertiary order as a virgin. By serving in additional, expanded roles of teacher, confessor, and political mediator, she went well beyond her position as a mercy providing tertiary to the poor and extended that mission to encompass the whole church and unbelievers. Catherine, though seemingly and innocently submissive to the patriarchal structure of the church, challenged and pushed her authority as a woman, and she did so with the conviction given to her through her experiential and embodied mysticism.

Catherine's mysticism was grounded by her conviction in the importance of working in the world. As she writes in her *Dialogue* with God, Catherine's duty to God was as a humble and working servant in the world and the holy church. Indeed, she writes that God proclaims;

... I would satisfy your anguished longings by reforming holy Church through good and holy shepherds. I will do this, as I told you, not through war, not with sword and violence, but through peace and calm, through my servants' tears and sweat. I have set you as workers in your own and neighbors' souls and in the mystic body of the holy Church. In yourselves you must work at virtue; in your neighbors and in the Church you must work by example and teaching.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, Catherine very much perceived her vocation and calling to be one of active participation and proclamative teaching. Catherine considered herself to be a leader, garnering her authority from a God-given charge. Furthermore, Catherine understood her work as physical and embodied;

With your prayers and sweat and tears I will wash the face of my bride, holy Church. I showed her to you earlier as a maiden whose face was all dirtied, as if she were a leper. The clergy and the whole of Christianity are to blame for this because of their sins, though they receive nourishment at the breast of this bride!<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Noffke, *Catherine of Siena*, 159.

<sup>36</sup> Noffke, *Catherine of Siena*, 159-160.

Thus, Catherine's charge required working in the grime of the world, toiling with sweat and tears and frustration against a corrupted institution. Catherine's call for reform is metaphorically related as restoration of the female body, a removal of dirty oppression of the bride and a restoration of the recognition of her powerful, life-giving prowess. Catherine felt called to become immersed in the world in order to be God's instrumental servant for reform.

Following in Catherine's footsteps, Raymond of Capua reiterated her charge from God as a sign of her authority, and he also legitimated Catherine's unsettling apostolate by underscoring her role in neighborhood networks. Raymond additionally emphasized the divine sanction Catherine had received by pointing to her visions and miracles as proof of God's approval and presence in her life. According to his hagiographic *Legenda* of Catherine, she was accused of hypocrisy and pride, and she was perceived of as social revolutionary, a woman who resisted her "place" in either the domestic or cloistered sphere.<sup>37</sup> Rather than remaining in the home caring for her own family, or remaining in a nunnery nurturing her sisters and her individual soul, Catherine actively pursued public service, tending to the sick and poor in the streets of Siena with her tertiary sisters. The initial hostility of the Siennese people to Catherine's assertive presence could easily be attributed to her very public performances; the social milieu of fourteenth century central Italy relegated women's mysticism to monastic cloisters or anchoritic cells.<sup>38</sup> Catherine's public ecstasies, her service of the poor within an organization usually reserved for

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<sup>37</sup> Karen Scott, "Urban Spaces, Women's Networks, and the Lay Apostolate in the Siena of Catherine Benincasa," *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy: A Religious and Artistic Renaissance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 108-110.

<sup>38</sup> Scott, "Urban Spaces," 107.



widows (rather than young virgins), and her traveling beyond her home certainly made Catherine a target for criticism. Still, Catherine's assertion and confidence in God's call to her to act freely in the world justified her atypical behavior for a young woman.

### **Encountering Food Asceticism, Suffering, and Humanity: Catherine's Embodied Mysticism**

Catherine's extreme food asceticism has garnered much attention and study. Catherine began her practice of fasting and developed a dislike of meat early as a child.<sup>39</sup> From age sixteen onward, Catherine subsisted on bread, water, and raw vegetables and gradually reduced these items to only the eucharist, water, and bitter herbs.<sup>40</sup> Grace Jantzen suggests that Catherine of Siena's food asceticism was another form of control over her body and her circumstances. In rejecting food, she may have been well aware of the correlation between it and her body weight and menstruation, and thus rejected her sexuality and marriageability as well.<sup>41</sup> Certainly, this analysis may be applied to Catherine's initial struggles against her family for control of her future, but it does not account for Catherine's continued extreme fasts or her attitude toward food as a whole when juxtaposed with her interest in feeding others or imbibing their suffering. Like Angela of Foligno, Catherine also drank pus and called it sweet, and she focused on images of nursing and drinking Christ's blood.<sup>42</sup> Identification with Christ's suffering through bodily images and *imitatio Christi* were central to Catherine's spiritual and

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<sup>39</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 167.

