DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Untimely meditations
Female mysticism in medieval culture and modern scholarship

Wasson, Louise

Award date:
2014

Awarding institution:
Queen's University Belfast

Terms of use
All those accessing thesis content in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal are subject to the following terms and conditions of use

• Copyright is subject to the Copyright, Designs and Patent Act 1988, or as modified by any successor legislation
• Copyright and moral rights for thesis content are retained by the author and/or other copyright owners
• A copy of a thesis may be downloaded for personal non-commercial research/study without the need for permission or charge
• Distribution or reproduction of thesis content in any format is not permitted without the permission of the copyright holder
• When citing this work, full bibliographic details should be supplied, including the author, title, awarding institution and date of thesis

Take down policy
A thesis can be removed from the Research Portal if there has been a breach of copyright, or a similarly robust reason.
If you believe this document breaches copyright, or there is sufficient cause to take down, please contact us, citing details. Email: openaccess@qub.ac.uk

Supplementary materials
Where possible, we endeavour to provide supplementary materials to theses. This may include video, audio and other types of files. We endeavour to capture all content and upload as part of the Pure record for each thesis.
Note, it may not be possible in all instances to convert analogue formats to usable digital formats for some supplementary materials. We exercise best efforts on our behalf and, in such instances, encourage the individual to consult the physical thesis for further information.

Download date: 15. Aug. 2021
Untimely Meditations: female mysticism in medieval culture and modern scholarship

Thesis Presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of English
Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
Queen’s University Belfast

Louise Wasson BA (Hons), MA
July 2014
Mairi Walker
(1935-2005)

Beginning with a survey of the writings of the medieval mystics, this book explores attempts to explore the medieval mystical tradition as a space of self-exploration and self-expression in both the medieval and modern periods. The chapter in philosophy with tracing an 'intimacy' relation between these two different periods via a series of systematic case studies stretching from the twelfth to the seventeenth century, and focusing specifically on the ways in which the nature of male mysticism is mediated in the medieval period and re-encountered in the modern period. The themes, incommensurability of the medieval within the modern, and the otherness of the mystical... The opening chapter provides a survey of medieval literature, considering the issues of gender and the mystical tradition in modern and contemporary contexts. This survey is followed by a chapter on a selection of mystical writers which consider a selection of mystical voices from the Middle Ages, including the works of such figures as the English mystics John Tauler (c. 1300-1361) and John of the Cross (1542-1591), and the writings of Saint Catherine of Siena (c. 1347-1380) and St. Theresa of Avila (c. 1515-1582). The second chapter contains an in-depth analysis of medieval mysticism by focussing on the work of John of the Cross and the mystical tradition is received and subsequently, reinterpreted in the modern period. Beginning with a survey of the works of modern mystics such as Evelyn Underhill and then progressing by analysing twentieth-century writers, re-examining the writings of Simone Weil and interpreting them in terms of a 'determinate' of self that forms the basis of mysticism today, this book brings together a survey of the so-called
Abstract

Beginning with a survey of the writings of the medieval *mulieres religiosae* this comparative thesis attempts to explore the medieval mystical tradition as a space of self-construction and self-expression in both the medieval and modern periods. The thesis is preoccupied with tracing an ‘untimely’ relation between these two historically distant periods via a series of synchronic case studies stretching from the twelfth to the twentieth century, and focusing specifically on the ways in which the writings of female mystics are mediated in the medieval period and re-mediated in the modern period. The return, recurrence and endurance of the medieval within the modern is thus a key point of interest. The opening chapter provides a survey of medieval mysticism and considers the problems of developing and defining a language set with which to discuss the abstract nature of the mystical. This survey is followed by a set of diverse case studies which consider a selection of medieval mystics from the *life* of orthodox figures such as the beguine Marie d’Oignies (1177-1213) to the speculative writings of heretic and beguine Marguerite Porete (d. 1310), and finally the Middle English translation of Saint Catherine of Siena’s (1347-1380) *Dialogue*. Chapter Three builds on this analysis of medieval mysticism by considering the ways in which the mystical tradition is received and subsequently, recovered and perpetuated in the early twentieth-century. Beginning with a consideration of the crucial work of female medievalists such as Evelyn Underhill and Hope Emily Allen in this area, the thesis progresses by analysing twentieth-century models of the medieval devotee/confessor relationship (Adrienne von Speyr and Hans Urs von Balthasar), before juxtaposing the writings of Simone Weil and Anne Carson, which resonate with the removal or ‘decreation’ of self that forms the foundation of the apophatic genre. Concluding with a survey of the so-called
'religious' or 'apophatic turn' within Continental philosophy and the humanities more broadly, the thesis hopes to usefully reflect on the role of the medieval mystical tradition and its contribution to an emerging women’s history. This thesis is fundamentally preoccupied with the impact which female religious writings have and how they are re-mediated and reappropriated in both modern scholarship and feminist historiography. Overall, a range of apophatic writings will be analysed as I argue for this genre as a paradoxical space for both the empowerment and silencing of the female voice at different historical moments. Mystical languages of ‘unsaying’ and the concomitant oscillation between languages of ‘selfing’ and ‘unselfing’ engendered by the self-negating nature of apophatic discourse will be shown to play a central role in the politics of women who write and are written into history.\footnote{References throughout this work have been prepared in accordance with the MHRA Style Guide Third Edition.}
Acknowledgements

This research has been made possible by the generous funding of a DEL studentship; my utmost gratitude for this financial support. Several people have played a crucial role in the completion of this thesis and to them I am truly thankful. First and foremost, my doctoral supervisor Dr Stephen Kelly. For your constant support, advice and encouragement and for the time you have invested in reading countless 'Words' - thank you.

The friendship gained from the medieval cluster at Queen’s has also been a source of real comfort during difficult stages of PhD research. I thank Amy and Kath for their support and friendship.

Finally, and most importantly, the constant love and support of family members and friends has been particularly invaluable. My thanks to my parents, Glynis and Hugh. For their patient support, encouragement (and tolerance!), I thank Clare and Barry, and for the much-needed distractions, Mia and Calum.
## Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................. ii
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................... iv
Introduction ........................................................................................................... 1
Chapter 1 .................................................................................................................. 13
   An Inward Turn: the Emergence of the Female Medieval Mystical Tradition .... 13
   Apophaticism, the Negative Way and the Roots of the Medieval Mystical Tradition... 22
   The ‘Flowering’ of the Twelfth-Century Monieræ Religiosæ .................................. 28
   Types of Medieval Mysticism ............................................................................. 37
Chapter 2 .................................................................................................................. 63
   Characteristics of Female Mysticism from the Twelfth–Fifteenth Century: ‘Felyng’ God 63
      Case Studies ................................................................................................... 65
   Touching ‘the pitevous maiden of Criste’: Marie d’Oignies .................................. 69
   Hagiography and the ‘myth-making’ surrounding ‘holy women’ ......................... 73
   Collaborative Relations: Female Devotee and Male Confessor ......................... 74
   Hadewijch of Brabant: Bride of Christ ............................................................... 84
   The Garden of Perfect Virtues ........................................................................... 90
   Marguerite Porete’s Mystical Self-Annihilations .............................................. 104
   The Trial of Marguerite Porete ......................................................................... 107
   ‘his book of reuelaciouns as for 3oure goostly comfort to 3ou I clepe it a fruytyful orcherd’: Catherine of Siena’s Middle English Dialogue ........................................... 122
   Life at Syon Abbey ........................................................................................... 124
   Female Reading Practices ................................................................................. 129
   The Orchard of Syon ....................................................................................... 133
Chapter 3 .................................................................................................................. 149
   ‘Giving people God in a very unofficial way’ ..................................................... 149
   Revisiting the Female Mystical Tradition Within Academia: Evelyn Underhill and Hope Emily Allen ................................................................. 149
   The Recuperation of the Female Mystical Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century .. 149
   Evelyn Underhill: Modern ‘Mystic’? ................................................................. 152
   The Feminist Undertakings of Hope Emily Allen .............................................. 164
Chapter 4 .................................................................................................................. 183
   ‘An eyewitness account.’ .................................................................................. 183
   Male Mediation of the Female Mystical Voice: Adrienne von Speyr and Hans Urs von Balthasar ................................................................. 183
   Marie d’Oignies: ‘Crystes mayden’ – An Analogue ......................................... 185
   Adrienne Von Speyr: ‘Handmaid of the Lord’ ................................................. 200
Chapter 5 .................................................................................................................. 218
   Decreating the Mystical Self: ‘Unselfing’ in the Writings of Simone Weil and Her Male Mediators ................................................................. 218
The Function of Biography ................................................................. 220
Perrin and Thibon as ‘Editors’ ......................................................... 222
Anne Carson’s Mystical Inheritance From ‘Sainte Simone’ ................ 243
Conclusion .................................................................................. 249
The Apophatic ‘Re-turn’? ................................................................. 249
The ‘Post-Secular Moment’ and the Contemporary Place of Religion .... 251
‘Afterlives’ of Apophaticism ........................................................... 253
‘Touching’ the Past ...................................................................... 262
Appendix I: Male Mediation of the Female Mystical Voice: Marguerite Porete 274
M.N. as ‘Meene’ and Mediator ....................................................... 275
M.N. as ‘Pseudo-author’ ................................................................. 278
Bibliography .............................................................................. 286
Primary Material ......................................................................... 286
Secondary Material .................................................................... 293
Electronic Material ..................................................................... 321
Introduction

A fundamental preoccupation of this comparative thesis has been to question the ways in which we relate and connect to the past, particularly in the context of medieval female religious writings. Over the course of this research, it has become apparent that various identifications and, conversely, misidentifications are often made in the process. The impetus for making what are often nostalgic identifications is almost always the interaction between the affective, 'inward' realm of 'feelings' and emotions, and that distant, external, yet desired realm of the lost past. As Nicholas Watson puts it: 'considered as an empathetic endeavour, study of the past thus becomes something like the mystic's quest for union with God'.

This assertion motivates and shapes the interests and arguments of the thesis to follow. In the interpretative encounter between modern scholar and medieval text or writer, there is an innate tendency towards sentimentalized identifications - towards an attempted becoming of that historical Other in the interpretative moment; an insistence, as Karl F. Morrison might put it, that 'I am you'. However, James Simpson has flagged the 'dangers' inherent in this model, as the 'passionate identification[s]' or collapsing of distinct, insurmountable yet inevitable historical differences represent their own challenges to research.

Simpson poses an alternative line of enquiry in which modern scholars might better represent their empathetic connections with the historical Other in terms of likeness instead of identification. Simpson questions: 'What about... “I am like you” rather than “I am you”?'

Women have long been traditionally associated with the

---

4 James Simpson, 'Confessing Literature', English Language Notes 44.1 (Spring, 2006), p. 123.
5 Simpson, p. 124.
sort of empathetic over-identifications suggested by Simpson, and nowhere is this better documented than in the case of the modern recuperation of the medieval mystical tradition. For instance, twentieth-century medievalist Helen Waddell (1889-1965) provides a case in point. An independent scholar, translator, poet and novelist working outside of the academy, Waddell’s most popular work was her fictional imagining of that most famous of medieval love stories published as, *Peter Abelard: A Novel* (1933). Only recently has Waddell’s background as a medievalist begun to be fully appreciated. However, Waddell’s own personal experience of ‘passionate identification’ with Heloise provides fascinating insight into the possible slippage between likeness and outright identification problematized by Simpson. Following a period of illness in Paris in 1924, Waddell reports her own experience of ‘becoming’ her subject; of mistakenly saying ‘I am you’: ‘For suddenly I was Heloise, not as I had ever imagined her, but an old woman, abbess of the Paraclete with Abelard twenty years dead...’. 6 This fascinating moment of over-identification sees the novelist abandon her own selfhood and identity as a result of her intense pursuit to understand that of her historical subject.

Such a phenomenon might be labelled ‘affective historiography’, and can be said to recur frequently in the interpretation of medieval mystical texts. Indeed, Sarah McNamer argues that ‘to perform compassion is to feel like a woman’. 7 As these religious texts are predicated upon knowledge of an absent, ‘unknowable’ and ‘unsayable’ ultimate Other in the form of God, the tendency towards identification is particularly strong. However, as the basis of this identification must be rooted in an utter self-abandonment, it becomes necessary to ask just how useful these affective

---

identifications and ‘passionate investments in the past’ really are. It is for this reason that I have chosen to tease out the personal connections made between modern scholars and their medieval subjects using a comparative structure, which enables what I understand as an ‘untimely’ dialogue to emerge between the two disparate historical periods. This structure enables the thesis to discuss the status and effects of the medieval female mystic within her own cultural and historical moment before tracing a trajectory which highlights the ways in which female religious writings are recuperated, re-mediated and reappropriated in both the scholarship and feminist historiography of the modern period. Carolyn Dinshaw has written of ‘the queerness of time’ in her most recent book, How Soon is Now? (2012). She develops her interests in a subject first articulated in Getting Medieval (1999), where she noted the desire ‘for partial, affective connection, for community, for even a touch across time’. I would suggest that this desire is characteristic of much modern scholarly engagement with past medieval texts, and particularly with medieval mystical texts.

For example, even Dinshaw’s 1999 admission, ‘through this book I describe partial connections’, has developed into a much more strongly felt and articulated form of personal connection by 2012, as illustrated by the title of the third chapter of her latest book: ‘In the Now: Margery Kempe, Hope Emily Allen, and Me’. Opening the chapter by questioning the nature of ‘the queerness of time’ – an idea which so fascinated her in Getting Medieval - Dinshaw begins with Margery Kempe’s visit to the graveside of her confessor Richard Caister of Norwich and asks: ‘how does it feel to be asynchronous?’. As the chapter continues, Dinshaw slowly interlinks her

---

8 Watson, 2010, p. 2.
10 Dinshaw, 1999, p. 35.
own experiences of the Book of Margery Kempe with scholar Hope Emily Allen’s, pointing out their shared experiences as Bryn Mawr graduates and finally culminating in her description of her experience researching in the same archive and building in which they both received training as medievalists. United by the Book of Margery Kempe, Dinshaw explains:

Our pasts touched in my reading her pages... The multiplicity of times in the archive that day was composed of temporalities that went back to Margery through Hope Allen and up to me (both in my 1970s incarnation and my early twenty-first-century one... In this instance, Dinshaw eloquently articulates precisely the sorts of affective identifications I have outlined. This thesis considers those moments during modern scholarly engagement with medieval texts and writers when the ‘partial connections’ made, or likenesses realized, at times seem to bleed into wholesale identifications. This strange ‘untimely’ relationship occurs both in terms of the medieval female mystics who so identify with their beloved God as to ‘become’ one and the same with him, and also in terms of those modern scholars (like Waddell and Allen) who practice an affective historiography and approach to the subjects of their study, causing them to make similar identifications with various consequences. This ‘untimely’ interplay informs the approach taken by the structure and content of the thesis.

Bridging the gap between the medieval and the modern via the recuperation of the mystical tradition by twentieth-century medievalists, this thesis opens with a summary of the medieval tradition of apophatic and visionary theology. Beginning with a consideration of the difficulties surrounding defining such abstract terms as

---

13 Dinshaw, p.124.
‘mystic’, ‘spirituality’ and ‘mystical’, the chapter aims to articulate a useful language set for discussing these idiosyncratic medieval texts and writers. Mystical texts will thus be shown to be very much *sui generis* — a crucial feature which strongly impacts their ability to appeal so widely to medieval and modern thinkers alike. Tracing the emergence of the tradition from its Neoplatonic and Pseudo-Dionysian roots, through the female mysticism of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the chapter also aims to contextualize the broad appeal of the mystical by noting the renewed interest in the topic, usually associated with William James (1842-1910), which characterized the early twentieth century. The case studies included in Chapters Three, Four and Five develop this renewed interest in and recovery of the medieval mystical tradition. The purpose of this opening chapter is thus to explore the emergence and uses of the discourses of ‘oneing’ and embodiment (‘selfing’), self-annihilation and silence (‘unseling’), and to discuss the opportunities and freedoms such a discourse might afford to medieval women. For example, the oscillating cataphatic/apophatic dialectic around which apophatic discourse pivots provides an opportunity for a particularly unlimited form of medieval female self-expression. If everything that can be said about God must be unsaid, then we enter a realm in which it is momentarily possible (through the sayings and affirmations of mystical texts) for female mystics to become self-identical with God. The potential of language and its ‘undoing’ or ‘unsaying’ thus enables women of otherwise significantly marginalized social status to adapt and shape the male-dominated intellectual tradition of mysticism in the period to their own purposes of identification with God and self-expression.

Having considered and defined the abstract terms applied to the medieval and modern mystical women explored in the thesis, Chapter Two charts the very specific
ways in which the thirteenth-century *mulieres religiosae* or holy women communicated their respective ‘inward’, idiosyncratic, personal theologies. With a strong focus on beguine spirituality, the chapter presents the thematically arranged cases of four different women – three beguine and one Dominican tertiary – Catherine of Siena (1347-1380). Selected in order to illustrate the particular emphasis of twelfth-century Franciscan affective piety on their mysticism – a mysticism rooted in the need to ‘feel’ and experience God - three beguine women illustrate the various apophatic discourses of the ‘unsayability’ and ‘unknowability’ of God. Beginning with Marie d’Oignies’s *vita*, the uses of the body and the bodily as sole means of female spiritual access are problematized. Written within the framework of the important relationship between female mystic and male confessor/hagiographer, the chapter aims to highlight the fictive tendencies of the hagiographical text. Brief moments of role reversal within the text are chosen to illustrate the shifting power dynamic which at times sees Marie break free of Jacques’s hagiographic rhetoric and put herself centre-stage. With their exclusive focus on spiritual access as an event which takes place ‘out of the senses’, Hadewijch’s *Visions* similarly highlight the attempts of certain female religious to detach themselves from the dominant mode of affective piety in order to engage in more serious contemplation. Perhaps most vehement in her eschewal of the bodily is Marguerite Porete. She articulates a speculative mysticism and most notably, a doctrine of theosis or deification whereby one might become God.¹⁴ Finally, the Middle English translation of Catherine of Siena’s *Dialogue* is used as a separate

---

¹⁴ Whereas the case study provided on Porete in Chapter Two (pp. 104-124) explores Porete’s text in terms of the mystical tropes and themes which drive her personal theology and also highlights her direct engagement with and adoption of apophatic discourses, an Appendix is also included (pp. 274-285) on the Middle English glosses. This Appendix briefly considers the ways in which Porete’s male Carthusian annotator and compiler engages with her text in his Middle English translation. His engagement with controversial aspects of her personal theology takes the form of fifteen interruptive and explanatory glosses. A selection of these will be explored in the Appendix.
case study illustrating the possible modes of female empowerment which can stem from female access to mystical and devotional texts. Focusing on the specific reception context of the Bridgettine double monastery Syon Abbey, I argue that despite the inevitability of a certain level of male clerical control and mediation in the access Bridgettine nuns might have had to these sorts of mystical texts, that same male/female relationship also sponsors the increase of their learning and the corresponding decrease of the gap between them and their male counterparts.

Chapter Three opens with the crucial work of twentieth-century medievalists Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) and Hope Emily Allen (1883-1960) in recuperating the medieval mystical tradition. Tracing the interests of these women back to the medieval mystics, the case study illustrates the resurgence of interest in apophatic writings in the early twentieth century which was to continue to flourish across the humanities in the late-twentieth century. Their fascination with these ‘women saints’ of the past gestures towards this tradition within medieval studies of ‘affective historiography’, which culminates in what Dinshaw has described as the desire ‘for partial, affective connection, for community, for even a touch across time’. This obsessive need to ‘touch’ the past is perhaps best attested to by Allen’s problematic relationship with one particular mystical subject of study – Margery Kempe. The work of these two women has been vital in instigating and continuing the early twentieth-century recuperation of the medieval mystical tradition. Their respective fascinations with mystical discourses of self-nourthing, ‘unsayability’ and ‘unknowability’ have prompted the recovery of a medieval female voice and subjectivity which has proven a vital contribution to the history of women’s writing.

---

Chapter Four juxtaposes a modern and medieval example of the female mystic/devotee and male confessor/amanuensis relationship in order to demonstrate the ways in which modern writers still feel and appreciate their debt to the medieval mystical tradition. Reading the relationships and writings of Marie d'Oignies and Jacques de Vitry and Adrienne von Speyr (1902-1967) and Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988) against one another, it is possible to note the various manipulations of the tradition at work in both the medieval and modern context. While Jacques and Balthasar ultimately control, mediate and disseminate the visionary experiences of their female devotees and mystics, both women effect their own brief role reversals and upset the traditional power balance. Thus, the medieval model of the devotee/confessor relationship (which is so central to the writing, production and authorization of female mystical texts), can be seen to endure in the modern pairing of 'quasi-hagiographer' von Balthasar and his Roman Catholic convert, von Speyr who eventually eschewed her Calvinist upbringing under Balthasar's direction. The chapter observes a kind of internal gender politics which sees the balance of power oscillate between male and female. Speyr's desire for self-effacement resonates with the apophatic discourses characteristic of the apophatic tradition while simultaneously signalling her awareness of it. Despite the various motivations male confessors might have for writing their respective devotees into religious history, I would suggest that in both cases they do so in a very conscious acknowledgement of the medieval mystical and hagiographical traditions. The fact that this relationship endures and reappears at different historical moments gestures towards a quality within mystical thought and writing which cites it as a paradoxical space for the silencing and empowerment of the female voice.
Chapter Five focuses explicitly on the ways in which modern writers such as Simone Weil (1909-1943) and also Anne Carson (b. 1950) identify with medieval mystical subjectivities of self-abnegation. Discourses of suffering, self-annihilation and self-deprivation seem to punctuate the writings of both these women. Carson’s nostalgic reminiscence of her childhood temptation to eat the pages of her copy of *The Lives of the Saints* so ‘lusciously rendered in words and paint’¹⁷ again suggests the unavoidable personal identifications and connections made in the modern encounter with past medieval tradition. Heavily indebted to the apophatic tropes, texts and metaphors which characterize medieval mysticism, I argue that the apophatic mode provides a particularly powerful and fruitful mode of self-expression for modern and medieval women alike. This self-expression is achieved through a discourse of ‘unselfing’ which is rooted in the *via negativa* and manifests itself in the creative and critical writings of both Weil and Carson. Subsequently, the case study discusses the ways in which these women revisit, return and perhaps even retreat to this medieval tradition in articulating their own individual voices, paying close attention (especially in the case of Weil), to the male collaborators who assist in the production and dissemination of their respective works. ‘Saint Simone’ is thus reassessed in light of the male/female, confessor/devotee relationship explored in the remainder of the thesis. The editorial influences of Roman Catholic philosopher Gustave Thibon (1902-2001) and Roman Catholic priest and confidante Father Joseph Marie Perrin (d. 2002) will be taken into account as I argue for their significant role in presenting, mediating and constructing Weil and her concepts in the form we have received them today. As with von Speyr and von Balthasar, I suggest these writings about Weil can usefully be read as a form of ‘quasi-

hagiography. As a poet, translator and ultimately a Classicist, Carson’s creative and scholarly works are heavily reliant on both the early apophatic tradition and Weil’s interpretations of it. It is for this reason that Carson has been included at this particular point. Although perhaps a strange juxtaposition at first, it is their shared fascination with an apophatic stripping away of the self (Weil’s concept of decreation and Carson’s conscious effort to remove the distraction of the ‘I’) which provides a common ground, and which speaks to the endurance of the medieval tradition of mysticism as a valued and valuable means of female self-expression.

The final chapter returns to the interpretative encounter between modern scholarship and medieval mystical text in the broader context of the notion of the so-called ‘apophatic turn’ within twentieth-century Continental philosophy and, more broadly, the humanities. This final chapter begins with a consideration of the ways in which medievalists have recently attempted to engage with these mystical texts in the affective mode earlier outlined. Particular attention is paid to a special 2010 edition of Religion & Literature co-edited by Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Jonathan Julifis. Interacting with recent debates within medieval studies regarding the ‘religious turn’ and how to approach it, this volume sees Kerby-Fulton call for ‘a literary theory for religious experience’ which would help us understand how best ‘to work with one’s own religious belief in writing scholarship’. Described as ‘something fearful’ in the very title, Kerby-Fulton is concerned that all contributors address this ‘religious turn’ from the perspective of their own religious faith positions. In asking ‘contributors...to frame or develop their scholarship with explicit commentary about their own faith traditions or positions’, we return to the

---

19 Kerby-Fulton, p.5.
initial and fundamental preoccupation of the thesis – the question of how moderns relate and connect to the medieval past. It would seem that the modern scholar’s attempts to identify with, and connect to their medieval subjects, directly mirrors that medieval subject’s mystical quest for knowledge of God. Ultimately, they too, can only be like God, as opposed to being God (at least in this worldly life). Thus, there is an apophatic circularity to Kerby-Fulton’s mode of scholarly enquiry as inevitably, our desire for connections with the past, partial or otherwise, is undercut by the unknowable and unsayable nature of a lost past. This is a particular sticking point for the interests of this thesis. Nevertheless, I would argue that identifications with the past are inevitable, and so it is within those moments of ‘partial connection’ suggested by Dinshaw that we can enhance our understanding of our medieval subjects and ‘touch’ the past, however briefly. But the execution of this ‘touch’ must be cautiously handled. Indeed, as Caroline Walker Bynum points out, ‘no one of us will ever read more than partially, from more than a particular perspective’.\textsuperscript{20}

Considering the context of the ‘ineluctable return’\textsuperscript{21} of religion and specifically, the apophatic re-turn within the humanities, this chapter concludes with a brief look at ‘the very real contemporary culture wars surrounding religion and its practice, both within and outside of the academy’.\textsuperscript{22}

In summary, it is the contention of this thesis that the oscillating dialectic of the cataphatic and the apophatic, of affirmation and negation which drives medieval mysticism, is similarly evidenced by a concomitant oscillation between languages of ‘selfing’ and ‘unseling’ at different historical moments which inform and guide female self-expression. Overall, the thesis hopes to tease out a trajectory across


\textsuperscript{22} Kerby-Fulton, 2010, p. 3.
history of an emerging feminist poetics as a movement from medieval articulation of self via the apophatic mode (exemplified by the medieval *mulieres religiosae*), to a modern project of recuperating the self through a reading and revisiting of this apophatic mode (as we shall see with the early twentieth-century medievalists assessed later), and finally, to the postmodern project of negating the self using the apophatic mode (as we will see in contemporary writers and thinkers). These discourses of ‘selfing’ and ‘unselfing’ are seen to be fundamentally rooted in the personal connections and ‘passionate identifications’ of mystic and scholar alike. However, the basis for these connections is the apophatic mode. The oscillation between the ‘sayings’ and ‘unsayings’ of the apophatic mode creates a paradoxical, self-negating language which ensures that these personal connections and identifications are fundamentally predicated upon the ‘unsayable’ and by default, ‘the unknowable’. With the powerful and paradoxical nature of apophatic language in mind, we begin with the ‘inward turn’ which it sponsored among the thirteenth-century *mulieres religiosae*.
Chapter 1
An Inward Turn: the Emergence of the Female Medieval Mystical Tradition

The research interests and preoccupations of this thesis interlink with an area of scholarly argument within medieval studies which concerns itself with the ways in which spiritual access to God was achieved within the Middle Ages, and particularly with the gendered nature of the methods adopted to achieve this goal. With the huge increase in mystical texts produced by or on behalf of women in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries came an idiosyncratic female spirituality characterized by languages of affective identification and erotic imagery which often made the female body the focal point and site of engagement during moments of spiritual union with Christ or meditation on his suffering body. This tactile method of achieving spiritual access through the feelings and identifications of the female body represented an affective piety which circumvented the traditional male role of priest/confessor as mediator between devotees and God, thus challenging traditional gender roles and defying orthodox practice. Essentially, this debate within medieval studies questions the validity of designating forms of mysticism as specifically ‘male’ or ‘female’ culminating in Caroline Walker Bynum’s much debated *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (1987). Bynum claims that: ‘indeed, for the first time in Christian history, we can […] speak of specifically female influences on the development of piety’.¹ This thesis is written in concurrence with Bynum’s hypothesis that an idiosyncratic female piety grounded in languages of affective identification with the body of the suffering Christ characterizes the writings produced in the period. I also contend that the mode of self expression afforded to

medieval women by these multiform texts enable them to partake of a ‘selfing’ and an ‘unselfing’ through their relationship with God which provides them with new opportunities and alternatives in a male-dominated society.

