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The Struggle of the Soul

Medieval Women Mystics and the Constraints of the Orthodoxy

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“Let your women keep silence in the churches for it is not permitted unto them to speak.”

- I Corinthians 14:34

Infamy and influence, or excommunication and death. This was the reality of the medieval woman mystic. During a time of political upheaval, violence, and change in the twelfth through fifteenth centuries, the Christian Church oversaw the emergence of powerful and dangerous spiritual figures, many of them women. Predominantly amongst members of the Christian Church, women mystics were relatively rare. The women that came forward claiming to have seen *visions* were either celebrated or convicted of heresy by the Church. Regardless of whether these women’s claims were legitimate, the political and religious structures they endured to make their voices heard conspired against them. Throughout Europe, women were not allowed many of the same rights awarded to their male counterparts. With scripture such as I Corinthians 14:34, even the Christian Church believed in male intellectual and spiritual superiority. The main factors that differentiated the women who were able to share their work was whether they resonated with the teachings of the Christian Church, as well as their overall demeanor. Women that were seen as more chaste and obedient to men of the Church, such as Catherine of Siena, were elevated, whereas women who preached of things contradictory to the orthodoxy of local church hierarchies such as Marguerite Porete, were excommunicated or executed.

Unsurprisingly, women in medieval Europe did not entertain many of the same rights as men in either political or spiritual life. The paterfamilias,¹ partnered with the inability of first-born women to inherit their family’s property, as well as scripture such as I Corinthians 14:34, all

¹ The paterfamilias, or male head of house, reflect the patriarchal structure of medieval Europe. Family dynamics were situated with the father or grandfather being entrusted with legal decisions and social superiority.

hindered the woman's ability to live equally with their male counterparts. It is a curious occurrence, then, how women mystics were able to achieve notoriety and political power within and around the Church. To ascertain the title of "mystic," women and men first had to fit the definition of Christian *mysticism*. Christian mysticism generally refers to the act of conversing with or seeing God through a series of visions or revelations; mystics were people who experienced these visions. Mysticism was not a title solely restricted to women, the most popular mystic of medieval Europe was in fact a man, Meister Eckhart.² Historian Lauren Finke notes how "[w]omen in the later Middle Ages were more likely than men to gain a reputation as spiritual leaders based on their mystical experiences."³ This is incredibly paradoxical, when "[e]very preacher, confessor, and didactic writer taught women that God loved nothing but silence and abject humility from his feminine creatures."⁴ The power of women to circumvent these obstacles to make themselves heard suggests the ability of mysticism to elevate individuals beyond the restrictions imposed on them by institutions. Mysticism, albeit a culmination of devout faith and commitment to God, proved to be a powerful tool for women. With the Church's support, women mystics were able to serve as counselors to religious leaders and kings. The mantellate⁵ Catherine of Siena (1347-1380 C.E.)⁶ infamously advised Pope Gregory XI and

² Meister Eckhart (1260-1328 C.E.), was a German mystic and theologian who authored several texts regarding the individual's relationship with God.

³ Laurie A. Finke, *Mystical Bodies and The Dialogues of Vision*, ed. Ulrike Wiethaus (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 29.

⁴ Jo Ann McNamara, *The Rhetoric of Orthodoxy: Clerical Authority and Female Innovation in the Struggle with Heresy*, ed. Ulrike Wiethaus (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 11.

⁵ Mantellate refers to the group of women in medieval Europe who devoted their lives in service of others and were often aligned with a spiritual or religious order (Dominicans or Beguines).

⁶ Catherine of Siena (1347-1380 C.E.) was a European mystic and Saint of the Dominican order.

fought for peace between the papacy and city-states of Pisa and Avignon.⁷ Without the Church's support, women mystics faced charges of heresy and execution. It is important to note that while mysticism describes an individual's relationship and experience with God, it is also inherently tied to the societal, cultural, and religious constructs in which it existed. Cultural and spiritual oppression ensnared the women mystics, yet against all odds, their work and lives are relatively well documented. These women risked life and limb to portray the will of God and many times they paid the price with their lives for doing so.