<sup>40</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 169.

<sup>41</sup> Jantzen, *Power*, 214.

<sup>42</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 172.

personal understanding, and she shaped and melded her own meaning in physical suffering.

Laura Finke argues that the harsh asceticism practiced by female mystics such as Catherine was utilized as a body redeeming and meaning-determining tool. By undertaking severe fasts, sleep deprivation, or flagellation, “the mystic becomes at once both torturer and victim,” so that “her body bears the marks, the ‘signs,’ of her own spiritual power.”<sup>43</sup> Although the church authorities encouraged moderation in penance, the mystics undertook extreme practices to show that “they were always special instances of God’s grace because they chose their own suffering and thus were free to define what it meant.”<sup>44</sup> Catherine shaped her own understanding of her food asceticism; she reasons that since eating causes her such torture, it would be suicide to eat, since eating would be a homicide by greed, a deadly sin.<sup>45</sup> Catherine determined the meaning of her food asceticism by asserting the sinfulness of eating and announcing her personal piety through suffering.

Catherine also describes her ingestion problems as an infirmity from God and prays for relief from this infirmity.<sup>46</sup> Catherine’s practices, “from her rejection of food for herself, to her drinking of the pus of a suffering woman, to her serving Christ through suffering, to her attempt to control the movements of the pope by her prayers and fasting,

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<sup>43</sup> Finke, “Mystical Bodies,” 42.

<sup>44</sup> Finke, “Mystical Bodies,” 42.

<sup>45</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 169.

<sup>46</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 169.

became in her case a constellation that pointed to holiness.”<sup>47</sup> Her practices were thus interrelated and inseparable from her agency in creating meaning and understanding the love and redemptive possibilities of God. Indeed, ascetic “technologies which, in the hands of a powerful church, were meant to limit severely the autonomy and authority of women became for the mystics a source of self-determination, virtually the only one available to women during this period.”<sup>48</sup> Although viewed as the weaker sex, women used ascetic practices to push their bodies, claiming piety, worth, and meaning molding agency, as well as being vessels for God’s presence and manifest love.

For many medieval women, asceticism was not merely a buying into an internalized patriarchal gender dichotomy, as Grace Jantzen suggests.<sup>49</sup> Rather, it was an activity that asserted creativity and assigned meaning to the experience of women and embodied mysticism. Ascetic practices that enhanced mystical experience cannot be reduced to the labels of psychological neurosis, biological illness, or sociological attention seeking. Catherine’s request to receive the stigmata without scarring emphasizes her conviction that the point of the stigmata was identification with suffering, not the visibility of the scars as a sign of her holiness.<sup>50</sup> As Caroline Bynum notes, “the notion of substituting one’s own suffering through illness and starvation for the guilt and destitution of others is not ‘symptom’ [of the psychodynamic theory of anorexia/bulimia]

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<sup>47</sup> Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Mysticism*, 222.

<sup>48</sup> Finke, “Mystical Bodies,” 42.

<sup>49</sup> Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Mysticism*, 222.

<sup>50</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 212.

– it is theology.”<sup>51</sup> Indeed, fasting “was not merely a substitution of pathological and self-defeating control of self for unattainable control of circumstance . . . it was part of suffering; and suffering was considered an effective activity, which redeemed both individual and cosmos.”<sup>52</sup> Catherine’s ascetic suffering was part of her charge from God, an active way to realize her commission to save the church through her own suffering. In other words, Catherine’s asceticism was the embodied theology of *imitatio Christi*.

Catherine’s emphasis on the physicality of mystical union and the humanity of Christ shows her understanding of embodiment and redemption. Catherine describes the physicality of union with God’s humanity in powerful sensory terms;

Once she has gone along this way of my only-begotten Son’s teaching and set her sights firmly on me, gentle first Truth, she comes to know what she has seen, and knowing it, she loves it. Her will, drawn along the heels of understanding, tastes my eternal Godhead and knows and sees therein the divine nature joined with your humanity. She takes her rest then in me, the peaceful sea. Her heart is united with me in affectionate love . . . when she feels the presence of my eternal Godhead she begins to shed sweet tears that are truly a milk that nourishes the soul in true patience. These tears are a fragrant ointment that sends forth a most delicate perfume.<sup>53</sup>

Thus, Catherine’s mystical experience is described in tangible ways; she knows, experiences, loves through sight, taste, feeling presence or touch, and smell. Even as her heart unites with God, Catherine describes the bodily experience of crying, and it is an embodied experience that nurtures and protects. Through this sensory imagery, Catherine highlights her common humanity with God and the possibility of redeeming her body through mystical experience.