The hybrid form of mysticism present in these writings often merges the apophatic with the cataphatic resulting in a personal theology which at once bears witness to the transcendent nature of God by realizing that any positive utterances which can be made about a transcendent and unknowable God must also be unsaid. Thus, these women articulate spiritual programmes which allow them to indulge in the contemplative life and to collapse the boundaries between the cataphatic and the apophatic in order to obtain a new form of personal spiritual access. Subsequently, they appropriate and reclaim for themselves those traditionally male apophatic languages of ‘unsaying’ and images of annihilation, thus incorporating them into a mode of access and self-expression which challenges male authority. Far from being a ‘naïve pre-critical ignorance of God’ Denys Turner describes apophatic theology as ‘a kind of acquired ignorance’ or ‘a strategy and practice of unknowing’.\(^2\) In contrast, cataphatic theology represents ‘the Christian mind deploying all the resources of language in the effort to express something about God’.\(^3\) This motif of the ineffability of God is one which similarly resonates with issues of mediation within the thesis and with the ways in which medieval mystical women exploited and at times, were exploited by those male members of the clerical elite who made it possible for their voices to be heard and also to be silenced. This issue lies at the heart of a thesis which is keenly aware of the implications of the following statement from historian Carlo Ginzburg: ‘Access to the past is always mediated, and thus,


\(^3\) Turner, 1995, p. 20.
always partial'.⁴ This 2013 Preface written and added to Ginzburg’s 1976 *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, acknowledges the difficulties inherent in historical distance and the implications for scholarly inquiry. I would argue that whilst our access is indeed always limited, the attempt to make contact or gain access remains a valuable and worthwhile part of the feminist project.

**Defining Mysticism**

Having outlined the problematic gendered nature of mysticism in the medieval context it is necessary to consider the obstacles faced in dealing with the term in and of itself. ‘Mysticism’ is a term plagued by its own characteristic abstruseness and indeterminacy. It is a term which is indeed, ‘both commonly used and resistant of easy description and definition’.⁵ According to David Knowles:

> Everyone in our day who proposes to speak or to write of mysticism must begin by deploring both the ambiguity of the word itself and the difficulty of defining it in any of its meanings.⁶

All attempts to define it tend to be found lacking in some respect or other. As Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff puts it,

> If one is not already a mystic, one can best understand mysticism by reading mystical texts, *for mysticism is an experience not an idea*. This is especially

---


true for medieval women mystics, whose works explore the manifold dimensions of this experience, as far as is possible in words.\footnote{Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Body and Soul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 3, my emphasis.}

A further difficulty exists in the tendency to use the term interchangeably with other vague, loaded terms such as ‘spirituality’. For example, it is often currently used as an umbrella term for various forms of ‘New Age’ spirituality (for example, Wicca) which can be ‘practiced’ at home as a sort of “do-it-yourself”, “pick-and-mix religion”\footnote{Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman, ‘The Sacralization of the self: Relocating the Sacred on the Ruins of Tradition’ in *Religion Beyond a Concept*, ed. by Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 799. So-called ‘New Age’ spiritualities are particularly popular in the United States with everything from book shops to dedicated online stores promising ‘occult’ products and supplies to aspiring ‘mystics’ See ‘Mystic-Awakening Shopping Spiritual Supply Store’, <http://www.mystic-awakening.com/> [accessed: 4 February 2013] for an example of such a ‘spiritual supply store’ where access to and purchasing of such products is unregulated and free for all self-appointed ‘mystics’ to avail of.} of course, Santha Bhattacharji notes, the term is a modern invention and so, it is not one [medieval mystics] use to describe their endeavours or their experience, although of course, they use the adjective *mysticus* to describe the “hidden” or “spiritual” meaning of Scripture.\footnote{Santha Bhattacharji, ‘Medieval Contemplation and Mystical Experience’ in *Approaching Medieval English Anchoritic and Mystical Texts*, ed. by Dee Dyas and Others (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), p. 51.}

This chapter works to highlight the different uses and meanings of the term in the medieval and modern periods while also articulating a language set for its own understanding of what constitutes a ‘mystic’ or ‘mystical text’. First and foremost, what the term ‘mysticism’ has come to designate itself is a culturally, temporally and socially specific construct. However, in general terms, ‘mysticism’ has been defined as a close, personal and direct relationship with the ultimate Other (God), which is most often gleaned through visions and inner, transformative experiences. Such experiences are acutely personal and thus subjective, as evidenced by the texts
produced from these encounters across medieval Europe. Nevertheless, the lack of concrete definition thus bestows upon ‘mysticism’ the potential quality of being ‘all things to all men’, and so the opportunities for misuse of a term with such a complex history are numerous. Of the similarly complex and easily misappropriated term ‘spirituality’, Peter Van Der Veer has remarked: ‘It suggests more than it defines’, a view that readily applies to ‘mysticism’. Given the preoccupation of this thesis with discourses of ‘unknowing’ and ‘unsaying’, to relentlessly seek a concrete definition of ‘mysticism’ is arguably to miss the point. Furthermore, any answer to the question: ‘What is mysticism?’ will necessarily fall short, as such a question fails to take into account the myriad geographical, temporal and most importantly, idiosyncratic features which combine to make up the specific theological program and ‘mysticism’ of a particular mystic. The four case-studies of medieval female mystics which follow this chapter understand ‘mysticism’, as apophatic or visionary theology, in its particularity, even as historiography of ‘mysticism’ in the twentieth century has preferred the general over the particular, as we shall see.

The resurgence of interest in the mystical tradition in the early twentieth century coincides with the Gifford Lectures given at the University of Edinburgh in 1901 by philosopher and psychologist William James (1842-1910). Highly popular and increasingly well-attended, these lectures reignited interest in religion and in particular the inward religious experience that also characterizes medieval mysticism. The lectures were published as Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature – a landmark work for the study of mysticism which has been reprinted thirty-six times since its first publication in 1902. James defines religion as:

The feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.¹¹ James's discussion of religion is based heavily on the first-hand experiences of others, again prioritising the definition of mystical experience in terms of an 'inward turn', a reliance on personal, transformative, religious experience which characterizes theories of religion in the period.¹² Donald Duclow has noted that the mind-cure movement which 'emphasized the healing power of positive emotions and beliefs'¹³ was highly influential for James, who strongly supported 'healthy mindedness', and believed it to be 'a major contribution to American religion and culture'.¹⁴ The link between the healthy and happy mind informs James's borrowing of Francis Newman's categorization of the 'once-born' and the 'twice-born' (James 80).¹⁵ 'Once-born' souls are child-like in their optimistic acceptance of a nurturing, merciful God, while 'twice-born' souls are sickly, self-critical and morbid in their outlook. The interdependence of the health and happiness of the modern soul is thus a structuring principle for James. In his final lectures James admits:

I do believe that feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue.¹⁶

Such an emphasis on feeling and personal inner experience in the context of religious belief thus gesture towards the tactile, affective spirituality exhibited by the

---

¹² James provides two different first-hand, anonymized experiences (presumably of his own patients) on the mind-cure (James, pp. 111-113). In lecture 9 on 'Conversion' he also cites the case of an American, Stephen Bradley who '[sees] the Saviour, by faith, in human shape' (James, p. 160).
¹⁴ Duclow, pp. 45-6.
¹⁵ James, p. 80.
¹⁶ James, p. 337.
female mystics explored in this thesis. Indeed, many medievalists concur with Sarah McNamer’s argument that ‘to perform compassion is to feel like a woman’. The notion of compassion as a feminized gender performance will recur in the case studies that follow this chapter. But James must be understood in the context of his times; the disenchantment of modern society sparks a renewed, nostalgic interest in (and perhaps retreat to) past epistemic models of religious virtue and faith. Petroff has commented that there are certain historical periods ‘during which mysticism becomes uncharacteristically prevalent and authoritative and during which mystics are more needed by their communities’. David Knowles sees this revival of interest in mysticism as stemming from two different quarters: ‘the scientific study of psychology’ in its bid to establish ‘a balanced personality’, and Catholic thinkers who responded to this movement within psychology by ‘reacting against the prevalent arid rationalism and...by interesting themselves in the direct, personal experiences and writings of the celebrated mystical saints of the past’. As the archetypal ‘age of faith’, the Middle Ages, with the emphasis of so many of its religious and theological writers on close personal connections and relationships with God, provides a model to be emulated and if possible, recuperated.

Mysticism is a repeatedly ‘timely’ topic from the early twentieth-century to the present day. In the wake of ‘New Age’ self-help books which privilege ‘well-being’ and ‘spirituality’ and what Mark McIntosh has described as ‘privatized “lifestyles” [which indulge] individualistic quests for something “inner”’20, ‘-isms’ of all varieties abound. But as Michael Sargent observes:

18 Petroff, 1994, p. 5.
Mysticism, in the rationalist modern age, is thought of as the esoteric religion of unreason, the religion of raptures and ecstatic visions... In the medieval period, however, the lines were drawn differently: the term “religion” referred to religious orders, and the word “mysticism” didn’t exist at all.

What they spoke of rather was “meditation” and “contemplation”... 21

The practice of contemplation is one of the key touchstones of medieval mysticism in the period designating those who had given themselves to the contemplative life: ‘that form of life, usually accessible only to vowed religious, that was spent in reading, meditation and prayer’. 22 However, at this point I would also like to add a further touchstone in the form of the quest for self-knowledge. The via mystica or mystic way involves three main stages: purgation, illumination and unification. Each mystic incorporates these three elements differently in their particular idiosyncratic spiritual programmes, but all mystical texts contain these key features to some extent or another. Therefore, certain characteristically ‘mystical’ discourses arise: specifically, discourses of ‘oneing’ or ‘withness’ and self-annihilation or silence which inflect and structure medieval mysticism.

However, I would argue that the overarching aim of the mystic (and of the logic propounded by mystical discourse itself) is a quest for selfhood. Innate to the mystical project is a need to self-identify with a higher, greater, transcendent being or power. This identification is expressed through language which in turn gives definition to the worldly self by virtue of its ultimate difference from a transcendent Other - God. Of course, such an identification is inherently paradoxical: if self-knowledge is predicated upon knowledge of God (an ineffable and ultimately unknowable entity), knowledge of the self is necessarily limited and impeded as God

22 Sargent, p. 77.
is beyond language. God is ‘unsayable’ and so by default, ‘unknowable’. Thus, the self can only be known negatively in terms of what it is not in comparison with the greatness of a superabundant God. Denys Turner summarizes this quality of unknowability:

It follows from the unknowability of God that there is very little that can be said about God: or rather, since most theistic religions actually have a great number of things to say about God, what follows from the unknowability of God is that we can have very little idea of what all these things said of God mean.\(^{23}\)

This is the fundamental premise of the apophatic discourse which drives the medieval mystical tradition and which will shortly be fully contextualized. However, at this point it is sufficient to focus on the self-referential nature of the identifications and relations made between mystic and God, self and Other. In the process of attempting to know God via identification with him or his divine qualities, a constantly oscillating relation is established between the positive (cataphatic) and negative (apophatic) utterances which can be said about him. Thus, these categories endlessly collapse into one another in the moment of enquiry as to the nature of God. Anything that can be said about God must simultaneously be ‘unsaid’. Therefore, a transcendent, otherworldly figure cannot be articulated. As Amy Hollywood notes, ‘…mysticism works through the “unsaying” of cataphatic utterances and experiences of the (divine) other…’\(^{24}\) and so, a by-product of this ‘unsaying’ about God is a corresponding ‘unknowing’ of the self.

It is the contention of this thesis that the oscillating dialectic of the cataphatic and the apophatic, of affirmation and negation which drives medieval mysticism, is

\(^{23}\) Turner, 1995, p. 20.

similarly evidenced by a concomitant oscillation between languages of ‘selfing’ and ‘unselfing’ at different historical moments which inform and guide female self-expression. The particular and paradoxical mode of self-expression afforded by the genre of the mystical text thus enables the female voice to oscillate between empowerment and silence at different moments - between what I have termed a ‘selfing’ and an ‘unselfing’, whereby the female mystic’s experience is guided by a shifting process of identification and self-effacement with and within God. Both the medieval and modern case studies analyzed in this thesis hope to demonstrate a movement from medieval articulation of self via the apophatic mode (as exemplified by medieval *mulieres religiosae*), to a modern project of recuperating the self through a reading and revisiting of this apophatic mode (as we shall see with the early twentieth-century medievalists assessed later), and finally, to the postmodern project of negating the self using the apophatic mode (as we will see in contemporary writers and thinkers). Prior to assessing the treatment of apophaticism in the Middle Ages and in modern and postmodern culture in any further detail, we must delineate the features of a long and complex tradition stretching back to the Neoplatonism of Pseudo-Dionysius.

**Apophaticism, the Negative Way and the Roots of the Medieval Mystical Tradition**

Despite the idiosyncratic nature of mystical texts which are characteristically *sui generis*, William Pollard and Robert Boenig observe ‘the relative emphasis on the *via negativa* and *via positiva*’ exhibited by ‘the writings of mysticism and devotion that grace the Middle English period of English literature…’ 25 At some level or another, all mystical texts invoke both affirmations and negations about their subject (God)

---

using language, metaphor and imagery. The discourse which arises from this practice is often called negative theology. William Franke has noted that the purpose of the self-negating language which characterizes it is ‘to evoke what is beyond words’, as ‘for negative theologies, it is possible to say only what God is not’. The roots of medieval mysticism and this via negativa or negative theology thus lie in the important and complex tradition of apophaticism. Before exploring the Neoplatonic roots of this tradition it is helpful to consider its etymology. I have previously sketched the discourses of medieval mysticism as languages of ‘unsaying’ and thus ‘unknowing’. Michael Sells’s 1994 work Mystical Languages of Unsaying defines the Greek word apophasis as an ‘un-saying or speaking-away’ while its opposite cataraphasis is defined as ‘affirmation, saying, speaking-with’. Sells’s definition of the polarized nature of these two constituent parts of language about God hints towards the possible slippage between them which makes apophatic discourse so unlimited. If ‘every act of unsaying demands or presupposes a previous saying’, then everything that can be said about God must also be unsaid. In this model, each category eventually collapses into the other and vice versa as the attempt to know God is enacted. The origins of this dialectical logic are to be found in the Neoplatonic philosophy of the third century C.E., although the via negativa or negative way of approaching knowledge of God is most commonly associated with sixth-century Syrian monk Pseudo-Dionysius.

To briefly contextualize the intellectual climate within which the apophatic mode emerged it is necessary to begin with Plato’s theory of the ‘unsayability’ of the

---

28 Sells, p. 3.
One (God or the ultimate principle of reality) which he articulates in his *Parmenides* (137b-144e: ‘Therefore [the One] is not named or spoken of, nor is it the object of opinion or knowledge, nor does anything among the “things that are” perceive it’ (*Parmenides* 142a)).\(^{29}\) Representing a wholly transcendent entity, the One is characterized by its complete ineffability as ‘all positive expressions [about it] are found to be inadequate’.\(^{30}\) For example, any statement made about the One implies ‘being’ of a sort. This imputed quality of being thus conflicts with the singularity or ‘oneness’ of the One being described and results in the attribution of something extra. Franke notes: ‘Plato had hypothesized a One that cannot be, since if being were added to it, then it would no longer be perfectly one’.\(^{31}\) Thus, all attempts to describe the One are insufficient as according to Plato the One is beyond words.

This theory is further developed by Plotinus. Widely considered to be the originator of the system of thought we now categorize as Neoplatonic, Andrew Louth comments that Plotinus ‘represents man’s inherent desire to return to heaven at its purest and most ineffable’.\(^{32}\) Plotinian metaphysics culminate in the thought of fifth-century writer Proclus who stressed the need for *aphairesis* – that is, the stripping or clearing away of everything which can be said about the One. However, the result is that language (and specifically, language about God) negates and unsays itself to the point of silence, resulting in a useless infinite regress. In this model, all utterances about God unsay and undo themselves to the extent that the only possible statement about a supreme, superabundant being such as God is that, ‘God is silence.’ It is in the mystical theology of Pseudo-Dionysius that we see the Neoplatonic language and


foundations of apophatic discourse take shape. Pseudo-Dionysian thought strongly inflects and influences medieval mysticism but as Robert Boenig points out, his influence and ideas can also be seen in the thought of twentieth-century ‘mystics’ such as Thomas Merton.\textsuperscript{33} His relevance to the development and dissemination of the apophatic tradition in the Western world is thus crucial.

Arthur Bradley has observed that the turn of the fifth to the sixth century saw ‘an imaginative philosophical synthesis between the Christian concept of the revelation of Christ and the Neoplatonic concept of the transcendence of The One’\textsuperscript{34} in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius (\emph{The Corpus Dionysiacum}). It has been argued that Pseudo-Dionysius ‘drives the negative way harder and farther than any of his predecessors’.\textsuperscript{35} In a short but comprehensive text entitled, \emph{The Mystical Theology} (hereafter, \textit{MT}) Pseudo-Dionysius elaborates on his own mystical theology or program for ascent towards and knowledge of God, thereby introducing the key mystical rhetoric, tropes and imagery which frame apophatic writings from the medieval to the present. Pseudo-Dionysian texts thus articulate the model of a hierarchical spiritual ladder which can be ascended, but which ultimately culminates in a cloud of darkness or unknowing. During this spiritual ascent, the One’s attributes are negated the further ‘up’ the apophatic, hierarchical ladder we climb until ‘the end of theology’\textsuperscript{36} is reached – that is, an \textit{actual} encounter with God. Pseudo-Dionysius appears to draw heavily from both Scripture and Neoplatonic language and concepts resulting in the sort of syncretistic mysticism characteristic of

\textsuperscript{35} Franke, Vol.1, p. 159.
\textsuperscript{36} Franke, Vol.1, p. 17.
the Eastern tradition. For example, Pseudo-Dionysius draws particularly on the ascent of Moses in Exodus 19:9 and God’s promise to Moses: ‘I am going to come to you in a dense cloud…’. This ‘dense cloud’ is described in The Mystical Theology as ‘the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing’. The trope of the dark cloud of unknowing is also later adopted by the anonymously authored, fourteenth-century mystical treatise and translation The Cloud of Unknowing, thus highlighting the significant role Pseudo-Dionysian writings played in shaping and influencing the medieval mystical tradition.

Also informed by Neoplatonic writings and concepts, The Mystical Theology borrows Plotinus’s image of the sculptor in order to illustrate the need for self-stripping, clearing away or aphairesis. This image identifies the worldly creature who longs for knowledge of the One with Plotinus’s sculptor who in carving a statue reveals ‘the beauty which is hidden’. Pseudo-Dionysius uses the text to outline the interplay between cataphatic and apophatic sayings about an indescribable God - ‘the Cause of all things who is beyond all things’ - in order to demonstrate his ultimate ineffability as he is ‘beyond all being and knowledge’. Chapter three sees Pseudo-Dionysius expand and elaborate on the first step along the mystic way of purgation or purification as he details the upward ascent towards knowledge of God:

The fact is that the more we take flight upward, the more our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming; so that now as we plunge

---

37 Although Pseudo-Dionysian thought was largely assimilated into the Christian mysticism practiced in the late Middle Ages, its roots in the various Eastern mystical traditions should still be recognized. Louth notes that his Ecclesiastical Hierarchy ‘presupposed the liturgical practices of the Byzantine East’ (Louth, p. 155) rather than the West, thus suggesting the non-Christian roots of his thought.
38 Mystical Theology, 1001A, p. 137.
39 Mystical Theology, 1025B, p. 138.
40 Mystical Theology, 1025A, p. 138; 997B, p. 135.
into that darkness which is beyond intellect, we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speechless and unknowing.\textsuperscript{41} The higher we climb on the journey towards knowledge of God ‘the more language falters...’\textsuperscript{42} until it is ultimately rendered completely silent. Pseudo-Dionysian thought thus predicates itself upon the cyclical movement of procession and return which characterizes Neoplatonism. It is only through ‘an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything’ and ‘with your understanding laid aside’ that ‘union with him who is beyond all being and knowledge’ can be achieved.\textsuperscript{43} We will see that this fundamental premise is repeatedly adopted by medieval female mystics in their respective texts. By chapter five, Pseudo-Dionysius’s language begins to undo itself as the various attempts to describe God - variously named throughout as ‘Trinity’, ‘the One’, ‘the Transcendent One’, ‘the Cause of all’ and ‘the Supreme Cause of every conceptual thing’\textsuperscript{44} - are finally reduced to the third person singular, ‘it’. Therefore, all attempts to understand ‘it’ or God can only ever be attempts at understanding approximations of his qualities as opposed to God himself:

It is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion...and...it is also beyond every denial.\textsuperscript{45}

Pseudo-Dionysius’s Neoplatonic ideas about an unsayable and unknowable Christian God thus function as a standard source for the apophatic writings produced by medieval mystics. With the twelfth-century reintroduction of the Corpus Aristotelicum into Western culture, Pseudo-Dionysian and Aristotelian ideas began

\textsuperscript{41} Mystical Theology, 1033B, p. 139.
\textsuperscript{42} Mystical Theology, 1033C, p. 139.
\textsuperscript{43} Mystical Theology, 1000A; 997B, p. 135.
\textsuperscript{44} Mystical Theology, 997A, p. 135; 1000C, p. 136; 1025A, p. 138; 1040D, p. 140; 1045D, p. 141.
\textsuperscript{45} Mystical Theology, 1048B, p. 141.
to infiltrate and inform medieval Scholasticism (particularly the writings and thought of Thomas Aquinas, 1225-1274). Boeppig has noted the ‘vast and slow seepage of [Pseudo-Dionysius’s] ideas from sixth-century Syria to fourteenth-century England’ as a result of ‘a number of influential commentators’, such as theologian and contemplative Hugh of St Victor (c.1096-1141). It is at this point that the flourishing of an idiosyncratic female spirituality grounded in cerebral Neoplatonic discourses of ‘oneness’ and ‘self-annihilation’ begins to occur.

The ‘Flowering’ of the Twelfth-Century Mulieres Religiosae

The late twelfth and early thirteenth century saw the introduction of a particularly peculiar strain of female mysticism both in England and on the Continent. Sarah Beckwith follows traditional characterizations of this form of mysticism in stating that ‘the late Middle Ages witness a new and extraordinary focus on the passion of Christ’. This period witnessed a wealth of new opportunities for women to participate in particular religious roles and behaviours, and so ‘large numbers of women – called beguines in the north, tertiaries in the south – undertook to lead holy lives of chastity, service and labour without withdrawing from the world physically, making permanent vows or founding complex organizations’. These semi-religious women were known as mulieres religiosae or mulieres sanctae – holy women who remained in the world while practicing a new form of religious lifestyle devoted to Christ. Bernard McGinn observes that ‘the new mysticism that burst upon Western Europe around 1200 involved innovative forms of asceticism, as well as new kinds

---

46 Boeppig, 1997, p. 21; p. 23.
of mystical contact with God'.  

As with all religious movements and traditions, change happens gradually and often in ways which are difficult to quantify exactly. Medieval mysticism is, by no means, an exception to this rule. However, Sells is confident enough to remark that ‘the 150-year period from the mid-twelfth to the beginning of the fourteenth century constitutes the flowering of apophatic mysticism’.  

The flourishing of an extreme and specifically female piety has been characterized in various ways with different consequences. For example, Nicholas Watson has commented on ‘the slippery divide between mysticism and emotionalism’ which gave concern to ecclesiastical conservatives, thus ‘evoking associations of mysticism with the “poisons” of heresy and subjectivism’.  

However, at present it is important to consider the particular features belonging to this female mysticism.

Emerging in the wake of the intellectualism of Schoolmen such as John Scotus Eriugena who translated Pseudo-Dionysian writings into Latin in the ninth century, this mysticism represented a new form of spirituality which not only foregrounded respective personal theologies but a specifically female form of affective piety and self-expression. McName captures the main impetus for this affective piety with the following observation: ‘At the centre of medieval Christian culture, there was a human figure – male, once beautiful, dying on a cross’.  