The lives of women mystics varied greatly; however, one common thread aligns them all: their ability to circumvent the institutions working to silence their voices. If these mystics wanted to share their truths, whether they desired it or not, they needed a platform and power. Power could be accumulated through a variety of ways, the most common method was through a confessor who was typically a church official. The Church was both the most predominant spiritual force governing medieval Europe as well as the most powerful. It was only natural that the women mystics aligned (or attempted to align) themselves with the Church from which their visions spoke to. Historically, “[t]hose people who can gain the closest proximity to that source of power—whether priests, ministers, rabbis, or imams—have traditionally enjoyed the highest respect or authority.”⁸ Because they lived in a society dominated by the patriarchy, women mystics oftentimes found themselves dependent on men within the Church to translate and circulate their work. This role was oftentimes filled by their confessor, as was true for Catherine

⁷ Monica Furlong, *Visions & Longings : Medieval Women Mystics* (New York: Random House, 1996), 157-167.

⁸ Sini Kangas, Mia Korpiola, and Tuija Aionen, eds., *Authorities in the Middle Ages* (Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2013), <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/lib/psu/reader.action?docID=912841>.

of Siena who's confessor Raymond of Capua helped circulate and disseminate her work.⁹

Women mystics also became increasingly dependent on confessors to spread and confirm the legitimacy of their visions.¹⁰ It was not an issue of proving whether you were a mystic, but rather finding a way to get one's voice heard. Hildegard of Bingen¹¹ effectively resorted to "deliberately reconfirming her male addressees' authority" through letters, as a way to receive assistance and support from the Church.¹² By utilizing language as "a small and insignificant figure" in addressing herself to male authorities and following her act of submission with suggestions and her true intentions, Hildegard was able to claim power as a mystic while appealing to her male counterpart.¹³ This method of subverting the usual lack of attention afforded to women in the Church through flattery or submission was also employed by Catherine of Siena as well as other women mystics. Indeed, women mystics were practically invisible if they did not find ways of drawing the attention of men in positions of power within the Church. Gaining attention for things that aligned with the Church's values was hard, gaining attention for things that did not align with the Church was far easier and far more dangerous. Marguerite Porete (1248-1310 C.E.) was executed for the publication and circulation of her book *Mirror of Simple Souls*, in which Porete outlined her ideas surrounding the soul, and convicted of heresy. Amongst the charges the Bishop of Cambrai accused her of, writing the text in French rather than

⁹ Raymond of Capua (1350-1399 C.E.) was Master General of the Dominican Order and spiritual advisor of Catherine for six years.

¹⁰ Sean L. Field. *The Beguine, The Angel, and the Inquisitor: The Trials of Marguerite Porete and Guiard of Cressonessart* (Norte Dame: University of Norte Dame Press, 2012), 43, Ebook Central.

¹¹ Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179 C.E.) was a German mystic and nun. Upon receiving a vision from God to record her visions, she documented her spiritual messages and mystical experiences.

¹² Kangas, *Authorities in The Middle Ages*, 15.

¹³ Hildegard of Bingen, *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Atherton (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2001), 35.

Latin, as well as her ideas about the soul's journey after death as well as her thoughts on Church hierarchy appear to be the most heretical.¹⁴ Marguerite was not unique: other women mystics such as Joan of Arc¹⁵ serve as an example of women mystics who saw their work, or themselves, burned at the stake for expressing visions contradictory to the Church.

The separation of the physical and spiritual self was not a luxury women mystics could afford; the physical body was as much a tool in gaining platform and power amongst women mystics by displaying their chastity as their visions were. The sacrifice of their flesh (bludgeoning, starvation, etc.) afforded women mystics great mobility in displaying their purity and chaste image, a crucial factor in the impression of women in the twelfth through fifteenth centuries. The role of physical suffering in the path to notoriety was great; self-flagellation and starvation were common methods amongst mystics to convey their obedience to God as well as their commitment to divine purity.¹⁶ Even hysteria was a method (or a byproduct of mysticism) adopted by Margery of Kempe,¹⁷ whose "copious tears" caused great annoyance amongst neighbors yet garnered substantial attention and documentation.¹⁸ While never convicted, Kempe was brought to many trials under suspicion of heresy. Catherine of Siena maintained constant mindfulness through the restriction of her diet, abstaining from meat and wine, she developed an

¹⁴ Louise Nelstrop, Kevin Magill, and Bradley B. Onishi, *Christian Mysticism: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Approaches* (Routledge, 2009), <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/lib/psu/reader.action?docID=476263>

¹⁵ Joan of Arc (1412-1431 C.E.) was perhaps the most famous mystic of European history for her role in the Hundred Year's War as well as the novelty of her position as a young woman acting under the word of God and succeeding in bringing about revolutionary change. Joan was burned at the stake in England for heresy.

¹⁶ Finke, *Mystical Bodies*, 42.

¹⁷ Margery Kempe (1373-1439 C.E.) was a mystic best known for her autobiographical work *The Book of Margery Kempe* which detailed her mystical experiences.