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<sup>51</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 206.

<sup>52</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 207.

<sup>53</sup> Noffke, *Catherine of Siena*, 163.

Indeed, medieval women tended to emphasize both their humanity and God's humanity, but this humanity was not understood in the patriarchal sense of woman as sinful corporeality. "To medieval women humanity was, most basically, not femaleness, but physicality, the flesh of the 'Word made flesh;' it was the ultimate negative – the otherness from God that the God-man redeemed by taking it into himself."<sup>54</sup> Yet, when Catherine physically "tastes my eternal Godhead and knows and sees therein the divine nature joined with your humanity,"<sup>55</sup> she redeems her broken body in her mystical unification with Christ.

Catherine's emphasis on the experience of the holism and redeemed humanity found through encounter with God can be seen in her discussion of eucharistic piety in the *Dialogue*.

Even if the host is divided, even if you could break it into thousands and thousands of tiny bits, in each one I would be there, wholly God and wholly human. It is just as when a mirror is broken, and yet the image one sees reflected in it remains unbroken. So when the host is divided, I am not divided but remain completely in each piece, wholly God, wholly human . . . Each one of you brings your own candle, that is, the holy desire to with which you receive and eat this sacrament. Your candle by itself is unlit, and is lighted when you receive this sacrament . . . it is I who have given you the candle with which you can receive this light and nourish it within you. And your candle is love, because it is for love that I created you, so without love you cannot have life.<sup>56</sup>

God, in the form of the mystical host, is wholly present and holy nourishment, redeeming the human body through physical food and spiritual identification with humanity. Catherine's theology thus emphasizes the physicality and the humanity of God without gender dichotomy. Yet the site of redemption is still the individual body,

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<sup>54</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 179.

<sup>55</sup> Noffke, *Catherine of Siena: The Dialogue*, 163.

<sup>56</sup> Noffke, *Catherine of Siena: The Dialogue*, 207-208.

nurtured by the gift of the host, so that the hope of redemption lies in embodied experience, not abstract intellectual understanding.

Thus, women mystics like Catherine redeemed the physicality of their patriarchally identified grotesque bodies through the mystical experience of God's humanity. There still remains the sense that women's mysticism was unique in that it understood God through embodied experience, the only outlet for spirituality and the only possibility for agency and authority for women within a structurally misogynistic world. Thus, embodied mysticism allowed women both to redeem their marginalized bodies and to move beyond imposed gender stereotypes by experiencing God beyond gender. Surely, Catherine and others still employed the language of bride and bridegroom in an ineffable attempt to describe mystical union; I do not deny the power and widespread use of the imagery of Jesus as mother or Christ as spouse. Yet, their experience and understanding of redemption through God was *holistic* and *healing*, unfractured by the imposed gender models of their day. Even as women identified with the grotesque body as a site of reception for physical and spiritual meeting with Christ, they also released gender identification while in mystical union with God. In this sense, women mystics, like Catherine, were able to *write* their bodies as receptive sites of redemption and to *right* patriarchally imposed gender stereotypes through mystical union with God

CHAPTER 5  
REFLECTIONS ON EMBODIED MYSTICISM: THE CONTINUED CALL FOR  
MEDIEVAL GENDER STUDIES

Clare of Assisi, Angela of Foligno, and Catherine of Siena are vibrant examples of mystics empowered by their spiritual convictions and encounters. These central Italian women mystics are not unified merely by their temporal and spatial proximity or by the similar social and historical conditions of institutional patriarchy that they faced. Rather, these central Italian women, two saints and one beatified, are unified across time by their insistence on embodied and experiential mysticism, and in their sense of conviction in being vocal agents of God. Thus we have seen how women mystics both *write* and *right* themselves, their agency, and their bodies in the face of the restrictive conditions of institutional hierarchy and misogyny and despite the efforts of male authority figures to mediate their mysticism.

Clare of Assisi asserted her spiritual understanding in her *Forma vitae*, a monastic rule that offered a way to live, a path to walk with God, in contrast to other rules that imposed severe injunctions and crippled movement. She wrote the *Forma vitae* with the desire for a horizontal working community, wherein men and women worked together collaboratively, and Clare's intention to right, or correct, human relationship is evident. Indeed, Clare wrote herself into the *Forma vitae*, for it was a statement of her life and the culmination of her long struggle to right her body within the cloistered confines of the patriarchal structure. In her correspondence, Clare seems equally insistent in writing her body into an intimate relationship with Christ by employing sensory, physical imagery

and by invoking the motif of mystical marriage. She rights her marginalized body through identification with Christ's humanity and redemption through *imitatio Christi*.