Compassion for the broken body of the suffering Christ thus forms the basis of this piety as female mystics attempt to visualize the Passion, empathize with it and suffer

---

50 Sells, 1994, p. 5.  
52 McName, p. 1.
with Christ as the etymological roots of the word ‘compassion’ imply. Of course, these identifications with Christ have their roots in the monastic tradition and the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) and Anselm (1033-1109) which Thomas Bestul notes incorporated ‘fervid expressions of emotion and love’ with biblical exegesis. However, the maternal, life-giving properties of the female body provide an even more direct reflection of Christ’s suffering body. According to Susan Arvay, ‘if “woman” is intrinsically associated with the body, and Christ assumed human flesh in order to redeem humanity, then by this logic “woman” comes to represent “humanity” itself [and] the fallen corporal human nature of both men and women.’ The ‘suffering, bleeding carnality’ of the female flesh which facilitates and gives new life makes women ‘supremely fit to embody the Passion and sacrifice of Chris, and to represent the humanity which that sacrifice redeemed.’

The mysticism of many of these women is strongly rooted in the *vita apostolica*; that is, in the practice of emulating Christ’s life and living a charitable, Christian lifestyle uninhibited by the formal religious vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. This is not to say that these behaviours were never practised by these women as many communities had their own rules, but in most cases they lived a semi-religious life which was not rigorously policed by formal vows. The women who indulged in these practices and this form of religious life are known as the religious or holy women or the *mulieres religiosae*. Elizabeth Makowski explains that at the start of the fourteenth century ‘a religious woman was defined by canon


law as one who had not only taken three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience but who had also made solemn profession in an already existing order. Religious women living in communities which did not exhibit one or more of these characteristics were ‘regarded as semi- or quasi-religious’ and found themselves subject to ecclesiastical scrutiny as in the case of the beguines. Beguine communities initially sprang up in the Low Countries in the early thirteenth century. These women ‘lacked a specific founder and never received papal sanction’. Instead they led a particular kind of pious life which allowed them to pursue a life very much within the world, outside of the cloister and separate from ecclesiastical structures. By 1312 and the Council of Vienne (1311-1312), the beguines found themselves not only associated with the antinomian Free Spirit heresy, but effectively identified as perpetrators of it. John Van Engen describes Free Spirits and mystics as those who ‘sought utter union with God’. This union ‘began in conversion as a loving yearning [and] came to transcend all love and will so a person’s “within” (the soul) merged indistinguishably with the “beyond” (the deity)’, as we will see in Chapter 2 with Porete’s doctrine of theosis or deification. Those uncleristered women living without vows tread a dangerous path as Makowski implies. However, outside of the ‘narrow canonical definition’ of the *mulier*

---

57 Makowski, p.2.
61 Ibid.
religiousa existed a much broader popular definition which gained ‘currency since the twelfth century’ and which designated those striving for a life of Christian perfection and in imitation of Christ (a vita apostolica) as religious and holy women.

Bernard McGinn has described the writings of the mulieres religiosae as ‘the earliest large-scale emergence of women’s voices in the history of Christian thought’, suggesting the empowerment of the female voice during a historical period known for its antifeminist inclinations and distrust of female religious. Thus, the ‘emergence’ of the female voice in the twelfth-thirteenth century is in fact facilitated by the mutually beneficial traditional relationship shared by medieval female mystic/devotee and male confessor or spiritual director/amanuensis. This relationship of mediation is paramount in the production and dissemination of female mystical writings in the period. However, before proceeding it is useful to expand on the language set and terminology used by this thesis in understanding and articulating these particular female mystics.

Firstly, I understand the term ‘mysticism’ in relation to these women as designating their own personal theology, predicated on their relationship with God, and the spiritual program advanced as part of their devotional practice. This program is most often taught to, or shared with, other members of the mystic’s religious community (male and female alike). It is this proclivity to claim spiritual authority and to teach and share the allegedly personally and divinely received Word of God in the form of mystical experiences that represents a serious and dangerous transgression for the medieval Church. Such experiences are of course wholly subjective and unable to be officially verified. Hence, the charisma and practice of discretio spirituum (the discernment of spirits) was introduced in order to test the

---

visions allegedly had by these women. This discourse emerged from the necessity of testing and regulating female visionaries, as a long tradition of antifeminist thought within the Church (reaching back to the Pauline Injunctions: 1 Corinthians 14:34) railed against the notion of women as communicators or teachers of God’s Word in a postlapsarian context. Rather, this was to be a strongly guarded privilege of the male sex. Rosalynn Voaden understands the misogynistic proscriptions of the Bible as weapons which ‘were refined by the Church Fathers, and then by centuries of Christian theologians and clerics into instruments designed to keep women subordinate, controlled and convinced of their own inferiority’. Thus the practice ‘is effectively reserved to the clergy’ in an effort to counteract possible misjudgements on the part of the mystic and to ensure that ‘the spiritual director constitutes the first line of defence in the Church’s battle against demonic infiltration’. With its original roots in Scripture, discretio spirituum was considered a gift from God divinely bestowed on those worthy enough to receive it. Voaden defines the practice as follows:

*Discretio spirituum* established the forms which a vision could take which were acceptable to the Church, and outlined acceptable behaviour for a visionary [...] it provided visionary women with a complete model for behaviour and communication, a model which facilitated the communication and acceptance of their divine message.

Generally, I use the terms ‘mystic’ and ‘devotee’ interchangeably when discussing the *mulieres religiosae* described above but a further differentiation is

---

63 ‘Let women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak: but they are commanded to be under obedience as also saith the law’.

64 Rosalynn Voaden, God’s Words, Women’s Voices: The Discernment of Spirits in the Writing of Late-Medieval Women Visionaries (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 1999, p. 22.

65 Voaden, p. 57.

66 Voaden, p. 48 n. 21 provides the scriptural roots of discretio spirituum: Mark 7:16; Romans 12: 1-2; Ephesians 5:10-11; Phillipians 1: 9-10; Galatians 5: 22-23; I John 2:24 and 4: 1-6.

67 Voaden, p. 43.
useful in acknowledging the visionary element incorporated into certain mystical experiences. Here, I follow Voaden’s classification and distinction between ‘mystics’ and ‘visionaries’. In terms of medieval theories of vision, Augustine’s tripartite model provides a useful breakdown which classifies possible types of vision in ascending order of superiority. For Augustine the three types of vision are as follows: corporeal, spiritual (sensory) and intellectual. Voaden observes:

This hierarchy is based on the reliability of each kind of vision. Corporeal and spiritual vision can err, either through the distortions of the natural world, the deficiencies of the viewer, or the deceptions practised by evil spirits. No such misapprehension can occur with an intellectual vision.\(^6^8\)

Following this model, ‘mystics’ experience incommunicable intellectual union with the Godhead (the *unio mystica*, Augustine’s third and most superior level of vision), while ‘visionaries’ experience spiritual or imaginary visions through the senses (i.e. the inner eye or ear and Augustine’s second level of vision). Despite the fact that a certain hierarchy existed in the period which privileged ‘mystical experience over visionary’\(^6^9\), it is imperative to note that these two categories are not always mutually exclusive. The practice of *discretio spirituum*, that is, the ability to discern spirits and differentiate between divine and diabolic visions, was considered a gift from God divinely bestowed on those worthy enough to receive it.

The motivations behind this urgent testing and regulation of female visionaries was rooted in a long tradition of antifeminist ecclesiastical thought. Voaden has understood the misogynistic proscriptions of the Bible as weapons which ‘were refined by the Church Fathers, and then by centuries of Christian theologians and clerics into instruments designed to keep women subordinate, controlled and

---

\(^{6^8}\) Voaden, p. 11.

\(^{6^9}\) Voaden, p. 10.
convinced of their own inferiority’.\textsuperscript{70} Certainly this rings true with the notion of a need for testing and regulating female claims to spiritual authority. However, as Voaden would also assert, the relationship between women and their regulatory discourse of \textit{discretio spirituum} is much more complex, as in fact, some women were able to use it to empower and amplify their voices.

As previously noted, the term ‘mysticism’ is very much a modern invention and so, terms such as ‘mystical theology’ and ‘contemplative life’ bear a more appropriate resemblance to any name these medieval mystics might have associated with themselves (if indeed they would have applied any term at all to a way or form of everyday religious life which we as moderns consider to be a collection of specific practices). Michel de Certeau notes this slippage in \textit{The Mystic Fable}: ‘Where we speak of “mystics”, a sixteenth-century author instead said “contemplatives” or “spirituals”’.\textsuperscript{71} Bhattacharji helpfully traces the etymological roots of the word ‘contemplation’ back to both the Latin \textit{contemplatio} and the Greek \textit{theoria} which have as their root syllable \textit{te} meaning: ‘see, sight’. In doing so, Bhattacharji enables us to appreciate the multifaceted, polysemous nature of the word ‘contemplation’ as our ‘medieval writers’ own preferred term’ for describing their mystical experiences.\textsuperscript{72} For example, the term also implies a withdrawal of the self from the everyday world in order to enact said contemplation, and so the interplay between physical sight and a deliberate, higher form of intellectual (fore)sight is similarly figured. Steeped in ‘the long tradition of Greek philosophy’\textsuperscript{73} visionary mysticism represented a particular challenge to orthodoxy and to the overall authority of the

\textsuperscript{70} Voaden, p. 22.
\textsuperscript{72} Bhattacharji, p. 51.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
Church itself, situating the medieval *mulieres religiosae* in a dangerous position of constant doubt and suspicion.

The religious writings they produced have been termed by Nicholas Watson (following Bernard McGinn) as ‘vernacular theology’ in an attempt to divorce these writings from alternative labels such as “‘popular”, “didactic”, “devotional”, “pastoral”, “mystical” or “affective”’ which Watson believes limit ‘mystics studies’.74 These religious writings and treatises are written in the vernacular and range from individual and idiosyncratic programs of personal theology (Julian of Norwich75) to apophatic, cerebral mysticism in the Neoplatonic tradition (Marguerite Porete) and hagiographical *vitae* (Marie d’Oignies). Whilst some mystical treatises could be considered dull or repetitive (for example, in their slavish, monotonous rearticulations of Scripture) I would argue that, as evidenced by the case studies which follow this chapter, there is a cultural vibrancy to the religious writings of these women which is further complemented by a rich array of imagery, metaphor and language which not only illustrate medieval female interiorities and mystical experiences, but which designate these texts as worthy of further rigorous study. In contention with the popular assumption that post-1400 writings ‘mark one of those crucial transitions between an age of gold and one of brass’ largely informed and structured by ‘sterile elevation and imitation’76 of the glorious Geoffrey Chaucer, Watson wishes to call attention to ‘the less well known body of vernacular religious

---

74 Nicholas Watson, ‘Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate and Arundel’s *Constitutions of 1409*, *Speculum* 70.4 (October, 1995), p. 823, n. 4; ‘The Middle English Mystics’, p. 545.


writing represented by Langland, the “mystics” and numerous other writers and texts’.\textsuperscript{77} Seeing this attitude as an inherited construct of the fifteenth century, Watson aims to redirect the focus of medieval studies onto the sorts of religious writings produced by our \textit{mulieres religiosae} which in form and content perhaps lack the flair and panache of Chaucer in form, but which instead speak to the politics of women who write and are written into history. Watson’s dissatisfaction with terms such as ‘the mystics’ or more precisely, ‘Middle English mystics’ is rooted in their anachronism. He notes that ‘the phrase “mystick theology” is first recorded in 1639 and “mystic” and “mysticism” are eighteenth-century terms…’, thus concluding that ‘from any historical point of view the field of medieval mystics studies has always been on shaky ground’\textsuperscript{78} and specifically, ground subject to the scrutiny of ‘the ecclesiastical, not the secular, academy’.\textsuperscript{79} While Watson’s points are crucial and important considerations for any study of medieval mysticism I would suggest that deliberations over terminology are only beneficial up until the point that they begin to hinder and cloud our interpretations. Instead, having clarified a language set for discussing the mysticism of the \textit{mulieres religiosae} outlined above, it is possible to consider the different types of medieval mysticism which existed in the period.

\textbf{Types of Medieval Mysticism}

Since the thirteenth century (courtly love, etc.), a gradual religious demythification seems to be accompanied by a progressive mythification of
love. The One has changed its site. It is no longer God but the other, and in a masculine literature, woman.\textsuperscript{80}

Here, we see Certeau observe a strange religious phenomena occurring within the thirteenth century which can be categorized broadly as love or bridal mysticism. With its roots in the allegorical reading of the Song of Songs made popular by Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), bridal mysticism involved the manipulation of gender roles within the narrative producing an eroticized contemplative practice whereby monks could adopt the female role of bride of Christ in pursuit of the object of their desire and affection - God. Barbara Newman provides an apt description of this playful relationship:

bridal mysticism was a narrative devised by male authors for a female protagonist: the virgin bride of Christ, who could be understood collectively as the Church, individually as the Virgin Mary or any loving soul, or more concretely as the female recluse or nun.\textsuperscript{81}

Thus, the Song of Songs tradition allowed monks to experiment with gender roles in playing the Virgin bride of Christ and female object of desire pursued by the male Christ within the allegorical text. As women (and beguines like Hadewijch and Porete) began to compose their own mystical texts following on from this tradition, they were also directly influenced by the courtly love tradition and language of fine amour. For example, ‘they drew on a discourse that assumes a male protagonist and a female object of desire’ thus allowing them ‘to experiment with gender roles just as monks did within the Song of Songs tradition’.\textsuperscript{82} In pursuit of knowledge of the One/God, women indulged in the practice of mystical theology and contemplation –

\textsuperscript{80} Certeau, 1992, p. 4.


\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
traditionally a male, monastic, intellectual domain – thereby rendering herself as strange and ‘Other’ as the otherworldly God she sought to understand. To clarify, in identifying with God on the journey towards mystical knowledge, she undoes herself in a self-annihilation or self-effacement which makes her Other.

Certain mystics (Marie d’Oignies (1177-1213), Beatrice of Nazareth (1200-1268) and Angela of Foligno (1248-1309)) also indulged in ascetic practices of self-flagellation to varying degrees which result in a physically destructive, literal undoing of self. In different geographical regions this type of mysticism proliferated in specific ways and under specific names – in the German tradition Minnemystik or love mysticism proliferates; in the Low Countries beguine mysticism is inflected by discourses of courtly love, bridal mysticism (Brautmystik) and ascetic practices; in England the transmission of mystical ideas from the Continent results in a hybrid form of mysticism which combines many of the aforementioned continental characteristics with Pseudo-Dionysian thought. An important backdrop here is represented by the flourishing of female piety in the twelfth-thirteenth centuries sponsored by the affective piety of the Franciscans. Sarah McNamer remarks that ‘Francis is typically cast as history’s chief exemplar of compassionate devotion to the suffering Christ’. 83 His dedication to a life of disciplined poverty and fervent compassion for Christ’s ultimate sacrifice culminated in his vision of the six-winged Seraph from Isaiah Chapter 6 (an image which represents divine love and which recurs in the female mystical texts of Hadewijch and Porete) and his receipt of the stigmata in 1224. 84 This type of affective piety thus began in monasteries and eventually came to be adopted as a popular form of religious devotion, particularly

for female religious who focused on Christ’s suffering as man. It was rooted in visualizing Christ’s Passion before identifying, empathizing and suffering with Christ using the feminized, maternal body as a site of engagement, thus adapting and emulating the devotional monastic practice of imitatio Christi. Indeed, ‘the idea of God as mother is part of a widespread use, in twelfth-century spiritual writing, of woman, mother, characteristics agreed to be “feminine”’.\(^{85}\) Voaden notes that in the thirteenth century and ‘largely due to the teaching of the Franciscans, there was a popular movement toward the exercise of affective piety in prayer and contemplation’, which marked a distinct ‘contrast to cerebral Dionysian mysticism’\(^{86}\). However, as Pollard and Boenig have remarked, all medieval mystical texts exhibit a ‘relative emphasis on the via negativa and via positiva’\(^{87}\) which oscillates between the polarized opposites of the apophatic and the cataphatic in their articulation of a spiritual programme for knowledge of God. Compassion, empathy and the capacity for ‘feeling’ in general mark the performativity of female piety and function as specific hallmarks of the mysticism of the mulieres religiosae.

As the case studies analysed in this thesis represent a cross-section of the medieval mystical tradition and its later recuperations and appropriations, they do not focus exclusively on one geographical region. Instead they represent specific instances which demonstrate the ways in which the female voice is mediated and passed on to those historians and writers who recuperate the female mystical tradition in the early twentieth century and beyond. One advantage of such an

---

85 Caroline Walker Bynum, ‘Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother: Some Themes in Twelfth-Century Cistercian Writing’, *Harvard Theological Review* 70.3/4 (July-October, 1977), p. 257. See pp.258-59 for Bynum’s warning against the dangers of conflating the twelfth-century tendency of attributing ‘“maternal” characteristics to male religious authorities’ with the supposedly “feminine” imagery which came to be popular with female writers in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. For a book-length study of the topic also see Bynum’s *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).
approach is the ability to consider quite a varied selection of types of mysticism and
their particular characteristics. However, as I have already pointed out, it is also vital
to consider each mystic individually, as all mystical experience is inherently
subjective. Nevertheless, certain shared discourses, tropes and images punctuate the
various mystical writings considered. The majority of these medieval mystical texts
pivot around the trope of the journey towards knowledge of God or the via mystica
while drawing on Pseudo-Dionysian imagery which plays with the binary distinction
between darkness and light, often inverting one into the other.  

Similar inheritances from Neoplatonism exist in the form of the interplay
between lack and abundance and also the circular logic of the Neoplatonic concept of
procession or emanation and return – just as the human mystic is created by God, the
supreme, first Cause, so too must they return to that source in the quest for
knowledge of God. Due to the focus within mystical texts on union with the
tripartite, mutually indwelling Godhead (unio mystica), languages of embodiment,
‘oneness’ or ‘withness’ and self-nourthing or self-abandonment are common in
articulating the endlessly oscillating relation to God, which constantly moves
between the positive and the negative or between affirmations and denials of God.
Turner confirms that amongst the Western Christian mystics there are a number of
metaphors and images which are shared and tend to recur:

The metaphors – of “interiority”, of “ascent”, of “light and darkness” and of
“oneness with God” – appear to have occupied a central role in the
description of Christian ways of spirituality for as long as Christians have
attempted to give one.  

---

88 For example, in chapter one of The Mystical Theology, Pseudo-Dionysius describes the locus of the
mysteries of God’s Word (the logos) as lying absolutely and unchangeably ‘in the brilliant darkness
of a hidden silence’ (997B, p. 135, my emphasis).
These particular metaphors are of course heavily indebted to Pseudo-Dionysian mysticism, and so it is obvious that female mystics were engaging in a male-dominated tradition with a long and complex intellectual history. Whilst some practiced mainly affective piety, apophatic logic and reasoning still crept into the writings produced from their mystical experiences at some level or another, thus threatening the preserve of male clerical authority. Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Duncan Robertson and Nancy Bradley Warren have commented on the threat posed by these vernacular religious writings:

After 1200 however, Latin literacy becomes increasingly problematized, as laymen and significantly, lay and religious women demand access to the domain of spirituality, previously monopolized by the clerical elite. 90 

Such ‘access to the domain of spirituality’ could thus be claimed by any woman living either an enclosed or unenclosed religious life and also under the spiritual direction and guidance of a male cleric and confessor who simultaneously acted as amanuensis. The majority of female mystical experiences were therefore recorded and written down by literate male clerics, who could potentially edit, reorganize, restructure and perhaps also censor the writings produced as representative of the mysticism of their female devotees/mystics. The female devotee and male confessor/amanuensis relationship was thus a mutually beneficial one of vital importance to both interdependent parties – the female devotee requires spiritual guidance, support, scriptural instruction and protection from Church scrutiny, whereas the male cleric requires the association with an individual (male or female) in receipt of authentic divine visions and/or communication if they are to advance their own ecclesiastical careers. Jacques de Vitry’s vita of beguine Marie d’Oignies

encapsulates this devotee/confessor relationship particularly well, as evidenced by the case studies which follow this chapter. However, the beguine mystics represented a particular challenge to the medieval Church as supposed adherents and practitioners of the Free Spirit heresy. Walter Simons has outlined the etymological roots of the term ‘beguine’ noting that ‘it evidently served as an insult’ (Simons 2001 121) due to its close relations to ‘the old French ‘béguer’ meaning ‘to stammer’ and to the various French derivations from the Middle Dutch terms such as ‘lollen’ and ‘popelen’ meaning ‘to mumble prayers or to sing quietly’.  

In the early thirteenth-century the Franciscan and Dominican mendicant orders marked a movement into the world and society of voluntary poverty, modelled on the vita apostolica. The Augustinians and Carmelites also practiced this mendicant way of life. Norman Cohn notes that ‘an elite joined these Orders and as wandering preachers, practising poverty and every kind of self-abnegation, won the devotion of the urban masses’. After a vast intake of members the Franciscan and Dominican Third Orders began to rival ‘the regular friars in asceticism’, thus resulting in a threat to Church authority. According to Cohn, the Church was able to harness the mendicant orders for a time by sanctioning them, thus controlling and using ‘the emotional energies which had been threatening its security’. Such an exclusive focus on voluntary poverty was the trademark of many heretical movements in the period (e.g. the Waldensians, the Cathars and the Joachimites), with these so-called ‘heresies’ allegedly springing up within towns and cities. In direct contradiction of the isolated, ascetic Desert Fathers, these religious were

---

93 Cohn, p. 158.
94 Ibid.
attempting to live in imitation of this particular form of isolation and self-deprivation which was so powerful because it occurred in full view of society, thus stirring the devotion of the urban masses as Cohn suggests. It was thus a form of separating one’s self from society while not wholly being removed from it. Also significant is the interest from members of the merchant class in this religious movement towards voluntary destitution as a means to spiritual perfection. For example, Malcolm Lambert has noted that the founder of the twelfth-century movement known as the Waldensian heresy Valdes (Peter Waldo), ‘was a rich businessman of Lyons’⁹⁵ who on hearing the life of St Alexius⁹⁶ abandoned his wealth and the world. Although Valdes never actually entered a monastery Lambert notes:

There was a Franciscan touch in his religious passion, throwing money on the street, rejecting the usurious business methods that had brought him wealth [and] insisting on receiving his food from others...⁹⁷

His appropriation of the apostolic life represents a classic example of ‘the would-be reform movement drawn into heresy by the inadequacies of ecclesiastical authority’.⁹⁸ The refusal to conform represented the site of Church distrust and suspicion – a stigma which would follow the similarly non-conformist lifestyle habits and strange religious practices of the mulieres religiosae and particularly the beguines. The main problem with these new forms of religious life is that they threaten the established form, deconstructing the ecclesiastical hierarchy which designates and preserves authority in the necessary places to ensure ecclesiastical power and control is maintained at all levels. As Lambert notes, ‘Valdes’s

⁹⁶ The son of a rich man who rejected marriage, lived in poverty and died years later unrecognized and destitute in his father’s home. See Lambert, p. 63.
⁹⁷ Lambert, p. 63.
⁹⁸ Lambert, p. 62.
movement was a popular success, likely to arouse both the fears and the jealousies of the local clergy. The new form of spirituality, infiltrating medieval towns and cities in the period and stressing the cult of voluntary poverty and the *vita apostolica*, aroused suspicion and regulation to varying degrees, whilst also creating a climate within which all ‘new’ or different forms of religious life were subsumed and associated with the dangerous stigma of heresy.

It was within this atmosphere that the beguines and beghards and the Free Spirit movement emerged. Due to the indeterminate nature of religious movements and traditions it is incredibly difficult to definitively pinpoint exact dates origin or their precise characteristics. Religious movements such as these coalesce over time, borrowing as well as making their own traditions. Of no so-called heresy is this statement more true than the Free Spirits; in fact, I would suggest that the most useful question we can ask ourselves about the Free Spirits is whether they ever actually existed. In the context of prominence of the cult of voluntary poverty within society, lay piety was stimulated to a degree not previously witnessed despite the Church’s efforts to regulate and enforce minimum requirements for lay piety (as dictated by chapter 21 of Lateran IV (1215)). Hubert Jedin has observed that as well as attempting to reform the lacklustre piety of the laity, Lateran IV represents a conscious attempt to quell the growing threat from various heretical movements currently outside of its jurisdiction by prohibiting the establishment of new religious orders: ‘The defensive war which the Church had to wage against the heresies of the Cathari, the Waldenses and similar sectaries, is reflected in its prescriptions for the Inquisition’.

Overall, the Fourth Lateran Council encapsulates the Church’s position on pastoral care and on reform. For example canons 3 and 13 announce

99 Lambert, p. 63.
respectively the Church’s intention to excommunicate and anathematize ‘all heretics, whatever names they may go under’, and mark 1215 as a watershed for the foundation of new religious orders ‘lest too great a variety of religious orders leads to grave confusion in God’s church…’.

Canon 7 advises on how church prelates should ‘diligently attend to the correction of their subjects’ offences, especially of clerics, and to the reform of morals’, with canons 14-18 similarly bolstering this push towards clerical reform by suggesting the regulation of clerical vices such as lust, gluttony: ‘all clerics should carefully abstain from gluttony and drunkenness’. Norman Tanner has described its seventy-one decrees as ‘the most impressive and influential legislation of all medieval councils’. Cohn suggests that the religious climate of the early thirteenth century, with its emphasis on the vita apostolica, found itself open to the new forms of spirituality practiced by figures like the beghards and beguines – men and women who lived as ‘itinerant “holy beggars”’ on the alms and charity of others:

The voluntarily poor formed a mobile, restless intelligentsia, members of which were constantly travelling along the trade-routes from town to town, operating mostly underground and finding an audience and a following amongst all the disoriented and anxious elements in urban society.

This link between ‘voluntarily poor’ wandering preachers and an ‘underground’ urban audience exhibits the way in which a general religious movement outside of the Church could (and would) be appropriated and radicalized by it. It would seem that this radicalization might have been an attempt to create a heretical threat that

---

102 Tanner, pp. 237; 242.
103 Tanner, p. 19.
104 Cohn, p. 157.
105 Ibid.
perhaps never existed. The beguines and beghards were just such appropriate scapegoats.