¹⁸ Furlong, *Visions and Longing*, 170.

inability to eat beyond a few bites and eventually starved to death.¹⁹ Catherine also engaged in daily flagellation, whipping herself with an iron chain three times a day for hours at a time.²⁰ Yet, it is in the desecration of the body that the mystic once again draws power: “The mystic’s pain—her inflicting of wounds upon herself—grants her the authority to speak and be heard, to have followers, to act as a spiritual advisor, to heal the sick, and to found convents and hospitals.”²¹ Through every sob, bruise, and hunger pain, the mystic’s devotion to God—and as a result, her chastity—is emphasized. As long as she is viewed as chaste, obedient, and submits to the will of the Church, she is permitted to engage in her work.

The women mystics who were able to effectively accumulate power, such as Catherine of Siena, were subject to intense scrutiny by male Church officials to ensure they were not threats to the established order. The most successful mystics were those who accomplished two things in the eyes of the Church, the first being maintaining their chaste image. Catherine of Siena had no problem achieving this, having promised her virginity to God at the mere age of seven, and vowing not to marry at fifteen.²² Catherine received visions of God throughout her childhood, gaining prominence and a reputation as a mystic only after gathering with individuals who shared her views on theology.²³ The second quality of successful mystics was unrelenting obedience to the Church. Catherine authored hundreds of letters and wrote a book titled *The Dialogue* about both her mystical experiences and relationship with God. These works reflect her

¹⁹ Aubrey Richardson, *The Mystic Bride: A Study in The Life-Story of Catherine of Siena* (London: T. W. Laurie, 1911; Internet Archive, 2010), <https://archive.org/details/mysticbridestudy00rich/mode/2up>.

²⁰ Finke, *Mystical Bodies and The Dialogues of Vision*, 42.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Furlong, *Visions and Longing*, 157.

²³ Ibid., 158.

devotion to the Church, as well as her support of the papacy. In a letter to Pope Gregory XI, Catherine utilizes a common practice amongst women mystics: submitting to male authority through flattery. Catherine, who often dictated her letters to a scribe, refers to Pope Gregory XI as “Oh me, oh me, sweetest “Babbo” mine!”²⁴ Referring to the Pope in this manner (Babbo translates to “dad” or “daddy” in Italian) may appear odd, yet Catherine is appealing to the Pope by submitting to his authority not only as a member of the Church but also as a young woman. When Catherine refers to the Pope as “Babbo,” she often inserts advice or requests in the next few lines. In one such letter, Catherine asks Pope Gregory “to summon those who have rebelled against you to a holy peace, so that all warfare may be turned against the infidels,” and quickly follows this assertive sentence with an apology and flattery: “Pardon me, father, that I have said so many words to you.”²⁵ Earlier in the same letter, Catherine refers to the Pope as “Babbo” multiple times. It is through these practices, praise and submission, that she can convey her thoughts on matters, offer counsel, and even critique the corruption of several Church officials. In one letter to an assembly of Florentine ambassadors who were causing great trouble in talks with Avignon, Catherine offers a stark warning: “You might bring great shame and reproach upon me. For nothing but shame and confusion could result if I told the Pope one thing and you another.”²⁶ Catherine advised a great number of laymen within the Church, city councils throughout France, and, even the King of France through her letters. Because she submits to the clerical authority through her writing and only strives for peace, she is not viewed as dangerous

²⁴ Catherine of Siena to Pope Gregory XI, in *Saint Catherine of Siena as Seen in Her Letters*, ed. Vida Dutton Schudder (New York: J.M. Dent and E.P. Dutton, 1905), http://www.domcentral.org/tradcathletters.htm#asseen_inletters.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., Catherine of Siena to the Eight of War Chosen by the Commune of Florence.

by the Church authority within Siena and between all she maintained correspondence with, and is allowed to act with the support of the Church in an unofficial capacity. Through these practices, she draws her power and influence. Catherine is not unique in this circumstance. Hildegard of Bingen practiced the same strategies, flattery and submission, in her letters to Pope Eugenius III and Bernard of Clairvaux.²⁷