Angela of Foligno wrote her embodied mysticism in the *Memorial* in a complex synthesis of active dictation, collaboration, and redaction with the assistance of her confessor Brother Arnaldo. Angela wrote her body into mystical experience through sensory imagery and mystical encounter with Christ's suffering and crucified body. Her physical descriptions seem dissonant when contrasted with orthodox rhetoric of intellectual spirituality. This further lends the sense that Angela is locating the body as a site for knowledge of God and the divine, and is thus righting her womanly body, challenging the male hierarchical locus of knowledge found in the priesthood. In her *imitatio Christi*, Angela embraces her marginalized body in order to enter into the most marginalized, grotesque body of the good Christ crucified. Employing embodied mysticism allows Angela to expand conceptions of God from God as spirit to God as human, experiential, suffering, ecstatic, and present. Thus, Angela writes her own body into experience and rights the flesh of humanity.

Comparatively speaking, Catherine of Siena seems to act as the most free agent of these mystics, openly defiant, active, and confident in her role of writing and righting the human body. Perhaps the sense of Catherine's agency shines so because she was able to exercise her embodied mysticism in an era of institutional chaos, where the cracks in the structural hierarchy allowed Catherine a vocal entrance point into worldly politics. Catherine righted and embraced her body in a number of ways, by claiming it as a receptive vessel for God's work and by invoking her person in the authoritative role reversals of the confessor/penitent model and the activist/tertiary model. She remained



strong in her conviction of her divine agency that only she could right a fracturing church. Her call from God to be an agent of church reform is also a call from God to right the female body, to “wash the face of my bride . . . whose face was all dirtied” by the corruption of the hierarchical clergy.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Catherine seems to surreptitiously challenge the abuses of the patriarchal establishment. Like Clare and Angela, Catherine also wrote her body into *imitatio Christi*, enduring forms of extreme food and penance asceticism in order to understand and identify with the suffering of Christ. For Catherine, suffering for Christ was a lived theology, and unification with the Godhead occurred in terms of the physicality of the body. Thus, Catherine’s embodied mysticism provided a holistic emphasis on the body as a site of healing and redemption.

The significance of embodied mysticism lies in its unmediated characteristics. These women mystics preferred to use their own bodies, rather than use the more common patriarchal mediation of theological intellectualism. Indeed, women’s mystical expressions were not dry, stuffy, and unidimensional in an intellectual sense, but vibrant, enlivened, and multifaceted in an experiential sense. Female embodied mysticism was neither a mere exercise of thought nor a reference to standard theological models, but was a lived experience with the potential for constant flux, change, and new understandings.

Throughout this study, I have not meant to suggest that these women mystics consciously or intentionally pushed the boundaries in the sense that they were pushing for feminist empowerment. Certainly, it is impossible to directly graph our modern notions of female freedom and agency onto a wholly different set of social and historical circumstances. Such an analysis would be tenuous and anachronistic. Yet, we have seen

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<sup>1</sup> Noffke, *Catherine of Siena*, 159.

the ways in which the feminist lens can illuminate certain behavioral and experiential characteristics when framed in its proper historical context. Feminist analysis can show how marginalized women take something restricted and oppressed and make it their own.

Medieval women related in ambiguous ways to the patriarchal tradition, wholly embracing medieval religiosity and wanting to stay orthodox to the teachings of the church in order to attain salvation. Yet, paradoxically, in embracing mystical expressions of religiosity, women adopted and adapted the church teachings, “pushing at the male-defined boundaries, [and] challenging their definitions and preconceptions.”<sup>2</sup> In the case of religious medieval women, “the source of their spirituality was experiential more than intellectual, in a stronger sense than was true for most male mystics.” Women, denied the “usual routes of education and ecclesiastical preferment,” used their experience as the basis of their authority.<sup>3</sup> As we have seen, Clare relied on her visions, and Catherine and Angela gathered authority from their tertiary service. Certainly, the experiential quality of these events cannot be understood as merely contrived to make a feminist statement. Far from it. These women were acting within a highly charged religious location and time period, and they sincerely sought spiritual connection and religious fulfillment. Yet, the outcome of wanting to make religious experience truly their own and to share it with others was a distinct expression that redeemed not only their individual souls but also their bodies as women in a patriarchal society. The agency of these women mystics came in their efforts to apprehend a personal, individual relationship with God, and its byproduct was redemption of both the soul and the body through a concretized, embodied

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<sup>2</sup> Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Mysticism*, 158.