Canons 16 and 28 of the Council of Vienne address ‘the women commonly known as Beguines’ who ‘are not religious at all’. The fact that ‘they argue and preach on the holy Trinity and the divine essence and express opinions contrary to the catholic faith’ leads them to ‘ensnare many simple people, leading them into various errors’. Canon 28 goes on to outline eight errors which are largely confined to allegations of antinomianism (the belief that persons in this life can be exempted from moral law due to a perfection acquired through grace). Errors one, three, four, five and six explicitly focus on this particular ‘perverse doctrine’. The eighth error is regarding incorrect celebration of the Eucharistic Host. According to this error, beguines consider it ‘an imperfection for them to come down from the purity and height of their contemplation so far as to think about the ministry or sacrament of the eucharist, or about the passion of Christ as man’. As the case studies in Chapter 2 demonstrate, most beguine women take Eucharistic devotion incredibly seriously as it forms the cornerstone of their personal theology and divine access. Canons 16 and 28 provide the basis for two papal bulls issued by Pope John XXII in 1317 which directly related to the question of beguine life. These are Ad Nostrum and Cum de Quibusdam Mulieribus. Ad Nostrum was detrimental enough as it formally identified the beguines with the Free Spirit heresy but Cum de Quibusdam Mulieribus was even more problematic in that it condemned the entire beguine way of life: ‘With the approval of the sacred council, we perpetually forbid

---

106 Tanner, p. 374.
107 Ibid.
109 Tanner, p. 383.
110 Tanner, p. 384.
their mode of life and remove it completely from the church of God’. Simons notes that *Cum de Quibusdam Mulieribus* ‘defined beguines as women who assumed religious dress but did not take vows of obedience or renounce private property and lived without observing an approved rule’ (Simons 133). Despite the condemnatory tone of Vienne, Canon 16 does stress that these rules apply only to those ‘bad’ beguines whose lifestyle taints the standing of those ‘faithful women...wishing to live a life of penance and serving the Lord of hosts in a spirit of humility. This they may do, as the Lord inspires them’. Following the publication of the council’s decrees in 1317, Pope John XXII issued a new bull on 13 August 1318 – *Ratio Recta*. Simons carefully points out that despite the bull’s assurance that those women ‘who did not express controversial ideas on the Trinity, the divine essence, or the sacraments of the Church would be allowed to pursue their lives as before; this did not mean...that the Holy See approved of the beguines as a religious order’. For example, a few years later John ordered the examination of beguine orthodoxy with investigations only being completed by most dioceses in late 1328.

Problems of definition and terminology are inherent in any discussion of this particular group as it can be difficult to distinguish between their actual everyday practices and religious life and the Free Spirit heresy with which they became synonymous in the fourteenth century. In the interests of focusing on the aspects which shaped and defined their particular strand of mysticism, I follow Robert Lerner’s definition. According to Lerner, ‘men and women known as beghards and beguines were lay representatives of the religious movement of the high Middle Ages that sought the *vita apostolica* – the “apostolic life” of poverty, mendicancy,
and preaching'. Sexual promiscuity seems to have been the main source of accusations of Free Spiritism made against the beguines. Lerner notes that the hostility and adversity encountered by beguines and beghards was the result of the fact that 'official opposition to the *vita apostolica* movement had become engrained in the later twelfth century, especially after the condemnation of the Waldensians...'. Lerner provides an example from one of Philip the Chancellor’s sermons written in the 1230s which illustrates this association of beguines with licentious, immoral behaviour. Philip writes that ‘[...] beguines, though supposedly chaste, find themselves pregnant after consorting with heretics’. Whilst such intrigue surrounding the connection between the beguines and the Free Spirit heresy is a tempting line of research, in keeping with the research aims of this thesis, focus will be limited specifically to the female beguines and their particular forms of mysticism.

Scholarship on the beguines captures in many respects the preoccupations of this thesis with the recuperation of mystical traditions in the modern era. The first seminal work to be produced on the topic of the beguines was Herbert Grundmann’s *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages* (1935) followed by Ernst McDonnell’s *The Beguines and the Beghards in Medieval Culture* (1954). Further works have since emerged which supplement our knowledge - particularly, Simons’s *Cities of Ladies* (2001) and John Van Engen’s *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life* (2008). Van Engen terms these male and female religious the ‘Modern-Day Devout’ acknowledging their similarities to Geert Groote’s fourteenth-century Brethren of the Common Life. Similarly to the beguines, Van Engen’s ‘Modern Devout’ lived

---

115 Lerner, p. 37.
116 Ibid.
communal, urban lives that were not strictly demarcated by the rules of professed orders. In many respects, they lived as self-contained and self-sufficient communities within the community. Furthermore, ‘as self-conscious converts’ living a holy life ‘they undertook to found a new form of community in which to care for their religious selves’.\textsuperscript{118} Drawing on a wide range of sources Van Engen attempts to trace the movements of the relatively large number of uncloistered and thus undocumented women. These sorts of religious chose to join ‘self-made urban commune[s] sustained in part by manual labour and resolved to ‘internalize and enact devotion in the face of suspicious townspeople and wary churchmen’.\textsuperscript{119} For example, Van Engen cites one particular noblewoman at a Sisters’ house in the Netherlands in 1400 who refused the opportunity to join a professed form of life just outside the town on the grounds that becoming a nun was not her intention. Van Engen notes that instead,

the experience of turning inward (\textit{innigheid}, in their tongue) defined for them a social and religious position awkwardly poised between church and society, religious community and social kin. This awkwardness promoted self-awareness, and that self-awareness expressed itself in writing – a boon to historians if not always easy for them.\textsuperscript{120}

While the parallels Van Engen draws between these Modern Devout men and women and the beguines are useful in broadening our overall understanding of the ways in which religious movements coalesced in and after the period, as he deals explicitly with men and women of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, I rely on the work of Grundmann and McDonnell as the typical sources and entry point into the study of that particularly elusive historical religious group – the beguines.

\textsuperscript{118} Van Engen, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{119} Van Engen, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.
McDonnell opens his Preface by observing: ‘In the wake of Gregorian Reform Western Europe was subjected to continuous waves of religious excitement’. The semi-religious lives followed and mysticism exhibited by the new female piety of the *mulieres religiosae* or *mulieres sanctae* thus functions precisely as ‘evidence of [this] early religious excitement’. Grundmann summarizes the problems arising from this female ‘religious excitement’ by noting that:

a “religious life” dedicated totally to the service of God could only take place within the stable ranks of the monastic estate, where it was assured that rule and discipline would protect the religious person against all backsliding or degeneracy, and the person would be solidly anchored in the general structure of the Church.

Living an itinerant lifestyle on alms and charity, either alone or in loose communities and without any formal rule, beguine women directly flouted Church prohibitions against the establishment of new religious orders as imposed by Lateran IV. The choices for those aiming to live a ‘religious life’ were thus limited at this point, with the only option being absorption into already existing tertiary orders. Grundmann agrees that the options for all medieval religious movements in the period were to either adopt ‘the ecclesiastical forms of the *vita religiosa*’ , that is, to become an order of monks or to separate from and break with the ecclesiastical rules of the Church itself, which is in effect to become a sect or heresy. The Dominicans were likely to have assisted with this to a point, although it is difficult to trace the movements of such relatively large populations of uncloistered and thus largely

---

122 McDonnell, p. 63.
124 Ibid.
undocumented women. Also, as the orders already in existence filled, space was limited and so a large number of beguine women would have been forced into either abandoning their semi-religious life or maintaining their itinerant lifestyle under the shadow of heresy and ecclesiastical suspicion.

Rooted in ‘Bernardine spirituality and compliant with Cistercian guidance’, beguine spirituality is considered by McDonnell ‘a remarkable parallel to the Franciscan way of life’, thus emphasizing the link between the beguines and the apostolic life. Characterized by a strong emphasis on good works, voluntary poverty and a deeply intellectual mysticism rooted in the Eucharist and the Trinity, the beguines sought a direct (and in some cases, unmediated) relationship with God. According to McDonnell, the spiritual interests of these women could be met by traditional monasticism – by joining approved orders as nuns under the supervision and spiritual guidance of monks – or by two other forms: ‘the already ancient reclaborium or inclusorium and the new semireligious or extraregular institution of the beguinage’. The first form entails the anchoritic, reclusive lifestyle where men but usually women ‘found the desired solitude in a cell in the shadow of a church or chapel instead of in common life’. The second form was represented by the opportunity to live in small (and sometimes significantly large) beguine communities within a beguinage. This practice was prolific in Belgium with large beguinages

---
125 Van Engen’s 2008 study does attempt to do this but has received criticism in terms of the structure, organization and presentation of such large amounts of information. In her review of the book, Carolyn Muessig has described ‘the flood of information contained in each chapter’ as off-putting and ‘difficult to follow’ (Muessig, 2010, p. 202). She complains that ‘the presentation of the work sometimes detracts from its benefits’ (p. 202).
126 McDonnell, p. 3.
127 McDonnell, p. 4.
128 Ibid.
129 Cohn notes that beguines became particularly numerous in ‘Belgium, in northern France, in the Rhine valley – Cologne had two thousand beguines – and in Bavaria and central German towns such as Magdeburg’ (Cohn, p. 160).
(begijnhoven) still operational today. Walter Simons describes these beguinages as follows:

Created by and for women not only in Ghent but also in many other cities and towns of the southern Low Countries from the thirteenth century on, they offered single women of all ages an opportunity to lead a religious life of contemplation and prayer while earning a living as labourers or teachers.¹³⁰ Instead of withdrawing from the world, the beguinage enabled women with shared interests in pursuit of a semi-religious life to live in common. McDonnell and Lerner both concur that women in these beguinages ‘organized themselves in a half-secular, half-religious fashion’.¹³¹ For example, beguines in these houses did submit to the spiritual direction of curés and chaplains, much as a recluse might. However, McDonnell notes that such a woman ‘resided, according to her fortune and social status in a common house or her own dwelling, which she eventually willed to the community’.¹³² Thus, emphasis is on living as part of a continuing female religious community, safe from Church suspicion. As with the Waldensians who were comprised of members of the merchant class, beguines could be females of similarly affluent backgrounds, finding themselves within the protective community of the beguinage for various reasons.

Therefore, the confines of the beguinage could in fact be quite an attractive option for some women (particularly those unmarried and from noble families unable to afford large dowries). Brenda Bolton suggests that ‘as a disadvantaged group in society, women looked for anything which might improve their personal status [and]

---

¹³¹ Lerner, p. 36.
¹³² McDonnell, pp. 4-5.
turned to religion, as nothing else was available for them’. Furthermore, those living in the beguinage enjoyed the secular benefits of the *privilegia beguinalia* which included ‘exemption from taxes and, in the case of beghards, military service’. In many ways, life in the beguinage resembles life in a nunnery. McDonnell observes that the main aim was ‘to foster piety, practical or contemplative [and] to hold aloof from the dangers of the world without stopping ordinary work...’ Each woman had a specific function within the beguinage and all women ‘submitted to a grand mistress’. Some beguine women signified their status by adopting a style of religious dress described by Cohn as: ‘a hooded robe of grey or black wool and a veil’. However, as there was significant freedom inherent in such a semi-religious community there was no single way of life dogmatically followed by all beguines. Hence, this adds to the problem of identifying them – a considerable obstacle now for modern scholars and historians as much as for the papal inquisitors of the day. Cohn notes that some beguines ‘lived lives which save for a general religious orientation, differed little from those of other women; they lived with their families, or enjoyed private incomes, or supported themselves by work’. Of course this description most likely applies to those small groups of unenclosed beguines who lived in small, loose communities perhaps in a house or group of houses. The larger beguinages were the repository of that form of beguine spirituality which was to eventually be deemed tolerable by the papal curia before the renewed hunt for heretics in the fourteenth century. The determination and dedication to live a semi-religious life caught the eye of Jacques de Vitry, who

134 McDonnell, p. 6.
135 McDonnell, p. 5.
136 Ibid.
137 Cohn, p. 160.
138 Cohn, pp. 160-61.
was influential in pleading the beguine cause at the papal curia in 1216.\textsuperscript{139} De Vitry’s efforts resulted in the *beguinae clausae* or enclosed beguines of the beguinages being considered ‘an order indirectly recognized by the papal curia’\textsuperscript{140} by certain bishops, thus increasing sympathy and tolerance of this new female practice of piety. In June 1233, Pope Gregory IX passed the bull *Gloriam virginalem* which formally approved the way of life of these *mulieres religiosae* as holy virgins living holy lives.

However, this is not to say that all beguines enjoyed such a relaxed attitude and treatment from the Church. For example, there were still certain beguines who lived solitary, unenclosed lives, travelling from town to town and sharing their mystical experiences and teachings with other like-minded semi-religious. One likely example here is Marguerite Porete. McDonnell notes that it was these sorts of individual figures who ‘by their mendicancy, vagabondage, doctrinal errors, and moral aberration caused the most trouble for the *beguinae clausae*, at times discrediting the whole movement’.\textsuperscript{141} It is to the mysticism of these *mulieres religiosae*, and particularly controversial figures like Porete, that modern scholarship finds itself drawn. The landmark study in this area remains Caroline Walker Bynum’s *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (1987). Written twenty-six years ago, this book-length study of the female medieval mystics anticipates the present-day ‘affective turn’ within medieval studies. As implied by its title, this famous book focuses explicitly on the significance and symbolism of food for medieval holy women, taking into account the implications of a form of piety built around the notion of Christ’s body as represented by (and contained within) the Eucharistic Host. The

\textsuperscript{139} Jacques de Vitry’s personal motivations for supporting the beguines are examined in Chapter 4.

\textsuperscript{140} McDonnell, p. 6.

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid.
internalizing of Christ’s body thus occurs through the literal consumption of it by these holy women in the form of the Host. According to Bynum,

Both men and women adored Christ in the bread and wine on the altar, received Eucharistic visions and worked to propagate Eucharistic piety...But despite the pervasiveness of food as a symbol, there is clear evidence that it was more important to women than to men.¹⁴²

Nicholas Watson has remarked on the power of Bynum’s text to reveal ‘a religious culture many had not known existed’.¹⁴³ This is a culture in which, the consuming, consumed, suffering, and endlessly signifying bodies of women are seen to form the basis of an intensely imagined female community, a community bound together not by the networks of communication that might be said typically to cement masculine institutions but by common desires lived out in common ways.¹⁴⁴

Bynum analyzes an array of hagiographical material on women such as Beatrice of Nazareth, Elizabeth of Hungary, Angela of Foligno, Dorothy of Mantau and Catherine of Siena in producing what she describes as ‘an interpretative essay in social and religious history’.¹⁴⁵ This text forms the foundations of the later lines of enquiry pursued by Bynum’s work which pivots around the fact that:

[…] the most bizarre bodily occurrences associated with women (e.g., stigmata, incorruptibility of the cadaver in death, mystical lactations and pregnancies, catatonic trances, ecstatic nosebleeds, miraculous anorexia, eating and drinking pus, visions of bleeding hosts) either first appear in the

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.
¹⁴⁵ Bynum, p. 15.
twelfth and thirteenth centuries or increase significantly in frequency at that time.\textsuperscript{146} However, my interest in \textit{Holy Feast and Holy Fast} lies in the fact that it seems to represent Bynum's own personal engagement in precisely the sort of affective identifications she is analyzing in the medieval mystics subject to her study. The approach taken requires empathy and feeling – qualities long considered to be the preserve of the emotional, irrational feminine. In her 1984 article outlining the methodological problems with studying female mystics, Gertrud Jaron Lewis observes an antifeminist preconception of the time (arguably still extant today) that 'work written by a woman will necessarily abound in feeling and show a lack of ideas'.\textsuperscript{147} Bynum strongly rejects this presumption, suggesting instead that there is a power, transmitted through mystical writings, in this particular mode of female affective piety which has been overlooked. In other words, the locus of the power and impact of medieval female spirituality resides precisely in its 'feeling' and ability to be felt by others.

It is perhaps the highly personal tone of Bynum's preface which alerts us to her own identifications with the women she studies and thus also with the medieval mystical tradition itself. Dedicating the book to the memory of her mother Merle Walker, Bynum instantly invites her reader to make the connection between the maternal spirituality of the medieval mystics contained in the pages within and the loss of her mother – a woman who was 'as circumscribed as any fourteenth-century woman by her society's assumptions about female nurturing and self-sacrifice'.\textsuperscript{148} Watson comments that this strangely detailed dedication 'suggests that a complex

\textsuperscript{147} Gertrude Jaron Lewis, 'Studying Women Mystics: Some Methodological Concerns', \textit{Mystics Quarterly} 10.4 (December 1984), p. 175.
\textsuperscript{148} Bynum, 1987, p. 16.
mixture of feelings inform every aspect of its composition — a statement equally true of all mystical texts. Furthermore, in alerting us that ‘the books [her] mother might have written never appeared’, Bynum projects her own work as a form of altruistic sacrifice; a penance almost, for the sake of mother and daughter alike:

But this book is more. For the books my mother might have written never appeared. My act of writing is therefore my pledge to her granddaughter, Antonia Walker, and to her granddaughter’s generation that women’s creativity shall not in the future be silenced. It is also an expression of hope that those future generations of women will not lose the compassion, the altruism, and the moral courage that made Merle Walker’s life not a tragedy of self-abnegation but a triumph over meaninglessness and suffering.

In this concluding paragraph, Bynum is very much writing in an affective mode. Her language displays a rhetorical quality which seems to eerily resonate with the wounded longing, and yearning of the medieval mystic infinitely separated from their beloved God. The inward turn evidenced by medieval female spirituality and the search for an unknowable, unsayable God seems to be emulated here in the ways Bynum relates to her subjects. The connections between the modern scholar’s own lived history and that of the medieval subjects she studies are so numerous at this point that the distinction between the two can almost be said to become blurred. Such a phenomenon is a specific quality of female medieval mysticism, which sees the evocation of strong personal connections and identifications from both modern and medieval audiences alike.

Despite Watson’s support for Bynum as ‘a feminist who is also a historian with a real sense of belonging within Western culture, [and] a full member of

149 Watson, p. 153.
150 Bynum, p. 16.
151 Ibid.
intellectual institutions – the academy and the Christian church…’, and her work as ‘helping to write women back into the history of the church…’, there are those who take issue with her particular affective approach to the medieval mystics. The two main sources of opposition have been David Aers (1994) and Kathleen Biddick (1998). In his attack on Bynum’s work, Aers takes issue with what he has described as Bynum’s “empowerment” thesis. Aers notes: ‘This thesis maintains that the imitation of the dominant figure of Christ’s body was one that empowered women, especially the women whose ascetic practices so fascinate her’. Bynum contends that by identifying with the feminized functions of Christ’s flesh as bleeding source of food and new life, ‘medieval women came more frequently than medieval men to literal, bodily imitatio Christi and were thus empowered. For Bynum, there is a distinct difference between male and female mysticism. Male mystics ‘write repeatedly of being at a core or ground or inner point…Women on the other hand, are “switched on” by “the other”, heightened into an affectivity or sensuality that goes beyond both the senses and our words for describing them’. Aers complains of a tendency within modern scholarship to ‘reproduce’ the normative identification with the broken, suffering body of Christ as opposed to interrogating it. He classifies Bynum’s work as guilty of promoting this particular kind of replication, which it seems is rooted in the sort of ‘affective historiography’ she practices. Such an historiography values the lived experiences of historically distant figures and views them as a site of engagement between past and present.

---

152 Watson, p. 153.
154 Aers, p. 3.
155 Aers, p. 2.
156 Bynum, Holy Feast, Holy Fast, p. 218.
157 Bynum, p. 192.
158 Aers, p. 1.
This form of historiography is much opposed by Biddick who questions ‘whether it is even possible to capture the experience of people of the past in this way’.

Whilst a valid concern, I do feel that all scholarly works have a necessary scope which limits their horizons considerably. Instead of viewing this as a negative, I suggest that this creates the impetus for engaging in and pursuing an open-ended scholarly conversation which is as inclusive as possible and which thus brings us as close as possible to our historically distant subjects. In many ways, Aers’s attack on Bynum’s affectivity mirrors the patriarchal monitoring and control which medieval women found themselves subject to whether by the censoring hand of their male confessors/amauenses or by the dismissive, negative attitudes to their affective outbursts and performative displays of ascetic piety.

Aers focuses mainly on Holy Feast and Holy Fast and Bynum’s essay collection, Fragmentation and Redemption (1991) in his critique, complaining of her use of the term ‘women’ as a ‘classless, regionless, universalizing term [which] pervades and shapes her studies’. The specificity Aers craves here seems to me to be a recurring problem in any study of the medieval mystics. In studying these idiosyncratic women, scholars must choose between the broadstroke, cross-sectional approach and the more focused, case-by case approach. Both have their advantages and disadvantages, and so it is only through prolonged and varied engagement with the study of these women that we can begin to advance scholarship and formulate ‘the bigger picture’. Of course, this is an on-going endeavour. Furthermore, I feel that Bynum addresses many of Aers’s concerns in the introduction to Fragmentation and Redemption penned in 1991 and pre-dating Aers’s 1994 review. Here, Bynum

---

159 Biddick, p. 137.
160 Aers, p. 3.
observes the limitations imposed on all critics who must necessarily approach their subject of study from a ‘particular perspective’\textsuperscript{161}:

We can only, from our own text-surrounded vantage point, read the texts in context (i.e., with other texts among which they belong both chronologically and by self-ascription). Our readings will change because we change, both as individuals and as a culture. \textit{No one of us will ever read more than partially, from more than a particular perspective.}\textsuperscript{162}

With this statement, Bynum summarizes one of the fundamental assumptions of this thesis: that critical study of these medieval female mystics is necessarily bound up with a desire for identification with the historically distant and absent past. The problem of how far these identifications can actually take us whilst they are predicated upon an ineffable, inarticulable God is another matter. Nevertheless, I would concur with Bynum that,

\textit{\indent Indeed, it is exactly because we admit that we are particular individuals, at a particular historical moment, using and affirming our own standards, that we move with confidence to speak of the beautiful, the cogent, the intellectually courageous and the moral in past writings and events. We know that what significance or nobility we find is significant or admirable to a particular “us”}\textsuperscript{163}

It would seem that an ‘affective historiography’ which privileges feeling, emotion and lived experience is fast becoming a preferred mode of scholarly enquiry within medieval studies\textsuperscript{164}, adding credence to Bynum’s approach. In her defence, Bynum

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}[\textsuperscript{161}]
\item Bynum, \textit{Fragmentation and Redemption}, p. 23.
\item Ibid, my emphasis.
\item Ibid.
\item Fulton 2002, Astell 2006 and McNamer 2010 continue this affective tradition in their respective works. Another key example of affective historiography as a burgeoning method of scholarly enquiry is the current project being undertaken by the Australian Research Centre of Excellence for the
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
quotes philosopher Thomas Nagel’s observation: ‘Sometimes, in the philosophy of
the mind but also elsewhere, truth is not to be found by travelling as far away from
one’s personal perspective as possible’.\textsuperscript{165} While I understand Aers’s concerns and
believe it is necessary to be cautious in relying too heavily on ‘personal perspective’,
I also believe that it is a fundamental part of all scholarly enquiry. For this reason,
perhaps instead of questioning (as Aers does) what sort of pernicious feminist
empowerment it is that is predicated upon the self-destructive mortification of the
female body in imitation of Christ’s, we must be content with the answer that it was
one effective and irrefutable mode of female empowerment available in the period.
The following chapter considers a selection of medieval women whose texts and
mysticism flourished within this strange culture of ‘extreme mysticism’ (Lerner 61)
and affective piety which has been mediated and transmitted to us by their male
confessors. These female devotees variously utilize and also sometimes manipulate
the guiding hand of their male confessors/chaperones in their respective ‘mystical
marriages’ to their BrideGroom Christ as will be shown in the case studies to follow.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{165} Thomas Nagel, \textit{The View From Nowhere} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 27 in
Bynum, \textit{Fragmentation and Redemption}, p. 23.}
Chapter 2
Characteristics of Female Mysticism from the Twelfth–Fifteenth Century: ‘Felyng’ God

In line with the preoccupations of this thesis, this chapter has at its centre an interest in drawing out the commonalities within the medieval mystical tradition which later recur and are so vital to the emerging disciplines of ‘women’s studies’ or ‘religious women’s writing’ in the twentieth century. In order to do this, I will be using Middle English adaptations and modern translations as I trace and assess the place of female mysticism in both medieval culture and modern scholarship. A potential problem for my approach is of course the issue of failing to engage with texts in their original language (Latin, French, Middle Dutch). However, I feel vindicated in my decision to use Middle English adaptations and modern translations, not only because of the specific interests of the thesis (as detailed in the thesis title), but also because of the recent work of Lawrence Venuti on translation.¹

At the most fundamental level, every translation is very much an intervention. Indeed, the very choice to translate a particular text in a particular language is an intervention and discriminatory act which excludes other foreign languages for a set of particular reasons regardless of the translator’s well-intentioned efforts. Venuti notes that translation is an act ‘often regarded with suspicion because it inevitably domesticates foreign texts, inscribing them with linguistic and cultural values that are intelligible to specific domestic constituencies’.² Despite this ‘suspicion’, the act of translation is also one which enables the dissemination of ideas across the boundaries of geographical space, culture and time and so it is a necessary project which should

instead be approached cautiously. Venuti identifies two contrasting attitudes to translation. Firstly, ‘the instrumental model of translation’ which assumes that a translation can also inevitably carry across a sort of ‘like-for-like’ or equivalence (an ‘invariant’) which manages to transcend linguistic specificity. This model proceeds from ‘the notion that a translation reproduces or transfers an invariant that is contained in or caused by the source text, whether its form, its meaning, or its effect.’ Venuti observes the ability of this ‘widely held model’ to lock ‘translation studies and practices into a limiting and obfuscating comparison between the source text and translation’ while also concealing ‘the translator’s interpretive labour and its linguistic and cultural conditions.’