Specific methodology in dealing with male Church officials was certainly important for women mystics in gaining power; however, many women were having a difficult enough time simply existing as a mystic within the Church. While Catherine achieved notoriety for her work as a mystic within the Church, Marguerite Porete was punished and executed for the ways she shared her visions with the world, revealing the danger facing women mystics who—intentionally or unintentionally—pitted their mysticism against the orthodoxy of the Church. Born in the middle of the thirteenth century and spending the majority of her life as a Beguine,²⁸ Marguerite documented her own mystical experiences and her beliefs about the power of “divine love” in her book *Mirror of Simple Souls*. Marguerite was sentenced to trial and execution for, according to her inquisitor William of Paris, having “composed a certain pestiferous book containing heresy and error.”²⁹ While a book about “divine love” may appear inconspicuous, many of the topics Marguerite proposed, such as the ability of the human soul to reach God before the afterlife, were declared unorthodox and dangerous by Bishop Guido and fellow Parisian Christians.³⁰ Marguerite was burned at the stake for the proliferation of her ideas

²⁷ Kangas, *Authorities in The Middle Ages*, 16-22.

²⁸ Beguines were groups of women who joined together to focus on spirituality in small communities.

²⁹ Field. *The Beguine*, 43.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 215.

through the dissemination of her book which was deemed contradictory to the orthodoxy. Her inquisitor, along with the Bishop, were concerned that Marguerite's controversial ideas about the Church and love would have negative impacts on those who read her work, specifically students.³¹ In the words of the Paris bishops who sentenced her, "according to canonical sanction, we consider and must consider you as convicted and confessed and as lapsed into heresy or as a heretic."³² Not only was Marguerite burned at the stake, but her book was ordered to be destroyed as well. In contrast to Catherine and even the male mystics of the period such as Meister Eckhart (who shared many of the same notions mentioned in *Mirror*), Marguerite was punished to the highest degree. The question remains why such injustice occurred. While heresy was an incredibly serious charge in the 13th and 14th centuries in which the mystic lived, why was Marguerite punished when others such as Eckhart were publishing similar ideas and when other mystics had challenged aspects of the orthodoxy before?

The issue of disproportionate punishment is one women have been bearing the burden of for centuries, Marguerite and other women mystics experienced this firsthand. The answer to why was Marguerite punished when others such as Eckhart were publishing similar ideas must lie in Marguerite herself; Marguerite was punished because she did not correctly submit to male authority in the eyes of the Church, and because she was a woman, she was judged unfairly. Sexuality was an incredibly important factor that determined the degree to which mystics were supervised and regulated, women did not afford the same rights as their male counterparts concerning Church matters. For example, Eckhart evaded execution, even though his ideas about

³¹ Ibid., 42.

³² Ibid., 228.

the annihilation of the soul paralleled Marguerite.³³ One scholar suggests that because Marguerite “had no known confessor to help shield her away from suspicion,”³⁴ that she lacked the authority as a woman to stand up for herself. The role of the confessor was incredibly important for female mystics, a well respected man in the church to disseminate the visions and words of the women mystic was crucial in gaining legitimacy and notoriety. Even Catherine of Siena relayed her visions through a male confessor.³⁵ The line between heresy and unpopular ideas was thin; however, it appears through comparisons of Marguerite and Eckhart, to be more easily transgressed by women simply on the basis of sex. Joan of Arc was convicted of heresy and burned at the stake in England in 1431, one hundred years after Marguerite, yet under eerily similar circumstances.³⁶ Both women were convicted of heresy for the ideas they proposed and circulated (albeit Joan’s circulation of ideas involved charging into battle). Unlike Catherine, these women defied authority in ways that defended their honor: Marguerite defended her intellectual ideas and Joan defended her integrity. These two mystics were executed for defiance of the orthodoxy: their actions and intellectual property were seen as dangerous to the ideas of the Church, so dangerous that they were murdered for speaking out. Marguerite Porete and Catherine of Siena were both mystics operating within similar church hierarchies. Similar to how Catherine’s flagellation represented her devotion to God, Marguerite sacrificed her body for the work she authored under the same inspiration. This act cemented her piousness and martyrdom

³³ Danielle C. Dubois, “The Virtuous Fall,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* (2015): 432-453, http://web.a.ebscohost.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=f197331a_bce2-4ab8-8324-717b3941d6c4%40sessionmgr4008.

³⁴ Field, *The Beguine*, 9.

³⁵ Algar Thorold, ed., *The Dialogue of The Seraphic Virgin Catherine of Siena* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1869; HathiTrust, 2020), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.31175001832511>.