<sup>3</sup> Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Mysticism*, 159.

mystical experience. That is, in seeking to make religious salvation their own, they also made it woman's. By emphasizing presence, senses, and suffering, they also placed the body within the realm of mystical experience. The writing and righting of the body through mystical experience was a cycle of both identifying with socially marginalized body and redeeming the body through unitive mystical experience with God. Through their experiential emphasis, women challenged and pushed the envelope of institutional understandings of religion.

Still, this study begs the question of how women mystics understood the dynamic between orality and writing, and to what extent they considered writing to be owned expression. Scholars have offered numerous critiques about the extent to which women participated in the writing of their mystical visions. Most often, scholars assert that women mystics separated themselves from, or were entirely disinterested in, the written recordings of their visions and theological understandings. Indeed, it is usually argued "that there is an inherent opposition between a mystical experience and writing (together with all its variants, opposition between the truth of the experience and the lie of the word, between nature and writing, between the divine and the human)."<sup>4</sup>

However, this model of understanding the dynamic between experience and writing does not seem to hold true in the cases of Clare, Angela or Catherine. Indeed, Clare insisted on writing her own Rule, despite the fact that she encountered a variety of Rules written with her convent in mind. Angela made Fra Arnaldo read his record back to her, and she criticized his style and corrected his interpretations. Catherine chided Raymond for falling asleep while listening to her discourses on God, and her role reversal with

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<sup>4</sup> Adriano Prosperi, "Spiritual Letters," *Women and Faith: Catholic Religious Life in Italy from Late Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 115.

Raymond allowed her greater interpretive control over how her visions were presented. Although women's spirituality has been identified as more experiential and men's as more rational and intellectual, these characteristics were often fluid and shifting, and should not preclude the participation and interest of either gender in one or the other type of expression. Indeed, we must understand these characteristics not as flat and closed, but as open and engaging models of comprehending both male and female spirituality. As we have seen with Clare, Angela, and Catherine, women were equally interested in the espousal of theology, and as we have noted, their hagiographers and confessors expressed equal interest in their experiential knowledge. Although women mystics may have placed greater emphasis on embodied mysticism, they also desired to write and right church theology.

The extreme food and body asceticism of religious women also played a key part in the writing of embodied mysticism. "In fact and in image, suffering (both self-inflicted and involuntary) and food (both eucharist and fasting) were women's most characteristic ways of attaining God."<sup>5</sup> Women identified with their grotesque bodies not by transcending them or inverting them by taking on male characteristics, but by embracing their bodies and expressions thereof in mystical performance. "Women reached God not by reversing what they were but by sinking more fully into it."<sup>6</sup> By identifying fully with the flesh and welcoming God's presence there, women mystics not only righted their own bodies but redeemed the whole body of humanity.

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<sup>5</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 172.

<sup>6</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 172.

Certainly, critics claim that real feminist analysis (in the modern, western sense) is impossible to apply to the medieval period because women internalized the misogyny of the patriarchal structure. To some extent, we can see how these women mystics acquiesced to the institution of the church. Indeed, we have seen how Catherine died trying to manipulate the workings of male patriarchy, and how Clare accepted retirement to a cloister. Yet, it is instructive to remember that there was no other option or avenue available to these women, and it would be anachronistic to think that there could be another type of medieval feminism aside from what these mystics have showed us. I argue that attempted agency within the confines of a social and historical location is better than absolute silence, and any type of activity necessarily carries with it the potential for interpretation and multivalent meaning. These mystics did challenge gender boundaries and assumed authoritative voices. Although somewhat reactive to their social surroundings, they acted in ways that they made their own. Clare, Angela, and Catherine staked a claim for women's spirituality and women's voice. Indeed, when the layers of male interpretation and mediation are peeled away, the ways in which women mystics actively wrote and righted themselves emerge. Although Catherine's hundreds of letters and Angela's mystical instructions are rich with expressions yet to be mined, this study has opened avenues and provided interpretive models for future study. Hopefully, the writing and righting of embodied mysticism can continue to be unlocked by the interpretive key of feminism. The authentic, embodied mysticism of Clare, Angela, and Catherine offers endless possibilities of understanding the nuanced ways medieval mystics understood the body and redemption.

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