In contrast to this ‘instrumental model’ Venuti also identifies a ‘hermeneutic model’ of translation which represents a kind of ‘best possible’ translation in the sense that it does cultural work in the receiving culture of the text regardless of any loyalty to a ‘source’ culture or text. According to this model, texts ‘are treated as an interpretation of the source text, one among differing and potentially conflicting possibilities, which vary the form, meaning and effect of that text.’ Venuti makes clear that in supporting the ‘hermeneutic model’ of translation he does not suggest that all ‘formal or semantic correspondences’ between the source text and the translation disappear. Instead he suggests that ‘any such correspondences are shaped by the exigencies of an interpretive act that is decisively determined by the translating language and culture.’ My decision to use Middle English adaptations and modern translations thus stems from an interest in the function of translation as a

---

3 Venuti, ‘The Poet’s Version; or Toward an Ethics of Translation’ in Translation Changes Everything, p. 178.
4 Venuti, pp.178-179.
5 Venuti, p. 179.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
re-mediation of women’s voices in both medieval culture and modern scholarship. The recuperation of the female mystical voice which begins in the early twentieth century witnesses a turn (or indeed, a return) to medieval writings which perform cultural work in a modern receiving culture which is invariably Anglophone, and which sees the emergence of the disciplines of ‘women’s studies’ and particularly, ‘religious women’s writing’.

Case Studies

As outlined in the previous survey of medieval mysticism and indicated by the title of this chapter, the mysticism of medieval holy women was very much anchored within the affective mode. Their mystical writings are thus rooted in an identification with, and compassion for, the broken suffering body of Christ on the Cross – a very specific form of spiritual engagement which generates a body of idiosyncratic female writings that appeal to medievalists and feminist thinkers in the early twentieth century, as we see in Chapter 3. Elizabeth Petroff has described the idiosyncratic spirituality of the beguines as employing the ‘language of the Song of Songs and of a certain kind of medieval love poetry, of *amour courtois* and *Minnemystik*’. By means of a selection of thematically arranged case studies, this chapter works to highlight the imagery, metaphor and various discourses of embodiment and ‘oneness’, self-annihilation and silence, ‘selfing’ and ‘unselfing’ which pervade the texts produced by the mystical and/or visionary experiences of these women. In picking out these key features, the chapter works to outline those characteristics of female religious texts and the medieval mystical tradition overall which reemerge in the early twentieth century and beyond in various mediated forms.

---

In choosing the most suitable case studies it has been necessary to limit significant discussion to four main mystics, although others will be drawn on where appropriate. It should also be said that particular attention has been given to specific beguine mystics, as their specific brand of mysticism characterized by intense Eucharistic devotion, maternal and marital imagery can be said to mark the late twelfth-early thirteenth-century flourishing of a new and extreme female piety.

Beginning with a consideration of the particularly extreme form of ascetic mysticism practiced by orthodox beguine Marie d’Oignies and documented by the Middle English translation of Jacques de Vitry’s *Life of Marie d’Oignies*, the relationship between beguine holy woman and her mediator and male confessor/hagiographer will be scrutinized - a theme further developed in Chapter 4 in conjunction with Adrienne von Speyr and Hans Urs von Balthasar. Having explored the ascetic behaviours and tendencies which punctuated acceptable if extreme forms of female piety in the period, the chapter progresses with an analysis of two unenclosed, solitary beguines who eschew traditional notions of the body and bodily as the only means of female spiritual access. Instead, these women seem to engage with the apophatic tradition in their writings and concepts. The visions of mid-thirteenth century Flemish beguine Hadewijch will be considered in modern translation, highlighting various tropes characteristic of bridal mysticism and particularly, the sentimentalized relationship between medieval devotee/mystic and beloved God-man, Jesus. French heretic and beguine Marguerite Porete’s apophatic, Pseudo-Dionysian theology will be considered with a view to understanding the more cerebral and intellectual bent of her particular strain of speculative mysticism founded upon her idiosyncratic use of the doctrine of theosis or deification – a mystical programme of such high contemplation it was deemed necessary to add
fifteen explanatory glosses when it was translated into Middle English. Having considered three different beguine mystics, I conclude with the Middle English translation of Catherine of Siena’s Dialogue known as the Orchard of Syon, in order to suggest the ways in which the mystical texts and programmes of the mulieres religiosae were adapted for the edification and spiritual instruction of others (in this case, the Bridgettine nuns at Syon Abbey). Each case study is framed within a culture of flourishing lay piety, whereby women’s voices were beginning to ‘emerge’ for the first time in the history of Christian thought. Therefore, this chapter is also informed by a significant preoccupation with the ways in which this female voice is mediated, transmitted and received. For example, the fact that these women’s voices were most often ventriloquized through the male confessors, spiritual directors and amanuenses who were sympathetic to them raises several questions in the face of assertions that female mystical texts represent female empowerment.

I would argue that these texts do represent a certain form of female empowerment to various extents, particularly during those moments of role reversal which briefly shift the power dynamic between male confessor and female mystic/devotee. However, as these women and their texts are undeniably the preserve of a controlling male clerical elite, it is important to remember that they are still subject to the male hand which concedes to give them voice and let them speak as much as they are to the scrutiny of the modern scholar. It is in the fleeting glimpses of female interiority within these texts that we can argue for moments of female empowerment. Focusing on key language, imagery and metaphors it is hoped that this discussion will fruitfully analyse the ways in which the individual mystical

---

programmes articulated by these women bravely, and in some cases dangerously attempt to engage in the complex Christian tradition of mystery and revelation as outlined by St Paul: ‘For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known’.\textsuperscript{10}

An extraordinary feature of all of the mystical writings considered in this chapter is that ‘the main event’, so to speak, never actually happens in an inheritance from the apophatic tradition of the unsayable and unknowable nature of God. The following observation from Amy Hollywood illustrates the ways in which the medieval mystic’s journey towards knowledge of God (the \textit{via mystica}) is constantly frustrated and haunted by the impossibility of the goal their texts are so often written to attain: ‘One of the central dilemmas in the women’s mystical literature and mystical hagiographies written about women in the later Middle Ages is what to do when Christ’s extraordinary presence is lost, as it inevitably must be as long as one remains in the body’.\textsuperscript{11} Hollywood further clarifies this statement by noting that some women ‘attempt to resolve the dilemma by rejecting the centrality of the physical’. Here, she alludes to women such as Porete who she elsewhere argues subvert the ‘association of woman with the body, suffering, and Christ’s suffering through the transfigurative operations of apophasis’.\textsuperscript{12} However, she also observes that not all female religious were so bravely defiant of Church authority as ‘male church leadership increasingly insisted on the visibility and physicality of women’s sanctity…’.\textsuperscript{13} Thus I would suggest that there is a varying but innate level of performativity latent in all of the medieval mystical texts analyzed in this chapter.

\textsuperscript{10} 1 Corinthians 13:12.
\textsuperscript{13} Hollywood, 2001, p. 178.
Some of the mystics (notably Margery Kempe but also Marie d’Oignies) seem to display their strange ‘holy’ behaviours as a protective badge of honour, designating them as specially chosen recipient of divine communication, while others (Porete, Hadewijch) strive for the intellectual heights of a more cerebral, contemplative mysticism. Nevertheless, despite their difference in approach, all of the medieval mystics are united in the shared goal of making a personal connection with God - of experiencing, touching and identifying with God through their ‘felyngs and revelacions’\textsuperscript{14}, regardless of the interventions and mediations which make the transmission of the results of this personal connection available to the modern reader.

**Touching ‘the pitevous mayden of Criste’: Marie d’Oignies**

One such holy woman who utilized the mode of affective piety in a particularly extreme manner in order to conduct her personal identifications and relationship with God was French beguine Marie d’Oignies (1177-1213). Renowned as ‘the first woman recognized as Beguine by the Church’ \textsuperscript{15}, Marie’s strange yet orthodox piety is only communicated to us through the *vita* compiled by her male hagiographer and confessor Jacques de Vitry (ca.1160-1240). I consider the Middle English version of the text, hereafter, the *VMO*.\textsuperscript{16} The traditional relationship between female devotee/mystic and male confessor/amanuensis which facilitates medieval textual production has been summarized by John Coakley as follows:

\textsuperscript{14} Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. by Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen (Oxford: EEETS 212, 1940), I, p. 83. All references are to this edition unless otherwise stipulated.


Men, mostly clerics, played important roles in producing the literature that constitutes our sources for the life and thought of late medieval holy women. The two principal kinds of texts that make up this literature are (1) contemporary hagiographical texts about the women, which in most cases are written by such men themselves, and (2) the texts that were ostensibly written by the women in their own voices, very often with the collaboration of such men.17

As Coakley demonstrates, the relationship between female mystic and male amanuensis is a mutually beneficial one of reciprocity, which in many ways serves the interests of both parties. However, a problem arises from the constantly shifting balance of this mutual interdependence, which is facilitated by the historical circumstances and political motivations that surround the production of the text. Written in the wake of the Gregorian reforms of the late eleventh century which aimed to regulate priestly office and emphasized the importance of the male priesthood and preaching in emulating and worshipping Christ18, many of these hagiographical vitae had the express purpose of validating the comparatively strange modes of imitatio Christi practiced by these controversial mulieres religiosae. The canonization of these suspect holy women was thus the only way to dilute their strange, ascetic behaviours (for example, holy tears, self-flagellation, mortification of the flesh and self-starvation or inedia) in order to make them acceptable role models for a lay religious society. These figures paradoxically needed to be as easily imitated as they were inimitable in order to function as inspirational and aspirational

markers of medieval piety (*admiratio*, *non imitatio* was a commonplace in medieval hagiography). Saints’ lives were an ubiquitous part of medieval culture and their influence on lay piety was particularly strong. Sarah Salih observes: ‘The saints were part of the fabric of everyday life, and the requirements of devotees often outweighed theological correctness’. Furthermore, she notes that it ‘required time, money, influence and a well-organized constituency of devotees’ to establish the cult of a saint. All of these requirements were instigated and facilitated by male confessors/amanuenses, with the hagiographical text of the *vita* perhaps representing the confessor’s best case in defence and praise of their candidate’s special graces.

However, the *vita* represents just one constituent part of the saint cult and it is quite possible that we imbue the physical texts that have survived to us with more importance and significance than they might have been accorded at the time. As Samantha Riches confirms, it is important that modern readers realize that ‘written saints’ legends will originally have formed just one aspect of devotion to particular saints’. This is not to discredit the centrality of the *vita* to the perpetuation of a saint’s cult, but to highlight the equally important factors of oral narratives, shrines, relics and visual images. Whereas some patrons could afford to commission the production of expensive, gilt-edged and even personalized hagiographies (for example, in some manuscripts of Osbern Bokenham’s *Legendys of Hooly Wumen*), these illuminated manuscripts were often the possessions of ‘an elite minority of the population’ according to Riches. Salih notes that often the most ‘effective

---

20 Salih, p. 4.
22 Riches, p. 29.
intercessors and miracle-workers\textsuperscript{23} were the fictive saints who lacked historicity yet were the most popular – the Fourteen Holy Helpers of the Roman Catholic church are such an example.

In order to understand the ways in which knowledge of these saints’ lives became so widespread amongst a ‘lewed’ laity it is necessary to consider the impact of clerical preaching, visual images and oral dissemination of a shared narrative. For example, possessing knowledge of only a few miracles or tales from the \textit{life} of a popular saint from a particular region (whether true or not) was to be interwoven into the social and cultural fabric of a place. Steven Justice has convincingly argued on this point in reference to twelfth-century mystic Christina Markyate’s prolific visions, concluding that often, believers in miracles are able to suspend their disbelief precisely because ‘they regard with secret relief the thought that much of what they choose to call miraculous may not be.’\textsuperscript{24} The hagiographical genre calls for a belief in and active engagement with the fantastical parameters of the narrative on the part of the reader/hearer. The fictional elements which define the boundaries of the hagiographical text and are inextricably bound up within it perhaps enable believers to indulge notions of miracle stories which make the overall narrative flow, but which are not necessarily treated as concrete beliefs to live one’s life by. As Justice asserts, the belief in miracles may be accompanied by a comforting sense of relief that they might not be true. Paradoxically, this possibility of falsehood actually acts to exacerbate the wondrous qualities at the core of the miracle – the sense that it might be untrue could heighten the believer’s desire to believe conversely that it might not. Therefore, sharing in the myth or legend of a holy man or woman was to be part of a community actively seeking salvation through the emulation and

\textsuperscript{23} Salih, pp. 2-3.
\textsuperscript{24} Steven Justice, ‘Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles?’, \textit{Representations} 103.1 (Summer, 2008), p. 17.
imitation of the imagined lives and afterlives of the saints. The cultural power wielded by saints and their lives in medieval society was thus immense. They were not only an accessible benchmark of moral fortitude and edification, but also proof of an afterlife for the saved. Owning relics and participating in pilgrimages and shrine visits were the main access routes for those who wished to feel a sense of proximity to these blessed beings in both their worldly and otherworldly manifestations. In her *Christian Materiality*, Bynum has recently discussed the centrality of relics to medieval culture stating that late medieval piety was characterized by an ‘intense awareness of the power of the material’.\(^{25}\) Despite the genuine awe that saints would have inspired in many, it is likely that many of these devotional actions were also borne of practicality.

**Hagiography and the ‘myth-making’ surrounding ‘holy women’**

Hagiography as a genre is thus able to function as a vehicle of diverse purposes - it provides social cohesion via its perpetuation of common religious beliefs, fosters a literary culture of patronage and encourages self-recognition and identification with the interior mystical (and perhaps mythical) life of the saint. The genre’s flexibility enables it to adapt to specific concerns and issues at specific historical moments, and so it can be bent at will either to inspire devotion within the waning piety of the laity, to rectify the immoral behaviours of political figures, or to alter public opinion towards them.\(^{26}\) Ultimately, ‘a saint’s life was written in order that it could be read, and (crucially) read to others, to the glory of God and for the

---


\(^{26}\) See Salih, 2006, pp. 4; 6 for more on corrupt political figures (Henry VI, Thomas of Lancaster and Richard Scrope) and the ways that cults were developed around figures of questionable morality.
saint concerned’. However, an equally crucial point made by Salih positions hagiography as an assimilation of textual traditions, ‘seamlessly mingling history and fiction’. The fictional element is the characteristic which makes interpretation of medieval *vitae* so problematic. Not only is the female devotee’s mystical experience necessarily filtered through the hand of the male confessor/amanuensis, but also, the experiences recorded are likely to be largely preoccupied with fictionalizing and myth-making. As Coakley observes, ‘the powers of women, as presented by the male hagiographers, were chiefly revelatory in nature’ while ‘their explicit obedience and devotion toward priests is a constant theme...’ Jacques self-ingratiatingly describes Marie’s love of ‘prechours and trewe keepers of soules’. Thus while Marie was most probably subject to a significant amount of this ‘myth-making’ at the hands of her confessor Jacques, she was also significantly protected against accusations of heresy from ‘vntrewe accusers’, despite the over-zealous affective and performative displays of piety which document the ways in which ‘she chastised her body’.

**Collaborative Relations: Female Devotee and Male Confessor**

Coakley defines the mutual reciprocity at work between female devotee/mystic and male confessor/hagiographer as follows: ‘Not only do these *vitae* display the women’s powers as in functional harmony with the work of priests but they also make a point of the women’s official subordination to clerical authority’.

Fundamentally, Coakley’s assertion is correct. However, I believe that strict

---

28 Salih, p. 1.
29 Coakley, 2010, pp. 85; 87.
30 *VMO*, II, 598, p. 147.
31 *VMO*, II, 678, p. 150; 711, p. 151.
32 Coakley, pp. 86-7.
adherence to this interpretation of Marie’s life misses some of the subtle moments of role reversal within the text whereby Marie seems to flip the power balance between herself and Jacques. To clarify, my contention is not with the fundamental premise of Coakley’s argument - that medieval holy women are ultimately subject to the patriarchal control of the male clerics who mediate and articulate their experiences to wider medieval society and eventually, modern scholarship. This is undeniable. Indeed, all historical narrative and traditions are necessarily mediated during the process of transmission and reception. However, I suggest that this is only one overarching framework within which these texts must be cautiously read. I suggest that it is possible to hear the female voice break through and speak for itself at certain moments. For example, on the point of death, a brief role swap occurs between Marie and Jacques. Having ‘in a meruelous maner [...] rekenyde vp alle the temptacyones of hir prechour, and welny alle his synnes’33, Marie momentarily becomes Jacques’s confessor. Moments such as these point to the highly self-referential nature of the hagiographical narrative and the task begins of separating ‘fact’ from fiction. Jacques consistently writes himself into the narrative throughout the text, making himself indispensable as a front and centre, first-person witness. Jennifer Brown notes his predilection for inserting himself, ‘both overtly and surreptitiously into nearly every aspect of Marie’s life’.34 For example, he presents himself as a ‘grete gifte’ from God to Mary who, as a woman, is unable to conduct the ‘offys of prechynge’.35 Thus he makes himself an indispensable instrument to the dissemination of Marie’s divinely received message. However, only a few lines prior, Jacques claims that Marie has already been engaged in the office of preaching.

35 VMO, II, 606; 604, p. 147.
when ‘in hir laste sieknesse’ she ‘tolde sum words of the sermone to hem that stood aboute’. During another period of illness, Jacques figures himself in the narrative as ‘a famyliar man of hirs’ who Marie petitions for prayer. In this instance, Jacques is careful to construct and protect his own reputation as well as Marie’s. The healing powers of this ‘famyliar’ man’s prayers are acknowledged in the fact that they ease Marie’s suffering: ‘thanne she felt hir sieknes sumwhat / aswaged thrugh the meke prayers of the deuoute man’. However, Marie also, selflessly (and in accordance with the saint-like position Jacques has scripted and ascribed to her), requests that her maid ask the man to ‘cece to preye’ for fear that this comfort might be a selfish endeavour on her part. Thus, the roles of mystic and confessor are both constantly prescribed by Jacques with their virtuous behaviours enforced and reinforced at every available opportunity.

The defining feature of Marie’s strange and miraculous mysticism has been her asceticism – a locus of accepted, orthodox imitatio Christi which Jacques likely emphasized in the writing of the vita. Marie’s position as ‘Cryste’s mayden’ is compounded (and protected) by a range of behaviours which recur in writings about various female mystics in the period. For example, Marie is so noble and humble in receipt of the divine graces bestowed upon her that she shuns the attention of those fascinated by her spiritual gifts, thus neatly avoiding the sin of pride. When told that pilgrims ‘fro fer contrees’ wished to visit her and witness her special gifts, Jacques describes Marie’s rather visceral reaction: ‘sche euomyte pure blode in grete quantite’. This bodily reaction of vomiting blood both invites comparison between

36 VMO, II, 593; 597, p. 146.
37 VMO, II, 699, p. 151.
38 VMO, II, 700-701, p. 151.
39 VMO, II, 702, p. 151.
40 VMO, I, 111, p. 91.
41 VMO, II, 521, p. 143; 529, p. 144.
Marie and the salvific blood of Christ while also functioning as a dramatic, miraculous happening which underscores Marie’s saintliness. Much as with the gift of holy tears, these sorts of strange behaviours can be read as defence mechanisms on the part of women claiming visionary experience. Marie’s copious lachrymal outpourings function as an outward sign of the intensity of her internal ‘swete compunxione’\(^{42}\) as a result of Christ’s Passion. The mere sight or mention of Christ’s Passion is enough to compel Marie to such a state of compassion ‘that hir teerys, copiously / dounrennynge on the kirke paumente’\(^{43}\) leave a visible trail behind her on the ground. Another instance sees a priest reproach her for her copious tears claiming she ‘shulde praye softlye and latte be hir wepynge’.\(^{44}\) This same priest is then overcome later that day while performing Mass with such an ‘abundauns of terys that his spirite was wel / nyghe strangelyd’.\(^{45}\) On another occasion the devil appears to Marie in a garden at Williambroux ‘in the liknesse of an hirdeman’.\(^{46}\) This appropriation of the symbolic role of shepherd with its myriad biblical significance upsets Marie to such an extent that even after the event when recalling it in her mind, ‘she / myghte not absetyne fro terys’.\(^{47}\) Of course, Margery Kempe similarly displayed this particularly expressive and affective behaviour in her

**Book:**

And this cretur had contrycion and gret compuncycon, wyth / plentvwys teerys and many boystows sobbyngys, for hir synnes and for hir unkyndnesse aegyns hir maker.\(^{48}\)

---

\(^{42}\) *VMO. I*, 145, p. 93.
\(^{43}\) *VMO. I*, 133-34, p. 92.
\(^{44}\) *VMO. I*, 149, p. 93.
\(^{45}\) *VMO. I*, 156-57, p. 93.
\(^{46}\) *VMO. II*, 618, p.148.
\(^{47}\) *VMO. II*, 631-32, p. 148.
Elizabeth Psakis Armstrong has observed how securely Margery was embedded within devotional traditions noting that ‘her gift of tears is a link between her and many women in life and art from Mary and Magdalene on down the ages…’. Behaving in this manner thus marks these women out, designating them as special and unique in their identifications with, and regret for, Christ’s sacrifice. By inflicting pain and suffering on themselves (both physical pain and mental anguish), their behaviours mirror Christ’s self-sacrificing ways, thus enabling these women to share the burden of the sins of humanity through their own humanity.

Other special gifts possessed by Marie centre around the Eucharistic Host as with most beguine mysticism. For example, during a child’s christening in the village of Ittre, she sees ‘a wicked spirite…departe fro the childe’ and the ‘Holy Goste comynge doune / into the childes soule’. A further instance describes a common charism claimed by beguine women – that of seeing the Christchild during the celebration of the Mass. Jacques notes that it is a common occurrence during Mass for Marie to see ‘bytwix the / prestys hands the lyknes of a fyer childe and an oost of heuenly spirites / doune-commybne with mykel lighte’. Furthermore, Marie is able to discern the worthiness and unworthiness of priests who celebrate Mass. This insight is given to her when the priest receives ‘the sacramente after the fraccyon’. Essentially, Marie can witness the transformative transmission of grace after the moment that Christ’s body is metaphorically broken in the breaking of the Host, once again illustrating how her focus on identifying with the suffering body of Christ is paramount to her mysticism. The self-destructive practices of self-mortification Marie engages in see her use the body as a means of identifying with

---

50 VMO, II, 647-648; 649-650, p. 149.
51 VMO, II, 651-653, p. 149.
52 VMO, II, 654, p. 149.
Christ in accordance with the dominant mode of Franciscan affective piety. Intricate details are provided regarding Marie’s fasting habits and penchant for self-deprivation. According to the *vita*, Marie miraculously fasted ‘three yeer togedir in brede and water...yet neuertheles, she soffred no harme of body nor of hir hands / werkes’.\(^{53}\) Portrayed as almost superhuman, Marie functions without food or water and maintains the active life required of a female religious. The gory flaying of skin initially appears to be a particularly violent form of penance and self-effacement and certainly it seems likely that Jacques would embellish Marie’s infliction of self-mortification in order to garner support for her canonization.

However, I believe that while the *vita* most likely presents a distorted picture of the ascetic practices Marie engaged in, the practices still occurred if only to a lesser degree, thus the motivations behind this violence done to and against the self are present regardless of the level of harm actually inflicted. For example, an entire chapter is devoted to Marie’s penance. Jacques informs us how she ‘punysshed hir body’ with ‘grete loue and delyte’.\(^{54}\) Chastising her body ‘by abstynens [,] she / folowyd Criste, settynge noghte by hirselves thurgh meeknesse’.\(^{55}\) This rhetoric of self-abuse culminates in the revelation that Marie (allegedly) ‘lothinge hir fleshe, cutte awey grete / gobettis and for shame hidde hem in the erthe’.\(^{56}\) During a visit to members of the Oignies church at Williambroux, Marie finds herself compelled to ‘crye for sorowe’ after having walked through the town in which ‘wrecchyd men’ wrong God ‘with so many mysdedys and synnes’.\(^{57}\) Marie finds herself so repulsed by her bodily presence within such a sinful place that she wishes to request a knife

\(^{54}\) *VMO*, I, 220, p. 96.
\(^{55}\) *VMO*, I, 230-231, p. 97.
\(^{56}\) *VMO*, I, 238-239, p. 97.
\(^{57}\) *VMO*, II, 580; 582; 583, p. 146.
from her maiden Beslina so that she might ‘kitte the skynne fro hir feet’. In these moments Jacques portrays Marie as being utterly offended by and ashamed of her own bodily flesh. Misogynistic, patriarchal undertones seem to reverberate here, and so I suggest it is best to view Jacques’s dramatizations and exaggerations regarding Marie’s physical penances as exactly that – dramatic constructions for narrative effect. Marie’s horrific practices fall safely within the ambit of accepted religious behaviours for a holy woman, but in their extreme, exaggerated nature they function as inspiration of the laity rather than a call for imitation.

Karmen MacKendrick offers an interesting and subversive interpretation of Marie’s ascetic behaviours. MacKendrick reads asceticism as a ‘counterpleasure’: that is, as a transgressive, purposeful ‘pleasure of excess’. From this perspective, it can be argued that asceticism is ‘a way to take an unblameable and yet defiant action’ - ‘unblameable’ as such, because the action is perpetrated by the self, against the self. In concurrence with Bynum’s “‘empowerment’ thesis” heavily criticized by David Aers and addressed in Chapter 1, MacKendrick acknowledges the fact that women within Christianity were of course ‘repressed and marginalized in the Middle Ages’ but argues that ‘asceticism, far from playing into this oppression, pulls against it precisely by appearing to embrace it’. It is within this appearance of compliance that brief empowerment can be effected. As ‘a [self] denial beyond all moderation’, Marie’s asceticism enables her through a voluntary, self-inflicted and self-regulated disempowerment to effect a paradoxical empowerment. However, the argument as to how far we can consider these women

58 YMO II, 581, p. 146.
60 MacKendrick, p. 71.
62 MacKendrick, p. 71, my emphasis.
63 MacKendrick, p. 66.
to be choosing empowerment while practicing activities which have emerged from a
patriarchally inflected and mediated Christian tradition is of course open, and is
perhaps the topic of a further study. Nevertheless, the concept of the
‘counterpleasure’ does significantly add to our interpretation of one of the most self-
destructive aspects of Marie’s mysticism. I suggest that read from this perspective,
Marie’s asceticism is complementary to those moments within the text whereby she
effects role reversals with her hagiographer, and upsets the gendered power balance
between them.