³⁶ Dominique Goy-Blanquet, *Joan of Arc, a Saint For All Reasons*. (Florence: Routledge, 2003) 1-142, Ebook Central.

as a mystic who believed that if she were to dismiss her work she would be directly defying God. Marguerite, however, received a death sentence for her actions whereas Catherine was celebrated. It must be noted that Marguerite had been warned not to circulate her book before her death sentence by the bishop Guido of Cambrai, yet she had received the all-clear from three prominent theologians of the time that her book was appropriately in accordance with the orthodoxy.³⁷

While Catherine of Siena may have at times offered criticisms and advice of specific individuals, even lamenting over large scale corruption within the Church, at no time does she assign blame to specific individuals or propose radical shifts. Instead, “[s]he was troubled by its corruption, which she felt as a personal burden,” and does not threaten to take radical action.³⁸ This allowed Catherine some protection against heresy, for she was not proposing ideas for reform that contradicted the ideologies of any officials in power. Similarly, Marguerite did not assign specific blame or propose radical threats, yet her views were deemed reprehensible and a direct contradiction to the orthodoxy. While Marguerite died thirty years before Catherine’s birth, the level of tolerance Catherine experienced amongst Church officials was so much greater that it points to the incredible significance of their approach to engaging in mysticism as women in the fourteenth century. Marguerite’s mysticism, while documented in *Mirror*, is only utilized as an afterthought, where an exchange with God is mentioned to support the ideas she proposes.³⁹ On the other hand, Catherine’s letters and *The Dialogue* convey how she relied on her mystical experiences to gain credibility in the varying messages and points she was trying to portray:

³⁷ Ibid., 10.

³⁸ Furlong, *Visions*, 159.

³⁹ Field, *The Beguine*, 8.

Catherine's reliance on mysticism allowed her to greater mobility as a woman mystic in society. Perhaps Catherine's words carried more weight under the tense political climate caused by the great Schism of 1378 which launched the Christian Church into years of unstable leadership as power was divided between popes. While the two women's situations did differ greatly in the ways they approached mysticism (Marguerite defying authority and Catherine advising authority), they both defied the systems of oppression within the Church and larger patriarchal society in order to make themselves heard.

The power mystics wielded, albeit small, was a substantial defiance to the social and political norms of the twelfth through fifteenth centuries. A radical decline of women mystics and their writing followed the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries as a response by the Church to correct the ability of women to obtain education and influence as mystics and implement the spirit of I Corinthians 14:34. As inquisitional practices were enacted to persecute women throughout the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries "the pathologization of specifically female forms of medieval piety was closely linked to the impetus to constrain and persecute women during the European witch-hunts."⁴⁰ High ranking Church officials deemed the affluence and success medieval mystics were able to wield as dangerous: "these theologians feared that women's piety had gotten out of control. They, therefore, attempted to constrain some of the central features of late-medieval female sanctity: ecstatic raptures, stigmata, ascetic fasting, and eucharistic devotion."⁴¹ The papacy attempted to reclaim the aspects of the women mystic's bodies that emphasized their chastity, instead demonizing the practices as "witchcraft."

⁴⁰ Tamar Herzig, "Witches, Saints, and Heretics: Heinrich Kramer's Ties with Italian Women Mystics." *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 1, no. 1 (2006): 24-55. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/236417N1>.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

Religious texts such as the *Malleus Maleficarum* which detailed explicit instructions for the hunting of potential witches, reflected the growing suspicions of holy women and mystics in the later parts of the medieval era.⁴² The response by the Church to vilify mystics conveys the degree to which the women mystics influenced the communities in which they lived.

For a brief period in European history, women were able to achieve incredible political notoriety and influence as mystics. Against institutional oppression, pious women were able to share their revelations, visions, ideas, and suggestions with the world, or, at very least, their own communities. The aspects that separated the women mystics who were able to speak freely without retribution were a combination of submission to male authority and healthy subscription to the orthodoxy that was imposed by the papacy at the period in which the women lived.

Women who differed from these qualities or who preferred to prioritize their own ideas instead of their mystical experiences paid with their lives. Interestingly enough, these women rose to prominence in the very bodies that were attempting to restrict their authority: the Christian Church. This historical paradox concluded with the persecution of mystics at the hands of witch hunters, yet left behind the documentation of dozens of mystical women in the Church. The women who were able to achieve influence in the church were able to do so because of submission to male authority, they were not able to incorporate systemic change in the institutions in which they acted to offer greater opportunities to other women to stand up and speak out against injustices that were occurring. Yet, the letters of Catherine of Siena, the work of Marguerite Porete, Hildegard of Bingen, and other women mystics have survived against all

⁴² Henry Kremer and James Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. Montague Summers (London: The Pushkin Press, 1948), 1-308.

odds to relay the dreams, hopes, and ideas of holy women who wanted nothing more than to speak their truth.

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