In terms of analyzing the personal relationship between Marie and Jacques
much attention has been paid to the famous Noli me tangere moment which echoes
Christ’s words to Mary Magdalene after his resurrection in John 20: 11-18. As one
of the most famous parts of the biblical narrative of Christ’s life, this was a popular
symbolic moment which is utilized in many devotional texts. For example, Margery
Kempe also includes it in her Book, documenting how Christ spoke to her ‘as he
dede to Mary’ causing her ‘gret swem and hevynes’ by refusing her his divine
touch. Some scholars have been tempted to read this scene in the vita as an
admission on Jacques’s part of the sexual attraction he felt towards the holy woman
in his care – an unsurprising allegation given the accusations of sexual promiscuity
made against beguine women and noted in Chapter 1. In fact, Jennifer Brown has
recently interpreted the moment in exactly this way describing it as ‘the moment
when Jacques surprised himself with the force of his own sexuality rising up as he
took Marie’s hand’. For Brown this is a transformative moment in which Jacques
‘no longer sees the two of them as priest and holy woman, as confessor and penitent,
but as man and woman, subject to lust and physical attraction. However, I feel this reading is reductive, and would instead argue for this moment as a carefully contrived and consciously constructed interlude, created and inserted into the narrative by Jacques in an effort to strengthen notions of Marie’s purity and chastity. His reasoning for doing so could arguably stem from the fact that his audience know that Marie has ‘lyued with John hir spouse in matr moyne’ and so this moment gives Jacques the opportunity to dispel any accusations of impurity given Marie’s past. He is able to refocus audience attention on Marie’s chaste behaviour within this moment and opportunity for transgression, thus inviting his audience to align Marie in their minds with the Virgin Mary as opposed to Mary Magdalene. In this respect this skilfully crafted narrative moment simultaneously provides him with the opportunity to strengthen his own position as confessor of such a virtuous holy woman.

My main motivation for suggesting this reading is the image that precedes the famous Noli me tangere moment. In an image designed to illustrate and exaggerate her chastity, Marie’s chaste, pure, dry body is described as a stretched drum: a ‘yonge tymberer’ stretched ‘bytwix two trees of / the crosse’ and devoid of ‘the firste / sterynges of lecchery’. This image is later recalled as a skilful, proleptic inversion with the description of Marie’s emaciated dead body: ‘so smalle and lene thurgh infirmitie and fastynges that the rigge bone of hir bak / was clungen to hir wombe’. Here, the body and particularly the womb as the locus of female reproduction, nourishment and human growth is utterly destroyed in death. Dried out and decayed, Marie’s body has made its final sacrifice. I would argue that these two images

---

66 Brown, p. 74.
67 YMO, I, 79, p. 89.
68 YMO, II, 716; 716-717; 717-718, p. 151.
69 YMO, II, 1501-1504, p. 189.
witness Jacques’s skill in constructing and interlinking various disparate images and sources of evidence as proof of the living exemplum he so desperately wishes to create in Marie – his own Virgin Mary. The *Noli me tangere* moment thus proves that Jacques is not too proud to indulge in a certain amount of self-sacrifice himself, in terms of putting his clerical reputation in jeopardy and revealing his own male ‘fibilnesse’\(^{70}\) in the face of the temptation of the touch of the female body. Whether or not Jacques is aware of the sexual connotations which this image invites is difficult to tell. By hearing ‘a voys / fro aboue’\(^{71}\) issue the divine instruction ‘touch me not’, Marie is figured as a virtuous, unstained prototype of the Virgin Mary. In identifying himself with Christ and Marie with the Virgin Mary, Jacques playfully and subversively invites his audience to draw connections which also figure Marie as tempting female body and Jacques as tempted male. The invocation of the lustful sins of the flesh ask the audience (medieval and modern alike) to reassess the purpose and function of the female body in their mind, while at the same time leaving no doubt of Marie’s purity and chastity as the woman who will not be touched. In a masterful layering of shifting multiple identities, Jacques achieves his desired effect of presenting Marie, ‘the wise and discrete womman’ as the untouchable ‘spouse of Cryste’ and Christ alone, thus ensuring the preservation of his own position as confessor to such a perfect holy woman.\(^{72}\) Chapter 4 develops the implications of the female devotee/male hagiographer relationship in the context of the modern pairing of von Balthasar and von Speyr and with a specific focus on Jacques’s own agenda in writing his *life*. However, in this chapter Marie serves to illustrate the advantages and disadvantages inherent in this protective yet complex relationship. While Marie’s piety is safely and visibly outwardly demonstrated

\(^{70}\) *VMO, II*, 733, p. 152.  
\(^{71}\) *VMO, II*, 724-725, p. 152.  
\(^{72}\) *VMO, II*, 587, p. 146; 1133, p. 171.
through her asceticism, other beguine mysteries such as Hadewijch and Porete seek a more abstract, speculative mysticism which eschews the body as the sole means of female spiritual access, relying instead upon the appropriation of the male-dominated apophatic tradition as their preferred route to knowledge of God.

**Hadewijch of Brabant: Bride of Christ**

The writings of mid-thirteenth century beguine mystic Hadewijch of Brabant provide us with an interesting yet perplexing snapshot of the bridal mysticism which dominated the Low Countries. Hadewijch’s writings are perplexing in the respect that she most likely represents those learned, solitary, unenclosed beguines who produced their texts without the domineering influence of a male confessor/amanuensis. Originally written in Middle Dutch, I use Columba Hart’s modern English translation. Scholarly consensus varies on the matter of her dates. Robert Lerner claims that ‘it seems most probable that she flourished in the first half of the thirteenth century’. Simons is non-committal, concluding only that due to the fact that ‘she is not documented in archival records’ and offers little information about herself in her works, ‘the date of her activity as a writer is uncertain’. Mary Suydam concurs that ‘almost nothing is known about Hadewijch’s life’, while a more recent article from Steven Rozenski dates her ‘(fl.1220-1250?)’. Nevertheless, Hadewijch’s writings have survived to us and consist of thirty-one letters, fourteen visions and two collections of poetry in stanzaic and rhymed verse.

---

Her sources are the writings of St Augustine (354-430 CE), William of St Thierry (1070-1148) and Guerric of Igny (d. ca. 1157), whilst overall her theology also seems to be strongly influenced by Bernardine and Victorine ideas of mystical union and spiritual access. Drawing on the Solomonic Song of Songs, she incorporates the motifs of bridal mysticism (Bräutmystik) into her own Trinitarian and Christological theology. It is only through separation from the divine Bridegroom that the devotee/mystic can fully recognize their wounded, lovesick status in the absence of their creator-God-Love or Minne itself. The relation of the Beloved and the Lover is one of eternal progress and return, again illustrating Hadewijch’s debt to the Neoplatonic ideas of emanation and return outlined in Chapter 1. God is figured as mother and creator, Christ is figured as God-man and Bridegroom of the soul, and the holy spirit functions as the facilitator of the Soul/God relation by bestowing charismatic gifts upon pious souls in order to enable their divine communication with God – i.e. Vision 13 details the mystical Divine Touch as the eighth gift after the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit or the ‘seven signs of love’. As one of ‘the first authors to shape the Dutch language into written form’, Hadewijch has several different terms for love: ‘karitate’ - a general love for humanity and one’s neighbour, ‘lief’ – the beloved i.e. Christ or the soul who is loved by Christ, and ‘minne’ – a term for the beloved from the language of courtly love which is feminine in gender. Such a variety in the kinds of love applicable to God is complemented by several other concepts which drive Hadewijch’s notion of mystical union. For example, the term ‘orewoet’ encompasses the stormy, passionate longing experienced by the devotee in her yearning with body and soul for her divine bridegroom. This sort of love is primal according to Hadewijch whose

79 Suydam, p. 5.
thought aims to effect the necessary return to God via the reunion of the beloved (God) with the lover (devotee/mystic). Suydam notes that ‘it is impossible to determine the sequence in which she wrote the Visions, her two collections of poetry, and the Letters’.80 However, for the purposes of eliciting Hadewijch’s personal theology in conjunction with the thematic concerns of her fellow beguines who also claim significant visionary experiences, I have chosen to focus mainly on the Visions.

Conceived as a whole work, Hadewijch’s fourteen visions represent a clear exposition of her theological project. Drawing on apophatic tropes of self-annihilation or self-noughting in God and through the love of God, Hadewijch incorporates elements of her own bridal mysticism (Minnemystik) in her articulation of the ecstatic experiences she has. For example, in Vision 7 mystical union is described as a mutual ‘passing away of the one in the other’81 whereby the perichoretic, mutual interpenetration of the Godhead is mirrored by a similar transformative union of oneness between God and mystic. Hadewijch tells us:

I saw him completely come to nought and so fade and all at once dissolve that I could no longer recognize or perceive him outside me, and I could no longer distinguish him within me. Then it was to me as if we were one without difference.82

This instance directly mirrors the definition of mystical union outlined by Michael Sells as ‘the moment in which the boundaries between divine and human, self and other, melt away’.83 All of the visions occur on different feast days (with the exception of Vision 14), but in this particular vision whereby Hadewijch sees the

---

80 Suydam, p. 6.
81 Vision 7, 94, p. 282.
82 Vision 7, 64, p. 281.
83 Sells, Mystical Languages of Unsaying, p. 7.
Christchild initially in the form of an eagle come towards her during communion, matins are being sung in the background, thus illustrating the juxtaposition of her alleged mystical experience with the simultaneous lived experience of the Mass presumably being celebrated elsewhere in the church. The influence of the courtly romance tradition figures heavily in Hadewijch’s bridals mysticism and model of absent, Beloved God-man and present Lover mystic. Also, the significance of beguine mysticism as a particularly urban form of religious devotion is underscored by the imagery she uses. For example, Vision 10 sees Hadewijch foreground herself in an alignment with the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21:2:84 ‘Your blessed soul is the bride in the city’.85 Overall Hadewijch creates a powerfully phantasmagorical atmosphere in the Visions which draws on the rich, vivid imagery she employs borrowed from the Book of Revelation. The visions are thus the product of a learned medieval woman’s skilfully woven meditation on the progress of the soul from one life to another; from the worldly to the otherworldly through a relationship founded upon love (Minne).

But what of the implications of claiming such direct and unmediated access to God in medieval society? Hadewijch (like Porete), indulges in an intense, speculative mysticism which is absent of all the hallmarks of the behaviours peculiar to affective piety which simultaneously isolate and safeguard the holy women that practice them. Whereas Marie d’Oignies (and later Catherine of Siena) practiced mortification of the flesh, self-flagellation and received stigmatic wounds, all supported and verified by their respective male confessors/amanuenses and the vitae they produced, women like Hadewijch and Porete were unprotected in their foray into the mystical contemplative life – a realm of male power and authority only. The

84 ‘And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.’ (Revelation 21:2)
85 Vision 10, 29, p. 287.
likes of Hadewijch and Porete presented a distinct threat to male clerical authority and often found themselves open to accusations of false devotion. Simons notes:

> When levelled by ecclesiastics, however, the accusation of hypocrisy and false devotion served a more specific agenda: to denounce new forms of monastic or religious life, or simply to discredit a competing force within the Church.  

The Scriptural basis for these kinds of assumptions can be found in Christ’s apocalyptic warning about false prophets: ‘For there will rise up false Christs and false prophets, and they shall shew signs and wonders to seduce – if it were possible – even the elect’. In their various imitations and identifications with Christ and also their claims to visionary experience, the *mulieres religiosae* thus found themselves dangerously (and conveniently) aligned with such ‘false prophets’.

The traditional medieval misogynistic conception of male and female associated particular polarized attributes with each sex. Caroline Walker Bynum provides the following set of binaries representative of such medieval attitudes:  

*Male* and *female* were contrasted and asymmetrically valued as intellect/body, active/passive, rational/irrational, reason/emotion, self-control/lust, judgement/mercy and order/disorder. In the devotional writing of the later Middle Ages, they were even contrasted in the image of God –  

Father or Bridegroom – and soul (*anima*) – child or bride.  

This set of binaries aptly illustrates the gender interplay which informs much beguine mysticism but particularly the writings of Hadewijch and also Porete. This positioning of weak, emotional, irrational female visionary mystic in relation to the dominant, rational male who is in all ways superior, forms the foundations for the

---

86 Simons, p. 123.
87 Mark 13:22.
castigation of medieval women from the more serious, cerebral mystical practice of
the contemplative life. Whilst caring for and nurturing the sick or saying prayers and
attending yearly confession women occupied a useful, non-threatening and ‘correct’
position within society. However, the claims to visionary experience made by holy
women like Hadewijch threw this convenient patriarchal order into utter disarray.
Suydam has noted the tendency towards denigrating visionary experience as inferior
when compared to the sorts of inner contemplation characteristic of the likes of
Victorine mysticism. Such attitudes fail to acknowledge the ways in which these
women are in fact engaging precisely with this contemplative practice. Suydam
explains that the distinction between visionary and contemplative experience resides
in the fact that ‘in the Middle Ages intellectual contemplation was the province of
the dominant group, literate men, while visions were primarily experienced and
reported by less powerful groups, especially women’. Suydam also observes that
this stigma has remained with ‘the privileged group’s religious experiences’
continuing to be better appreciated ‘until quite recently because literate men continue
to dominate the academy’. Hadewijch’s mysticism thus represents a challenge to
such derogatory attitudes, interweaving Scripture with her own allegorical imagery in
order to mark out her place within the long, male-dominated tradition of
apophaticism.

---

89 Suydam, p. 10.
90 Suydam, p. 10. Also see Anneke Mulder-Bakker and Liz Herbert McAvoy, ‘Experientia and the
Construction of Experience in Medieval Writing: An Introduction’ in Women and Experience in
for the prevalent attitude towards women as those who did not read, learned from the ‘book of
experience’ and were ‘experts in non-intellectual, experiential ways of knowing’ (p. 1).
The Garden of Perfect Virtues

The majority of Hadewijch’s Visions document various sightings of Christ’s face and body in different symbolic guises. It should also be said that as with all visionary experience, there are inherent and intractable problems. For example, beyond intuitive questions which might ask whether a vision actually occurred or not, we also face the issue of discerning why certain visions might not have been recorded yet are still alluded to. For example, in the final vision we have the following admission from Hadewijch:

In the form of the Countenance that was there, I had never seen him before that moment, although I had already seen him at an earlier time in the same Transfiguration in which Saint Peter and those who were with him on Thabor beheld it.\(^9^1\)

The ‘Countenance’ Hadewijch refers to implies that she directly saw Christ’s face along with the disciples or eyewitnesses present on the mountain. Reasons for not recording such a divinely given experience could range from a personal decision on Hadewijch’s part not to disclose such a holy experience, an inability to remember the facts of such an intense event in order to record it appropriately or (if Hadewijch did not actually physically write her text) the failure of a scribe or advisor to copy down all of the visions she recounted to them; or perhaps it is a purposeful rhetorical device employed by Hadewijch to bolster her own credibility and reputation as one who is in receipt of the gift of divinely bestowed visions. The reason for the omission is beyond us. The important point is that this sort of moment suggests that other omissions are also quite possible and maybe even deliberate. Suydam usefully

---

\(^{91}\) Vision 14, 85, p. 303.
comments that 'although visions may be spontaneous, written visionary literature is not'.

Hadewijch seems keenly aware of the subjective nature of visionary experience when she exclaims in Vision 11: 'For a great book would be required if one were to write everything perfectly in full truth!'. I make this argument not to discredit Hadewijch or bring her authenticity into doubt, but instead to suggest the possibility that the Visions represent a skilfully produced, self-contained work which consciously asserts its place within the apophatic tradition. In all of the mystical writings considered in this chapter it seems only logical to suggest that certain visions or mystical experiences may have been (and most likely were) elaborated upon to various extents during the writing process. Agatha Anna Bardoeel has advanced the suggestion that in having visionary experiences, 'Hadewijch would have been able to see herself as leading a particularly fruitful life in a society which gave women little outlet for spiritual and moral self-expression'. Thus, it would be naïve for modern scholars to consign writers like Hadewijch to the realm of ineffective, irrational, emotionally-charged, sentimentalized piety. In fact, it is the idiosyncratic use of this emotionally-charged language which makes possible the gender subversions and transgressions that give these texts their power.

The opening of the first vision (which occurs after the taking of communion) enables Hadewijch to instantly lay claim to visionary experience when on Pentecost Sunday the Lord is 'brought secretly to [her] bedside'. Immediately framing her relationship with God within the traditional, homely, domestic imagery we have come to expect from the female mystics, Hadewijch subverts expectation when it is

92 Suydam, p. 11.
93 Vision 11, 37, p. 290.
95 Vision 1, p. 263.
revealed that her vision of a meadow, ‘the space of perfect virtue’\textsuperscript{96}, is in fact a reimagining of the Garden of Eden from Genesis 2:4-25 whereby she situates herself as a female Adam. In this bold move Hadewijch immediately claims authority for herself and her subsequent visions. During her ‘inward togetherness’ with God she is ‘led as if into a meadow, an expanse that was called the space of perfect virtue’,\textsuperscript{97} where she learns the names and significance of those things in the meadow. Perhaps a more accurate interpretation of Hadewijch’s metaphorical role in this vision is as \textit{hortus conclusus} herself - a recurring theme within many female mystical texts, as illustrated by the allegorical orchard motif imposed on Catherine’s \textit{Dialogue} when it is translated for the Bridgettine nuns of Syon Abbey as the Middle English \textit{Orchard of Syon}. Also, Mary appears on Hadewijch’s ‘List of the Perfect’ and in Vision 13 where she speaks to Hadewijch beseeching her to ‘fully taste Love’.\textsuperscript{98} Certainly Hadewijch would have welcomed any identification with her. Thus Hadewijch’s mind and body, her self, becomes the site of action within which this first vision unfolds. Vision 1 has sparked debate with respect to the following passage:

\begin{quote}
And this same day, having grown up, I had come close to him, so that I received him; and from then on he was to be my guardian and the companion of all my ways.\textsuperscript{99}
\end{quote}

The idea that Hadewijch’s first vision signifies the fruition of her mystical communication with God is at odds with the ethos of the remaining thirteen visions which claim to offer instruction from Hadewijch’s first-hand experience on attaining union with Love/God. I would suggest that perhaps Vision 1 was not the first vision received (if indeed any were actually received) and is instead the result of

\textsuperscript{96} Vision 1, 15, p. 263.
\textsuperscript{97} Vision 1, 15, p. 263.
\textsuperscript{98} Vision 13, 128, p. 301.
\textsuperscript{99} Vision 1, 24, p. 263.
Hadewijch’s attempt to condense her doctrine into one concise, easily remembered (and perhaps also easily taught) exemplum. This would explain why the disjointed nature which characterizes the rest of the Works is missing from Vision 1. As Vision 1 progresses, Hadewijch names and describes seven different trees in the meadow of perfect virtue. These seven trees resonate with the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit and are named as follows:

1. Tree of Self-Knowledge (Vision 1, 24, p. 263)
2. Tree of Humility (Vision 1, 42, p. 264)
3. Tree of Perfect Will (Vision 1, 60, p. 264)
4. Tree of Discernment (Vision 1, 71, p. 264)
5. Tree of Wisdom (Vision 1, 80, p. 264)
6. Tree of Knowledge of God (Vision 1, 185, p. 266)
7. Tree of Knowledge of Love (Vision 1, 199, p. 266)

A male angel of the choir of Thrones (the third most important hierarchical classification of angel in the first sphere) acts as Hadewijch’s guide around the garden before she meets God and Christ, who advise her on how to come to fruition in union with God/Love. The Tree of Self-Knowledge is described as having ‘a rotten root’ underground but beautiful buds and flowers above ground. The angel explains that this tree represents human nature which must be known and understood if a soul is to progress to union with God. The Tree of Humility is small with ‘beautiful leaves, graceful and multicoloured, that were pleasing to the sight’.

Humility is necessary for souls like Hadewijch to recognize their ‘own unworthiness’ in comparison with God’s great worthiness. The Tree of Perfect Will is explained to Hadewijch by the angel. She describes the tree as tall and strong

---

100 Vision 1, 24, p. 263.
101 Vision 1, 42, p. 264.
102 Ibid.
with wide leaves. On each leaf is written: “I am the power of the perfect will; nothing can escape me”. The angel encourages Hadewijch to use her will in order to make the right choices that will be pleasing to God. The angel’s exhortation, ‘Read and Understand!’ strongly resonates with Augustine’s *Confessions* and the conversion scene in which he hears a child’s voice saying, ‘Tolle lege’ or ‘take it and read’. This juxtaposition demonstrates Hadewijch’s awareness of Augustine’s writings and also symbolizes her own conversion in the Garden of Perfect Virtues to the perfect life of fruition in God. The Tree of Discernment is tall with many branches which extend and intertwine with the branches of other trees in the garden. In a reference to the Parable of the Vine and the Branches in John 15:5, Hadewijch understands that on each leaf it is written: ‘I am discernment: *without me you can do nothing*’. The angel explains that as the trees intertwine so too should devotees by using their power of reason to understand the benefits for ‘those who grow up through one another’. This network of discernment is similar to the vineyard motif discussed later in relation to *The Orchard of Syon*. The Tree of Wisdom perhaps shares the most links with biblical trees and also trees imagined in the mystical writings of women like Catherine of Siena (‘tre of charyte’) and Marguerite d’Oingt (1340-1310). For example, in a letter presumably to her spiritual confessor mentioned only as ‘dearest father’, d’Oingt

103 Vision 1, 60, p. 264.
104 Ibid.
106 Vision 1, 71, p. 264.
107 Ibid.
108 *The Orchard*, 19-21, p. 63.
describes a vision given to her by ‘the one who is filled with sweetness and pity’\footnote{Letters, p. 66.} of a withered tree at the foot of a mountain. ‘This tree had five branches which were all dry and bending downwards’\footnote{Ibid.} and on the leaves of each branch the five senses were written. After attentively gazing at the tree ‘a great stream’\footnote{‘Letters’, p. 67.} representing Christ rushed down the mountain drenching the tree so violently that it upturned ensuring that the previously withered, drooping branches now stretched towards the heavens. Catherine of Siena similarly outlines an upside down tree in her text but in this example from d’Oingt, the mystic’s body can be associated with the withered tree whilst the nourishing force of the stream which overturns and transforms the tree can be said to represent Christ. Thus, the bodily senses most often used by women to access God (and considered inferior by male ecclesiastics), are venerated and justified as adequate means of spiritual access in this vision. Hadewijch’s Tree of Wisdom fosters the themes of gestation, growth and subverts the theme of God as mother by suggesting that the soul can ‘carry Love [...] as an incessant exercise of burning will’.\footnote{Vision 1, 138, p. 266.} It would seem that this particular section of the vision is aimed at those disobedient, young beguines in Hadewijch’s community, described as those ‘who were created to love God but go astray from him and finally end elsewhere!’\footnote{Vision 1, 80, p. 264.} The tree has three sets of branches with different coloured hearts imprinted upon its leaves. The colours used (from lowest to highest branches) are red, white and gold. Commonly used, these colours also occur in Marguerite d’Oingt’s clapped book of the teachings of Jesus Christ in her \textit{Mirror}.\footnote{Marguerite d’Oingt, \textit{Mirror}, 4, p. 42 in \textit{The Writings of Margaret of Oingt: Medieval Prioress and Mystic}, trans. by Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006).} Each set of leaves on Hadewijch’s Tree of Wisdom represents a different fear – the lowest fear is that ‘of not being
perfect and of forsaking perfect virtues’, the middle fear is that persons (i.e. Hadewijch’s disobedient beguines) ‘do not show God many marks of homage’, and the highest fear is the fear that ‘each person must die by the same death whereby our Beloved died’. This ultimate act of imitatio Christi encourages Hadewijch’s readers to be so perfect and virtuous that they are willing to metaphorically ‘die of that death every hour, and to carry that cross, and to die on it each day’. The affective elements of Hadewijch’s spirituality are practiced in the mind instead of through bodily mortifications of the flesh. Arguably, the level of mental anguish Hadewijch expects devotees to inflict upon themselves in their meditations is just as harsh as punishment of the flesh.

The next tree shown to Hadewijch is her most famous – the Tree of Knowledge of God, also known as the upside-down tree. This tree inverts the top-down hierarchy of the Tree of Wisdom as this tree has ‘its roots upward and its summit downward’. This image complements the idea of annihilating or noughting the soul in God’s love which pervades the more speculative mysticism of Hadewijch and Porete. In their theological models, progress in the form of union with God is paradoxically achieved by a descent or return to perfection in God as opposed to an ascent to a transcendent God. Such a notion of a circular, eternal return is strongly reminiscent of Ruysbroeck’s concept of regiratio which Anne Hunt explains is a constant ‘flowing back or return’ wherein the three persons of the Trinity ‘flow back into their shared being through the Spirit in a never-ending dynamic of ebb and flow’. Hadewijch’s support of this idea of union can also be seen in Vision 14 where she claims that devotees need ‘to have been flowed through

---

118 Vision 1, 124, p. 265.
119 Ibid.
120 Vision 1, 185, p. 266.
by the whole Godhead, and to have become totally one, flowing back through the Godhead itself.\textsuperscript{122} The angel instructs Hadewijch to ‘climb this tree from the beginning to the end, all the way to the profound roots of the incomprehensible God\textsuperscript{123}, thus effecting the upside-down Tree of Knowledge of God. The seventh and final tree in the garden is that of the Knowledge of Love and it also represents Hadewijch’s passing from the life of virtues into the more perfect life of love. At this most perfect tree Hadewijch’s angel guide deserts her only to be replaced by God himself who Hadewijch can only see through a transparent ‘cross like crystal, clearer and whiter than crystal’.\textsuperscript{124} This event can be paralleled with Revelation 1:12-16 and again demonstrates Hadewijch’s significant knowledge of Scripture.

The ‘lofty and marvellous Countenance’\textsuperscript{125} that Hadewijch sees at this point recurs throughout the \textit{Visions} but is most definitively articulated here in Vision 1. Hadewijch’s interactions with God are alluded to but not voiced due to the ineffable nature of God. However, God does reprimand Hadewijch after providing her with a new commandment:

\begin{quote}
if you wish to be like me in my Humanity, as you desire to possess me wholly in my Divinity and Humanity, you shall desire to be poor, miserable, and despised by all men; and all griefs will taste sweeter to you than all earthly pleasures; in no way let them sadden you [...] You will still for a short time lead such a life of suffering, and I shall find my pleasure in it. For your hour has not come.\textsuperscript{126}
\end{quote}

Hadewijch’s misery and despair (\textit{onthope}) at having lived perfectly and according to God’s will while still remaining punished by the absence of her Beloved is present

\begin{footnotes}
\item[122] Vision 14, 77, p. 303.
\item[123] Vision 1, 185, p. 266.
\item[124] Vision 1, 214, p. 267.
\item[125] Vision 1, 246, p. 267.
\item[126] Vision 1, 288, p. 268.
\end{footnotes}
throughout the Visions (see Vision 11, 188, p. 292) and is a source of displeasure for God. The intimation is that Hadewijch is merely experiencing the human condition and thus, she should do so without complaint (as Christ did) until such time as God grants himself to her ‘in fruition’. God’s chastising of Hadewijch’s selfish ways vindicates her as orthodox, and cements her position as a devotee still in pursuit of union with God as opposed to one that has already experienced ‘fruition’.

Whilst Vision 1 can be considered a relatively full exposition of Hadewijch’s personal theology, several other visions are helpful in outlining the themes which characterize her particular mysticism. The majority of the visionary experiences begin with Hadewijch being ‘taken up’ in spirit (Visions 5; 6; 8; 10; 11; 12) – being taken up, out of and away from her self. Language is chosen which describes her as being ‘raised up’, ‘drawn inwards’ or as having ‘gone to God’. As mentioned earlier, Vision 7 represents the culmination of this relationship of inwardness as it details an experience of oneness or unity similar to the mystical death which Hadewijch has after receiving the Eucharistic Host: ‘After that I remained in a passing away in my Beloved…and I was changed and taken up in the spirit’. As the literal body and blood of Christ as determined by the doctrine of transubstantiation finalized at Lateran IV (1215), the Eucharistic Host is of central importance to all female mystics but particularly to the beguines as Christ’s body in its various manifestations provides the foundation of their spiritual access. Vision 7 is coupled with Vision 8 which follows directly on after Hadewijch describes being ‘taken up’ having seen the Christchild initially in the form of ‘a great eagle’.

---

127 Vision 1, 408, p. 271.
130 Vision 7, 42, p. 281.
atmosphere in which the vision begins carries over from Hadewijch’s divine vision of Christ approaching her from the altar and ‘showing himself as a Child’ to her vision of God’s ‘Countenance’ in Vision 8 - the only vision where Hadewijch’s guide is an unnamed human as opposed to an angel or God himself.\(^{131}\) This encounter with Christ is momentary, yet it seems to cover a vast quantity of Christ’s lifespan, ranging from his appearance in the church at just three years old to his appearance on the great mountain as a grown man. The theme of Hadewijch’s spiritual growth via the bodily and spiritual consumption of the Eucharistic Host therefore mirrors the biological, human growth of Christ.

The figure of the Christchild complements beguine notions of the maternal, nurturing powers of the female religious. Aligning themselves with the Virgin Mary, mother of Christ and paragon of virtue, beguine women like Hadewijch can identify as compassionate mother of the suffering Jesus Christ.\(^{132}\) Inward union between God and Hadewijch is achieved in this vision through the external means of the senses: ‘It was thus: outwardly, to see, taste, and feel, as one can outwardly taste, see, and feel in the reception of the outward Sacrament’.\(^{133}\) In this reversal of order of sensory experience, Hadewijch plays with our notions of experience and takes us from the outward physical sight of the Eucharistic Host through the internal experiences had when that exterior is consumed. However, as in the majority of the visions, Hadewijch’s spirituality is characterized by an escape or detachment from the senses. They provide the locus of spiritual access through which she can transcend them by

---

\(^{131}\) This human guide is referred to as ‘the Champion’ (Vision 8, p. 282) and remains anonymous even to Hadewijch who seems totally unaware of who ‘carried [her] upward’ (Vision 8, p. 282). Newman and Hart have speculated on the identity of the Champion respectively as Peter Abelard (Newman, 1995, 168) or Richard of St Victor (Hart, 1980, p. 382, n. 79).

\(^{132}\) Caroline Walker Bynum provides an example of a liturgical cradle from the Grand Beguineage in Louvain in which figures of the Christchild were placed (Bynum, 1991, p. 199). This popular practice demonstrates the strong connections made by beguine women with the virgin mother and her son and also the external apparatus used daily to perpetuate such connections.

\(^{133}\) Vision 7, 64, p. 281.
being ‘taken up’ and freed of them through love of God. As Vision 7 takes place
publicly during the singing of Matins in Church, it would seem there is a definite
performativity to it. For example, this vision does not occur ‘in some darkened cell,
rapturously oblivious to all’\textsuperscript{134} – the typical setting of isolation which normally
frames the visionary experience of various mystics. Instead, as Suydam argues, here
we have an instance of Hadewijch providing her own alternative to the Mass that was
actually occurring elsewhere in the Church. Hadewijch displaces the Mass
conducted by the male priest with her own alternative interlude. Suydam suggests:
‘her vision was both shaped by this ceremonial performance and, simultaneously, an
alternative to it’.\textsuperscript{135} Moments such as this perhaps suggest Hadewijch’s awareness of
and concern for her own literary reputation as well as her interests in the spiritual
edification of the young community of beguine followers which she most likely led.
Thus the visions can be said to be an original, disciplined and carefully executed
literary exercise instead of being dismissed as the irrational ramblings of a hysterical
woman overzealous in her desire for religious perfection. Indeed, moments such as
the one above in Vision 7 undo this preconception entirely. I would concur with
Suydam citing Paul Mommaers that as ‘a distinct literary genre’ it is incorrect to
view the visions as “‘uncontrolled’ outpourings”.\textsuperscript{136}

Indeed, Vision 9 sees Hadewijch acknowledge the importance and the role of
reason in the mystic quest in the form of Queen Reason. Stimulated by a night-time
reading of the Song of Songs, Hadewijch sees Queen Reason come ‘clad in a gold
dress’\textsuperscript{137} alluding to the alleged superiority of the faculty of reason. In a description

\textsuperscript{134} Mary Suydam, ‘Beguine Textuality: Sacred Performances’ in \textit{Performance and Translation: New
Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality}, ed. by Mary Suydam and Joanna Ziegler (London:
\textsuperscript{135} Suydam, p. 189.
\textsuperscript{136} Suydam, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{137} Vision 9, p. 285.
reminiscent of Revelation 4:7 and the description of the throne in heaven, the dress is described as being ‘all full of eyes, and all the eyes were completely transparent, like fiery flames, and nevertheless like crystal’. These eyes numbered one thousand – the ‘full number of every virtue’ and each eye contains ‘knowledge of Love’. The dialogue between Hadewijch and Queen Reason sees Hadewijch ultimately surpass Reason who for long enough has been a constant source of ‘woe and pain’ for Hadewijch. The implication here is that while Hadewijch considers reason a possible route to mystical knowledge, it is necessarily limited and must be utilized only so far as it is useful. Love of God is a superior form of reason for Hadewijch who after conversing with Queen Reason is able to achieve such mastery of reason as a faculty that she is able to transcend it and take her leave of it as Queen Reason represents Hadewijch’s own soul’s faculty of Reason: ‘Then Reason became subject to me, and I left her’. In this instance, the self-referentiality of Hadewijch’s text spills over into an apophasis ‘unsaying’ and ‘undoing’ of herself. In transcending her powers of reason Hadewijch also transcends and abandons herself. Thus for Hadewijch Reason is an essential part of achieving knowledge of God, but as it will only take her so far it must be ‘surpassed by Love which is superior to Reason because it encompasses all qualities’. The penultimate vision (Vision 13) is very similar in setting to Vision 7, with one major exception. Throughout this vision, Hadewijch is rendered silent in an apophasic stripping away of voice out of reverence for the Virgin Mary, while music plays continuously in the background for the duration of the vision. In the preceding

138 ‘In the centre, around the throne were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and behind.’ (Revelation 4:7).
139 Vision 9, p. 285.
140 Vision 9, 55, p. 286.
141 Vision 9, 40, p. 285.
142 Vision 9, 65, p. 286.
143 Suydam, p. 18.
visions, choir singing occurred around Hadewijch while she had the visions but never as a built-in component of the actual vision itself. Again, it would seem that this evidences a conscious decision on Hadewijch’s part to construct her visions for particular rhetorical effect and impact. Here Hadewijch is shown ‘the new heaven’ or the ‘Countenance of God’ which is figured as a six-winged seraph – a popular and recurring motif within beguine mysticism as evidenced by two separate instances within the writings of Porete and Marie d’Oignies. The seraph appears during Marie d’Oignies’s death song in Jacques de Vitry’s Middle English VMO where it ‘spradde [its] weyngys abouene hir breste’ encouraging her song, while in the Middle English translation of Porete’s Mirrour of Simple Soules it conceals God’s face and body from the reader with its wings. This seraph invites Hadewijch to ‘see here the new secret heaven’ in a moment similar to Paul the Apostle’s vision of the third heaven (2 Corinthians 12:1-10). In this respect, Hadewijch juxtaposes herself with Paul and aligns herself with one of the most famous biblical moments of revelation, thus consolidating her authority as a woman in receipt of divine visions. Suydam comments that Hadewijch’s mysticism is so complex and confusing because it ‘does not impose or even imply a dichotomy of body/soul’. Instead ‘like many mystical texts of “unsaying” [she] destabilise[s] such dichotomies’. In utilizing ‘human modes of communication’ such as the senses (sight, taste and hearing specifically), she ‘upsets the hierarchy that privileges the intellectual over sensory

---

144 Vision 13, 24, p. 297.
145 VMO II, 1260, p. 177.
146 Pe Mirrour, 4, p. 254.
147 Vision 13, 15, p. 297.
148 ‘I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven’ (2 Corinthians 12:2).
149 Suydam, p. 16.
150 Ibid.
In doing so, Hadewijch's writings 'confuse and disorient hierarchies in order to contextualize (perform) the moment in which transcendent and immanent fuse'\textsuperscript{152} - that is, the moment of mystical union. Indeed, Hadewijch even inverts traditional hierarchy by insisting in her vision of the six-winged Countenance of God that those enfolded within the bottom, lowest pair of wings rather than the top, highest pair of wings have in fact reached a higher level of perfection in their love of God as they have 'transcended humility'.\textsuperscript{153} Although they were 'a small number', they possessed 'many more wonderful deeds than all others had'.\textsuperscript{154}

Overall, Hadewijch's visions can be said to represent a considered personal theology which consciously identifies with and asserts its place within the long and complex tradition of the traditionally male domain of apophatic thought. Heavily influential on the thought of Jan van Ruusbroec (1293-1381), Saskia Murk Jansen has also argued for a reassessment of the 'substantial similarities between the theology of Hadewijch and that of Eckhart'.\textsuperscript{155} By utilizing the senses in such a subversive and playful way, it can be argued that Hadewijch disrupts traditional conceptions of women's visionary experience as inferior to the more intellectual, contemplative experience of her male counterparts. Indeed, Hadewijch often seems to combine the two in a move which sets her apart as a woman using traditional means of female spiritual access (an embodied spirituality which engages with the divine through the senses) while also identifying with serious Neoplatonic concepts of the 'oneness' of God. Perhaps she couches her thought within embodied terms as a precautionary measure to dissuade any unwanted attention or suspicion from

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{153} Suydam, p. 22.
\textsuperscript{154} Vision 13, 159, p. 300.
Church authorities. For example, in Letter 29 Hadewijch alludes to her fear of possible imprisonment: ‘What happens to me, whether I am wandering in the country or put in prison – however it turns out, it is the work of Love’.\textsuperscript{156} However, I would suggest that Hadewijch’s visions show her to be a pious woman who is also very much concerned with her own position and reputation as writer. For example she is quick to point out in her final vision: ‘For each revelation I had seen partly according to what I was myself, and partly according to my having been chosen’.\textsuperscript{157} The assertion of that position as writer is undeniably made possible only by the apophatic languages of ‘selfing’ and ‘unselfing’ which she employs in her various identifications with God. She is only able to be ‘taken up’ (Visions 5; 6; 8; 10; 11; 12) to the highest heights of contemplation through and within God as Minne, where she can ‘be out of the spirit and ...be in him’,\textsuperscript{158} because of her radical self-abandonment. Such doctrines of ‘unselfing’ or self-annihilation in and through love of God were to be the downfall of the next mystic considered: Marguerite Porete.

\textbf{Marguerite Porete’s Mystical Self-Annilhations}

Both Hadewijch and her fellow solitary beguine, Marguerite Porete of Hainault (d.1310), have long been considered the ‘two most prominent beguine writers of the medieval Low Countries’.\textsuperscript{159} However, the case of Porete suggests they may also have been the most suspect. As David Kangas observes:

It seems a number of factors about Marguerite were threatening: her gender; the authority she simply presumes, not only for her book, but for her overall stance toward human existence; her writing in the vernacular; her connection

\textsuperscript{157} Vision 14, 145, p. 305.
\textsuperscript{158} Vision 14, 145, p. 305.
\textsuperscript{159} Simons, p. 135.
with the ill-defined beguine movement; all of these were enough to unsettle.\footnote{David Kangas, ‘Dangerous Joy: Marguerite Porete’s Good-bye to the Virtues’, \textit{The Journal of Religion} 91.3 (July, 2011), p. 300.}

Had Porete written her text fifty years earlier (as Hadewijch did), it is likely that the orthodoxy of her text may well have been unquestioned (at least at the inquisitional level). The main reason for this suspicion, distrust and eventually the fatal accusation of heresy was Porete’s doctrine of deification and mystical union which took the notion of identifying with God one step further.

For Porete, it was possible through a self-abnegating annihilation of the soul in and through love of God to fleetingly become one and the same with him. McGinn notes that this notion of a link between knowing and loving originates from Gregory the Great’s remark that “love itself is a form of knowledge”.\footnote{Gregory the Great, \textit{Homilies on the Gospels}, in \textit{The Essentials of Christian Mysticism} (New York: The Modern Library, 2006), 27.4.} Highly influential on William of St Thierry’s thought and articulated in his \textit{Golden Epistle}, this notion of love as a transformative mode of understanding (\textit{intelligentia amoris}) is central to beguine spirituality and particularly the mysticism of Porete. Strikingly similar to Hadewijch’s notion of being ‘taken up’ and out of the senses, Poretian theology sees an attempt to similarly divorce the means of female spiritual access from a solely bodily or sensory realm. Porete’s project is thus to engage with and articulate a form of serious, contemplative mysticism using apophatic languages of ‘unsaying’ and ‘unknowing’ as her means. As mentioned at the top of the chapter, Hollywood observes the tendency within Porete’s (and Eckhart’s) writings to subvert ‘the association of women with the body, suffering, and Christ’s suffering through
the transfigurative operations of apophasis'. 162 Effectively, 'the soul herself can and must be refigured or reimagined, and as such become united without distinction in and with the divine'. 163 Porete's imitatio Christi occurs privately and internally in the mind as opposed to publicly and externally through mortification of the body as with Marie d'Oignies.

However, her ultimate and literal self-sacrifice at the stake in the Place de Grève as a heretic invites myriad comparisons and mirrorings of Christ on the Cross. According to Maria Lichtmann, the mixed audience present of 'secular authorities, church dignitaries' and a large crowd of other people 'were moved to tears at the sight of her nobility'. 164 In a period when 'women found themselves perpetually oscillating between a pit and a pedestal', 165 the suspicions of Church authorities were both easily aroused and forceful in their handling of those non-conformist members of society who conducted their own religious ways of life in towns and cities, irrespective of ecclesiastical jurisdiction. McGinn has noted that many of the errors ascribed to the Free Spirit Movement (to which Porete was linked) are derived from 'an investigation held in Germany in the 1260s' 166 which resulted in a list of ninety-seven (often contradictory) errors entitled 'The Compilation Concerning the New Spirit' (ca.1270) which drew on various ancient heresies (Manichaean and Pelagian), thus imbuing the forms of spirituality and religious life practiced by women like Porete with heretical qualities. The main area of contention which applies to Poretian thought is the blasphemous error 'that a soul united to God is made divine'.

and ‘that a person can become God’. It is quite likely that this list, as well as the eight errors formulated at the Council of Vienne (Ad Nostrum) which met between 1311-1312, were in direct response to women like Porete (if not Porete herself).

The Trial of Marguerite Porete

Having written an instructional ‘treatise and…handbook’ which allegedly taught and encouraged autotheism or self-deification and also an antinomian abandonment of obligation to virtuous behaviours and the moral law, Marguerite’s book was condemned and publicly burned by the local bishop Guy de Colmieu as a warning against further dissemination of heretical teachings. The Mirror of Simple Souls was originally written in Old French some time between 1296 and 1306, but despite inquisitorial efforts, it survived and was translated into Latin, Italian, Middle English and modern English. This chapter focuses mainly on the Middle English Mirour of Simple Soules (hereafter, the Mirrou) but also draws on Ellen Babinsky’s modern English translation in certain instances. Undeterred by this clerical disapproval, Porete continued to circulate her text which resulted in her being brought before the new Bishop of Cambrai, Philip of Marigny (who was affiliated by blood relation to Philip IV’s court) and the Inquisitor of Lorraine between 1306 and 1308. In 1309, Porete found herself in Paris in the custody of Dominican Inquisitor William Humbert (or William of Paris), where she remained in prison and in

170 Marguerite Porete, Pe Mirrouof Simple Soules, ed. by Marilyn Doiron, Archivio italiano per la storia della poeta 5 (1968), pp. 247-355 and The Mirror of Simple Souls, trans. by Ellen Babinsky (New York: Paulist Press, 1993). All references are to this Middle English translation of the text unless otherwise stipulated.
stubborn silence for approximately a year and a half. Porete was also accompanied by her follower and clerical supporter Guiard de Cressonessart who on 9 April 1310 confessed his heretical intention to form a new order and was sentenced to life imprisonment, thus escaping the stake. Having failed to extract a recantation or confession from Porete and unable to begin proceedings as she would not ‘swear the oath on the sacrament that would have allowed the trial against her to begin’, William of Paris attempted to gain written evidence and proof of Porete’s heresy. Also heavily involved in the intensive trial against the Knights Templar (which began in 1307 and saw the Order completely disbanded in 1312, thus cancelling any outstanding monetary debts owed by King Philip IV to the military, religious Order), William extracted a list of erroneous articles from Porete’s text in 1310 and sent them for the scrutiny of the twenty-one theological regents of the University of Paris. Lichtmann makes the crucial point that ‘with Marguerite we therefore have the chance to observe head-to-head combat between a noncredentialed, non-academic mystic and the scholastic theologians at Paris’. As a solitary, unenclosed beguine without the relative protection of a clerical confessor, Porete posed a significant threat to Church authority at a time when consolidation of power and authority was of utmost concern. Her contemporaneity with Philip IV’s reign (1285-1314) and Clement V’s papacy (1305-1314) made her a useful pawn in Philip’s attempts (aided by Clement’s decrees) to perpetuate and spread a kind of moral panic which would reassert secular control, power and ecclesiastical authority.

According to Lichtmann:

Marguerite appeared in the political arena at an extremely unfavourable time. France’s king, Philip the Fair, may well have used Marguerite’s case to re-establish favour with the pope after pursuing his personal vendetta toward the too powerful Knights Templar.\textsuperscript{175} I would certainly concur with this view, as it seems to explain the motivations behind the pursuit and persecution of one solitary beguine at a time when the Templars had been the dangerous ‘Other’ and alleged disseminators of ‘moral turpitude’.\textsuperscript{176} Such a united ‘witch-hunt’ perhaps aimed at cementing an unflinching orthodoxy between Philip the Fair and Pope Clement V, where ‘no base motives could be suspected’\textsuperscript{177} even if they were present. With the condemnation of the articles from \textit{The Mirror of Simple Souls} as heretical on 11 April 1310, Porete found herself a victim of circumstance. Her public execution took place on 1\textsuperscript{st} June 1310 witnessing what Henry Charles Lea has labelled ‘the first formal \textit{auto de f\'e} of which we have cognizance at Paris’ where Porete is the main victim alongside ‘a renegade Jew’\textsuperscript{178} also burnt at the stake.

Lea has commented that the crime which an inquisitor ‘sought to suppress by punishment was purely a mental one’.\textsuperscript{179} Arguably, it is impossible to form a just criterion with which to judge the orthodoxy of another person’s thoughts. Not only does Lerner’s apt claim come to mind that ‘in fact it was never simple to determine who was a Free Spirit’,\textsuperscript{180} but also the medieval trial records that we might consider accurate ‘were not taken verbatim but reproduced only the parts that the scribe or

\textsuperscript{175} Lichtmann in McGinn, p. 68.
\textsuperscript{176} Lerner, 1972, p. 76.
\textsuperscript{177} Lerner, p. 77.
\textsuperscript{180} Lerner, p. 6.
inquisitor thought most important.\textsuperscript{181} Coupled with the knowledge that a set of general questions taken from an inquisitorial handbook would be posed to the accused in medieval trials, it is obvious that the aim was to prove guilt as opposed to innocence in the most efficient way (unless a conversion could be effected). Reform of so-called heretics was to be the standard papal response up until King Henry IV’s \textit{De heretico comburendo} of 1401. The need for efficiency in dealing with so-called heresies suggests an urgency to quell threats to church and state authority by controlling and regulating religious experience, thereby formulating a programme not only of who could know God, but also of how they could know God. Women like Porete and Hadewijch who eschewed accepted modes of female piety unsurprisingly provoked suspicion. Indeed it would seem that Porete simultaneously functioned as the perfect scapegoat at a time when the assertion of church and state authority was essential for power and control. In this atmosphere, Church and secular state could support each other’s mutual interests while at the same time providing smoke screens behind which each could act ‘justifiably’. Despite her reported silence throughout the entire trial, it seems that the hanging of the label of ‘heretic’ around Porete’s neck was a \textit{fait accompli}. Joanne Maguire Robinson includes a variety of extant information from documents on Porete’s trial in an appendix at the end of her 2001 book-length study: \textit{Nobility and Annihilation in Marguerite Porete’s Mirror of Simple Souls}. These documents\textsuperscript{182} claim that, ‘from the time that Marguerite Porete was suspected of heresy, she refused, remaining in rebellion and insubordination, to take the oath and to respond to the inquisitor about

\textsuperscript{181} Lerner, p. 5.

everything pertaining to his office as inquisitor. Also, it is recorded that even after condemnation, as well as still having ‘the said book’ – *The Mirror* – Porete had ‘other books’ which she circulated ‘to many other simple persons...as if [they] were good’. Even if she had recanted, it seems likely that the vilification of perceived heresies like the Free Spirit heresy (which has its roots in Germany) would have occurred inevitably to effect what Babinsky has termed, ‘the strengthening of royal power’. Whether or not the Free Spirits actually existed, the threat posed to social order by their possible existence provided enough justification for the aggressive persecution of personal theologies like Porete’s.

Accusations of radical thought and heretical errors in Porete’s text stem mainly from her complex notion of mystical union which fundamentally extols the doctrine of theosis or deification and suggests that it is possible for the soul to become one and the same with God through the transformative relationship of love. She formulates a powerful self-abnegating subjectivity which strips the soul back to a position of nothingness. However, there is a freedom implicit in this annihilation as in abandoning responsibilities to the virtues and to the trappings of worldly life, one’s soul is paradoxically liberated by a return to the loving enclosure of God. Souls in this state are annihilated or said to have become ‘pure nouμν’ and are the most perfect. There are several qualifying factors here, such as the fact that Porete draws on Neoplatonic ideas of emanation and return, formulating a model in which the soul is *returning* to a pre-existing, lost state of divinity previously possessed by the soul prior to original sin rather than *ascending* to such a state. As Kangas points

---

184 Ibid.
185 Babinsky, p. 25.
out: ‘The Mirror […] constitutes at [its] core a critique of teleology’. Poretian theology suggests the need to return to God and a perfect state of prelapsarian union before The Fall. Porete aims to recapture this lost state. During seven stages of illumination, Porete explains that the most perfect annihilated or noughted souls must free themselves of enslavement to the virtues in order to attain this return to God. That is, they must cast off reason in their quest for knowledge of God so that they can be annihilated in God and live a full life of spiritual perfection. Indeed, ‘life lived under the virtues is refused without apology’ despite the fact that these virtues provide a means of regulating social behaviours within the medieval community. Juan Marin notes that the ‘annihilated soul does not lose consciousness of distinction [from God] but rather attains consciousness of indistinction [during the moment of union]’ when the soul is annihilated in and through love of God.

Recurring imagery of mixed substances (particularly liquids) are often invoked in beguine texts to illustrate this idiosyncratic concept of union and oneness. Lerner has noted the prevalence of this use of the simile of mixed liquids as a last resort for the ‘notorious impossibility of fully describing the mystical experience in mundane language…’. He notes the influence on beguine spirituality of the orthodox Bernardine understanding of deification in On Loving God which uses the example of two different yet combined substances – water and wine:

just as a drop of water mingled in wine seems entirely to disappear and take on the savour and colour of wine…so must it be that all human affection in

\[187\] Kangas, p. 302.  
\[188\] Ibid.  
the Saints will then by some ineffable means melt away from itself and be entirely transformed into the will of God.\footnote{St Bernard, *On Loving God* in Lerner (1971), p. 397.}

Several qualifications apply here in order to ensure the orthodoxy of this representation of the union of distinct substances. Lerner points out that Bernard insists that “the drop of water only “seems” to disappear\footnote{Ibid.} (however, the Latin *videtur* can also be translated as ‘is seen to’) and although it adopts and takes on the taste and colour of the wine, its substance still remains. So too with the soul’s substance which, although ‘transformed, “will indeed remain”’.\footnote{Lerner, p. 398.} Bernard stresses that this sort of union is heavenly as opposed to earthly. However, Lerner correctly points out that ‘the effect of the simile could be heady’.\footnote{Ibid.}

Indeed, when it appeared in the writings of women like Porete it was interpreted as heresy.

The influence of this orthodox doctrine on Porete’s thought is witnessed by her inclusion of an image of union between the annihilated soul who wills ‘parfiitli pe wille of God’\footnote{Porete, *Mirror*, 13, p. 278.} and God as ‘Fyne Loue’. In this image, the soul ‘swymmep in pe see of ioie, hat is, in pe see / of delices, streymyne of diuine fluences’\footnote{Mirror*, 28-29, p. 278.} Thus, God is figured in this image as ‘pe see of ioie’ within which the soul is dissolved. At this point, ‘sche hirsilf is ioie’ but Porete adds the qualification that ‘sche felib no ioie’.\footnote{Mirror*, 29, p. 278.} That is, the soul, like Bernard’s drop of water, is transformed by union with God and by being dissolved within the sea of joy, but the soul’s substance remains as she feels no joy/divine qualities. Framed in this way, it is difficult to pinpoint the difference between the articulations of mystical union by orthodox saint and heretical female mystic. However, the passage continues with several statements which could
be interpreted as blurring the boundaries between the distinct entities being described: ‘So is ioie in hit, pat sche hirsilf is ioie… Now is he wille of he loued and he wille of his soule turned / into oon, as fire and flawme, for loue haf his soule al ymeued in him’.\textsuperscript{198} Also, the suggestion that the soul has become so united with God that the two have merged, melting together, through and in one another to the extent that Soul exclaims: ‘So haue I lost my name / for louynge pat so litil may loue’.\textsuperscript{199} Having become so intensely united with God the soul forgets her own name in a moment of ‘unselfing’ which could arguably be said to threaten the orthodox requirements of distinction within this union. It is in the moment of contemplation of the union of distinct properties that the blurring of boundaries occurs and obscures the self-negating, unravelling powers of the apophatic language and tradition within which Porete writes her text. The slippage between the two different states is mirrored by the oscillation between positive and negative, cataphatic and apophatic, ‘selfing’ and ‘unselfing’ which drives the tradition of the via negativa. Thus, for Porete, mystical union appears to mirror Neoplatonic ideas of a circular flow of being which flows from the ultimate source (Monad or the One) and emanates back towards this source of creation. In this model the source or point of creation and the created can be said to be one and the same during this infinite regress. Porete’s theology also makes possible this self-abnegating, over-identification with God whereby the soul transcends itself to the point of being united with and dissolved within God as nothingness, and thus momentarily becomes self-same with an ‘unsayable’ and ‘unknowable’ God.

Drawing heavily on Pseudo-Dionysian thought and apophatic ideas framed within an allegorical narrative, Porete articulates her personal theology without the

\textsuperscript{198} Mirrour, 31; 32-33, p. 278.
\textsuperscript{199} Mirrour 36-37, p. 278.
traditional female aid of visionary experience. Instead, we are presented with a dialogue between the Soul, Reason and God (‘Fyne Loue’). For Porete, the ability to know God is incumbent upon the soul’s annihilation to the extent that performing active, charitable deeds actually further removes the soul from God, as they are acting selfishly according to their own will as opposed to God’s. Simple souls who allow themselves to be totally subsumed and annihilated by God’s will through the transformative power of love are only capable of doing God’s will and thus, they can attain perfect union by regressing but also, paradoxically progressing back to the perfect image of humanity received from God at creation. This complex theology enables her to construct a theory of two churches – Holy Church the Greater (the church of simple souls who follow her theology of love and annihilation) and Holy Church the Lesser (the established church governed by reason). As she inverts the traditional hierarchical structure of religious order whereby worship and access to God is mediated in a ‘top-down’, sacerdotal structure (that is, from God to the pope to the clergy to the laity), her theology was unsurprisingly troubling and problematic for the ecclesiastical and secular authorities of the period.

Using the narrative framework of ‘a dialogue of courtly love’\textsuperscript{200} between different allegorical personae, Marguerite’s theology revolves around the idea of becoming closer to God – so close in fact that the truly annihilated soul can become God in the ‘flittinge’\textsuperscript{201} moment of perfect union, which is attained through the yearning and all-consuming love of an absent creator-God, and an unquestioning faith and compliance with his will. Mirroring the trinity with her allegorical characters, Marguerite constructs a lively dialogue between Soul (the soul of the worldly devotee who longs for union with and knowledge of God), Reason (the basic

\textsuperscript{200} Sells, 1994, p. 119.
\textsuperscript{201} Mirroure, 1, p. 252.
human faculty of reason as opposed to the more developed acuity of a faith-like
‘inward solt vndirstandinge’);\textsuperscript{202} and Fyne Loue (God who is described as ‘oon
deite, oon oonli / God in þre persoones’).\textsuperscript{203} The result of the often informal repartee
between Reason and Love is a gradually increasing frustration with Reason’s lack of
perception that culminates in the death of Reason\textsuperscript{204} – the implication here is that for
Marguerite, souls cannot come to a knowledge of God through reason alone but she
still values the reasoning process as a way of coming closer to God, and this is
embodied by the very text itself, which aims to teach an understanding of the route
to the ‘liif of perfeccion’.\textsuperscript{205} This route to perfection within God is couched in the
rhetoric of the \textit{mystique courtoise} noted by Petroff (1986) and Newman (1995).\textsuperscript{206}
As stated earlier, this particular kind of love mysticism borrows the language and
conventions of courtly romance in order to explicate the relationship between
devotee and God as one of separated, lovesick lovers. As we have seen, this is very
much a shared and dominant theme within beguine texts: for example, throughout
Hadewijch’s visions, Love’s arrows are shot at Hadewijch,\textsuperscript{207} while the trope of
being wounded by God as the Beloved is present in Porete’s \textit{Mirroure} in her
description of God/‘Fyne Loue’ treatment of Soul: ‘ful / often loue comeþ to hir
wij his rauyschinge dartes and woundeþ hir so sweteli, / þat sche forgetiþ al þat sche
afore sawe and wiste’.\textsuperscript{208} Newman adopts the term ‘\textit{mystique courtoise}’ because it,

\textsuperscript{202} \textit{Mirroure}, 22, p.250.
\textsuperscript{203} \textit{Mirroure}, 15-16, p. 306.
\textsuperscript{204} \textit{Mirror}, 87, p. 162.
\textsuperscript{205} \textit{Mirror}, 7, p. 257. It should be noted that it is at times difficult to disentangle the pedagogical
goals of Porete’s text from those of the Carthusian annotator M.N. This is perhaps one such example.
See Appendix I for a brief discussion of a selection of the glosses and Middle English editor and
compiler M.N.’s treatment and reception of the text.
\textsuperscript{207} Vision 14, 7, p. 302.
\textsuperscript{208} \textit{Mirroure}, 25-26, p. 260.
'like the beguines themselves, straddle[s] the border between religious and secular life'. Both Porete and Hadewijch utilize this technique in their respective texts. Porete's most obvious parody of the courtly romance genre comes at the beginning of the Mirrour with her exemplum of "Farnearness" or the "fer nyʒ" and sets the tone for the reader's instruction on how to relate to God. The 'litel ensample' which Porete provides tells the story of old of a king's daughter who fell in love with the 'noble gentilnesse and [...] hʒe renoun' she heard tell of about Kyng Alisaundre. This aristocratic maiden has never seen this great king, but she nevertheless falls in love with him and finds it tortuously painful to be so far from the man she loves:

And whanne sche sawe þis fer loue – to hir so nyʒ – was /so fer from hir, sche þouȝte to conforte hir silf of him bi ymaginacioun of sum /figure, þat myȝte bere þe liknesse of him þat sche louede, for whom sche felte /hir herte ful ofte wounded. And þanne sche lete peynte an ymage, þat present- /ide þat kynesg semblaunce as nyʒ as sche myȝte, whom sche so louyde.

We are told that 'þis lady [...] myȝte neiþir hauve [...] ne se212' her lover, yet she imagines his appearance as a comforting substitute. The love and desire the maiden has for the King, who is 'to hir so nyʒ' whilst being at the same time 'so fer' because of his physical absence, spurs her decision to 'peynte an ymage þat presentide / þat kynesg semblaunce'. The creation of this image enables her to internalize and make present an image or idea of her absent beloved within her mind. Thus, this courtly image of the 'fer nyʒ' acts as a mirror for Porete's reader of the

209 Newman, p. 139.
210 Mirrour, 24, p. 250; 3, p. 251.
211 Mirrour, 6-10, p. 251.
212 Mirrour, 4, p. 251.
213 Mirrour, 6, 7; 9-10, p. 251.
contemplative experience they will have whilst reading the text, in pursuit of union with God who is also simultaneously close to and far from the devotee.

Such a pursuit is a gradual journey which Marguerite breaks down into stages for the instruction of her entire readership, ‘actif / and contemplatif\(^{214}\) and which includes common (lay) readers.\(^{215}\) Marguerite does state that the book is a gift ‘3ouen of al þe Trinite’\(^{216}\) but this is as likely to be a modesty topos as a statement of divinely received inspiration. However, there is a sense of lived experience implied in the authoritative and direct tone she adopts in her writing. Porete’s speculative theology can be summarized as follows:

1. A spiritual, worldly journey of contemplative ascent towards ‘þe liif of perfeccion’\(^{217}\) following the *vita apostolica*.

2. An ascent through seven stages of spiritual progress which is reminiscent of the Pseudo-Dionysian hierarchical model of spiritual ascent, and which involves three kinds of spiritual deaths – the death to sin, the death to nature and the quietistic death to the spirit itself.

3. The annihilation of the soul as after the aperture illumined by the seventh stage and the dying of three deaths, the soul is noughted in the union of ‘Farnearness’ or the ‘fer nyʒ’ with God. Through the transformative power of divine love, Soul has made of two, One.

On the journey towards this ‘liif of perfeccion’\(^{218}\) the soul must endure the seven stages necessary to create a pious soul. This soul must possess nine points which mirror and enable these seven stages to occur, and which also deem the soul

---

\(^{214}\) *Mirrou* 18-19, p. 250.

\(^{215}\) Again, it is possible that this is an interest imposed by the Carthusian annotator of the text as opposed to Porete. See n. 186.

\(^{216}\) *Mirrou*, 14, p. 252.

\(^{217}\) *Mirrou*, 7, p. 257.

\(^{218}\) Ibid.
worthy to be called to such a life by God or ‘FYne Loue’. The pious soul knows nothing of themselves and nothing about God. They will nothing, except what God divinely wills in them. As Love explains to Reason, ‘a soule þat is nouȝted [...] kan no more werke’.\footnote{\textit{Mirror}, 25; 30, p. 261.} Such a soul is aware of her eternal wretchedness only in so much as this enables her to be aware of God’s eternal goodness. For example, Soul proclaims: ‘Lord, howe myche comprephe ȝe of ȝoure myȝte, of ȝoure wisdom and / of ȝoure goodnesse? As myche as I comprephe of my seblenesse, of my soti-/nesse, and of my wickidnesse’.\footnote{\textit{Mirror}, 5-7, p. 348.} If the soul is eternally wretched, then she can be assured of receiving God’s eternal goodness. By noughting herself and making herself nothing in comparison to the greatness and ‘al goodnesse’ of God/Fyne Loue, this annihilated soul receives a kind of freedom by achieving mastery over and freedom from the ‘uertues’ and restricting herself to doing God’s will only.\footnote{\textit{Mirror}, 19; 24, p. 254.} Such a soul enters a perfect state of nothingness whereby they are not required to do good or charitable works in order to earn grace as ‘pe werkis of uertues / ben alle wipynne pis soule closid’.\footnote{\textit{Mirror}, 29-30, p. 352.} By achieving this state of nothingness – ‘I am pure nouȝte’\footnote{\textit{Mirror}, 21, p. 351.} – the annihilated soul wills ‘noping þat is not of þe bounte of / loue’.\footnote{\textit{Mirror}, 22-23, p. 351.} At this point, she has achieved ‘þe beynge of frenesse’ and is in ‘hir hijest perfeccion’ as at this stage, the annihilated soul has true knowledge through faith of God’s grace: ‘...for whanne / I relinque and nouȝte parfiti myself þanne his myraclis ȝiven me uerrey knowinge / of his diuine ȝiftes. Feip is cause of þis’.\footnote{\textit{Mirror}, 35; 26; 22-24, p. 352.}
Throughout the text there is a Pseudo-Dionysian inflection to Porete’s ‘derke wordis’ which actively conceal and reveal meaning apophatically. The apophatic trope of an ineffable ‘God hat noon ne kan o word of seie’ of course contributes to Porete’s complex and at times abstract programme for spiritual progress, but it seems that her main concern is always to teach and instruct. The points in the text which do verge on affirming any kind of visual model of God are always tempered by ‘he schadewe of he / sunne’. Reminiscent of Pseudo-Dionysius’s dark cloud of unknowing, the enlightenment of knowing is clouded by the shadow paradoxically cast by the sun as light itself. To take an example which commonly occurs in beguine texts, the image of winged seraphim present in both the Old and New Testament (Isaiah 6:2 and Revelation 4:8) is utilized by Porete as a symbolic representation of the unknowability of God. She employs an image of the annihilated Soul as a seraph who covers different parts of God’s body with her six wings. The comparison of the human being with the seraph (an angelic being associated with light, ardour and purity) immediately echoes the text’s recurring Pseudo-Dionysian theme of light and darkness – for example, when Soul finally becomes ‘pure nou3’ in God she explains that it is a divine spark ‘hat schewide me sodaynli him and me – him so hi3e and me so / lowe’. Thus, this binary opposition functions in the text as a kind of barometer of spiritual understanding or knowledge. Those souls which are spiritually enlightened and aware are represented by light, while those who are not are said to remain ‘in he schadewe of he / sunne’ (Mirrour, 22-23 264). A particularly interesting moment (which recalls

---

226 Mirrour, 36, p. 304.
227 Mirrour, 28, p. 263.
228 Mirrour, 22-23, p. 264.
229 Mirrour, 21, p. 351.
230 Mirrour, 28-29, p. 351.
231 Mirrour, 22-23, p. 264.
Hadewijch’s experience of the ‘Countenance of God’ occurs when the seraph/annihilated soul is said to ‘keueriþ þe face of oure Lord’ with two wings, thereby concealing God’s physiognomy from the reader while also signalling its presence. This moment illustrates Porete’s concept of the ‘fer nyʒ’ in the respect that the annihilated soul is close enough to be able to touch God’s face, yet this proximity only enables her to conceal his face, actively depriving herself of the sight and increasing the distance between Soul and God. Nevertheless, she has attained perfect union by ‘unselfing’ or noughting herself to the point that she ‘dwelliþ alwei in þe diuine willen’.

Through complete, self-negating abandonment of her own will, the soul can transcend itself and return to a state of true union with God.

Porete’s doctrine of theosis or deification unsurprisingly made her text potentially threatening in the sense that it could unwittingly spread theological error in its dissemination if read by a spiritually naïve ‘amateur’ audience of ‘comune peple’ or if it fell into ignorant hands. This anxiety is articulated in the Prologue to the Middle English translation which the translator tells us is a second version, as they have been informed ‘þat /some wordis...haue be mystake’ by some people ‘þat haue red þe booke’.

The Middle English translator is only identified as ‘M.N.’ by his practice of enclosing fifteen explanatory glosses within his initials. M.N. explains that these fifteen glosses are added to the text ‘at suche places þere me semeth moost nede’.

For reasons of space I cannot adequately assess the glosses in this chapter and instead include a short discussion of a selection from them in Appendix I. However, what the glosses demonstrate is a burgeoning commitment to

---

233 Mirrour, 4, p. 254.
234 Mirrour, 14, p. 254.
235 Mirrour, Prologue, 25, p. 248.
236 Mirrour, Prologue, 6-7, p. 247; 26, p. 248.
237 Mirrour, Prologue, 26, p. 248.
police female spirituality, ensuring that it conforms to accepted and orthodox modes
of female piety. The Middle English translation of Catherine of Siena’s Dialogue
entitled The Orchard of Syon provides us with an opportunity to assess the ways in
which female mystical texts were incorporated into everyday spiritual practices, and
were adapted by male clerics for a specifically female readership. In this concluding
case study it is hoped that the opportunities afforded by female mystical texts, in
their sponsorship of female access to the medieval mystical tradition and serious
theological ideas and concepts, can be realized as a form of empowerment in itself
for a marginalized group within medieval society.

‘His book of reuelacions as for 3oure goostly comfort to you I clepe it a fruytful
orcherd’: Catherine of Siena’s Middle English Dialogue

Much like Marie d’Oignies, Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) had a large cult
following and exhibited many of the trademark displays of affective piety. Linked to
multiple different confessors/amanuenses throughout her lifetime, a variety of
legends and miraculous stories have proliferated about this Italian holy woman and
her ecstatic experiences mainly in Raymond of Capua’s Legenda Major (1384-1395).
Since ‘it was Raymond’s hagiographic portrait of Catherine that became
authoritative’, 238 it is important to temper the information gleaned from his vita with
a sensitivity to the historical Catherine who was originally an unenclosed, lay
tertiary, intensely devoted to a relationship with God who became a useful
instrument for and representative of Dominican authority. Devoted to prayer from a
young age, Catherine showed a predilection for the religious life throughout her
childhood and teenage years. Suzanne Noffke has noted Raymond of Capua’s claim

238 Karen Scott, ‘Mystical Death, Bodily Death: Catherine of Siena and Raymond of Capua on the
Mystic’s Encounter with God’, in Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters, ed. by,
Catherine M. Mooney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 36.
that she ‘vowed her virginity to God’\textsuperscript{239} at the tender age of seven. Joining the Dominican affiliated Mantellate group at seventeen Catherine received a significant education and accumulated friends, disciples and pupils known as Caterinati or la bella brigata. These women tended the sick and needy and were particularly active. A mixed lifestyle of active, charitable works and inward contemplation using her ‘ynward witt’\textsuperscript{240} was continued by Catherine throughout her life, and she stressed a strong personal emphasis on virtues such as charity, truth and reform of individual, community and clergy alike. In 1368, Catherine’s mystical espousal to Christ allegedly occurs. Michael Freze has observed that ‘although no one ever saw the mystical ring except Catherine, she claimed it was upon her finger for the rest of her life.’\textsuperscript{241} Reportedly prone to levitations, Catherine allegedly received the stigmata in 1375 with the marks ‘visible, at her request, only to herself’.\textsuperscript{242} The exchange of hearts with Christ and her four-hour mystical death in 1370 also mark Catherine out as a woman whose life and history has been deeply entangled with the legends perpetuated by the hagiographical tradition in its construction of her as saint.

However, unlike Marie, she produced her own lengthy text (assisted by various male confessors/amanuenses) and expounded her own personal theology. For this reason, we do not have to rely solely upon Catherine’s vitae and can instead examine her own writings and personal theology. As one of only two women ever honoured with the title of Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church (1970), Catherine was a role model for the Bridgettine nuns of Syon via her position as an orthodox mystic and as a writer. Catherine’s Dialogue was originally written in vernacular

\textsuperscript{240} Catherine of Siena, The Orchard of Syon, ed. by Phyllis Hodgson and Gabriel Liegey (Oxford: EETS 258, 1966), p. 23. All references are to this Middle English version of the text (hereafter, The Orchard) unless otherwise stipulated.
\textsuperscript{241} Michael Freze, They Bore the Wounds of Christ: The Mystery of the Sacred Stigmata (Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Inc., 1989), p. 258
\textsuperscript{242} Noffke, p. 5.
Tuscan (c.1377-1378) and has been translated into Latin and Middle English. This chapter focuses on the fifteenth-century Middle English translation *The Orchard of Syon* which adapts Catherine's *Dialogue* for a learned Bridgettine audience at the double monastery Syon Abbey in England. In this text the anonymous Middle English translator and compiler (most likely a male priest or brother of Syon Abbey), adds a prologue and imposes an overall allegorical structure which recasts the *Dialogue* as a manual of specifically Brigittine piety, thus constructing Syon Abbey itself as 'the blessed vyne3erd of [the] holy / Saueour'. 243 Whereas the previous case studies have focused explicitly on the personal theologies, mystical discourses and imagery used by medieval holy women, this final case study considers the reception context for Catherine’s personal theology, mystical imagery and discourse in one particular female community. In imagining this specific reception context, we gain insight into the ways in which the learned and enclosed sisters of Syon might have used Catherine’s text, which although mediated to them by the hand of the anonymous male compiler/translator, provides an opportunity for access to and engagement with serious theological concepts and questions which might otherwise be unavailable to them.

**Life at Syon Abbey**

As the first and only Bridgettine double monastery founded in 1415 in England and remaining until its dissolution in 1539, Syon Abbey was home to a learned and pious community of male and female religious. Ann Hutchison notes that the abbey was esteemed on account 'of the rigour of its religious observance and

on account of the learning of its members’. Founded in 1415 under the royal
patronage of King Henry V (1413-1422) and following Saint Bridget’s Rule ‘The
Order of Saint Saviour’, Syon Abbey enjoyed the privileges of being respected as
highly orthodox despite being founded under an unconfirmed order. A strict order in
favour of reading, learning and intellectual improvement in general, the Bridgettines
were undoubtedly worthy intellectual counterparts to their Carthusian neighbours at
Sheen. Having studied the reading habits of the Syon nuns, Hutchison reveals that
the Bridgettine obsession with learning is even reflected in the structure of the order
itself: ‘Its full complement was to have been sixty nuns, thirteen priests, four
deacons, and eight lay brothers, making a total of eighty-five, symbolic of the post-
Ascension community’. Hutchison interprets the various different members of the
Syon community as being representative of certain Biblical figures. For example,
she believes the thirteen priests to represent the twelve apostles plus Saint Paul,
while the four deacons represent the Latin Church Fathers: Ambrose, Augustine,
Gregory and Jerome. Whether or not Hutchison’s speculations are correct, it is clear
that the relationship between the men and women of Syon was one of symbiotic and
practical necessity. While the male priests and lay brethren provided security against
secular intruders, attended to the monastery’s external affairs, aided the nuns with
their devotions and preached public sermons on Sundays in the vernacular, George
James Aungier insists that ‘the abbess retained supreme control over the monks, as
well as the nuns; their prior depended upon her choice, and was bound to regulate his
conduct by her instructions’. Aungier’s presentation of Syon as representative of
one of many monasteries in which ‘a society of men were subject to the spiritual

245 Hutchison, p. 207.
government of woman suggests that within the walls of the abbey, female religious could wield significant power and control. Although this is a possibility, I would suggest that while the abbess was an important figurehead, the devotional practices which provided the abbey's core structure were moderated by the male confessor-general, priests and lay brethren. Thus, if female religious were given opportunity for control, it was still facilitated and mediated by male members of the abbey.

In terms of the relationship between the brothers and sisters of Syon Abbey, the set of additional and gender specific rules drawn up during the Bridgettine community's forced wanderings abroad (1536-1541) due to Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries, provide an insight into the power dynamic at work within Syon. Written around 1416 these Additiones are for the guidance of the Syon community in particular as opposed to being incorporated into Bridget's original Rule. One possible implication here is that the Syon community were considered to be somehow falling short of the strict standards of their motherhouse in Vadstena.

Incredibly detailed, the Additiones cover all aspects of the daily life of the Syon nuns in fifty-nine chapters. Dietary requirements, strict observance of silence, and appropriate behaviour in the church, during choir and at mealtimes are just some of the stipulations enforced by the Additiones. The various 'defautes' or faults the nuns can be guilty of are categorized in separate chapters as follows: Chapter II 'Of light defautes'; Chapter III 'Of grievous defautes'; Chapter IV 'Of more greuous defautes' and Chapter V 'Of most greuous defautes'.

Most striking when reading the Additiones is the obvious disparity between the percentage of the text aimed at the female as opposed to the male religious. The heavy emphasis on discipline in the

---

247 Aungier, p. 15.
249 Additiones, p. 252; p. 256; p. 258; p. 261.
Additiones is unsurprising considering Bridget herself was an ascetic. For example, the Middle English translation of her life (early fourteenth century) explains how she ‘spared / noght hir bodi in [k]nelinges and bettinges’. According to the Additiones, sisters who have erred should kneel willingly to receive the normal punishment of five lashes but are ultimately at the mercy of the abbess. The punished sister cannot speak but to accept blame and promise she will reform. Any sisters present at the disciplining of another sister must ‘caste downe ther hedes and sight towarde the erthe [...] hauyng compassion of her suster or sustres’. Even the strength of the blow a sister should receive is given in precise detail: ‘And the lasches in disciplines owe not to be softe or esy, but moderatly scharpe’. The painstaking attention to detail paid to the ‘disciplyne’ of the Syon sisters is not matched in the brevity of the comparatively short additional rule for the disciplining of the Syon brethren. For example, neither the amount or intensity of lashes is mentioned. The passage instructing one’s behaviour whilst witnessing another’s punishment is similarly omitted.

As two separately enclosed groups, these nuns and monks conducted their necessary communication through ‘iron grates, so contrived that they [the nuns] might be heard but not seen’. Despite outnumbering their male counterparts, the Syon nuns were very much compliant with rules that forced them to avoid the male gaze and to protect their vow of chastity on a daily basis. They submitted to the rules of an order which was derived of female visionary experience but which was essentially designed to promote and privilege male, spiritual authority. However, this did not render female religious powerless. Within the confines of the abbey and

---

251 Additiones, p. 255.
252 Ibid.
253 Aungier, p. 245.
with access to various non-liturgical, devotional works written in the vernacular, women could narrow the gap between them and their male counterparts via their reading and understanding of mystical texts like Catherine's. Hutchison observes that 'a remarkable feature of the Bridgettine Rule, a rule in which poverty is stressed, is the provision made for an unlimited supply of books for study'. It was through the determined, motivated and self-disciplined reading practices sponsored by the Syon ethos for learning that these women were able to engage in serious contemplation. David Bell has articulated a four-part model of Latin literacy within medieval nunneries which speaks to the significant intellectual abilities most likely possessed by (at least some of) the Syon nuns:

The first and simplest level is the ability to read a text without understanding it [...] ; the second level is to read and understand a common liturgical text; the third level involves reading and understanding non-liturgical texts or less common texts from the liturgy; and the fourth level is the ability to compose and write a text of one's own.

Bell's attention to types of learning and knowledge acquisition highlights the differences between rote learning which makes it possible for the spread of foundational or culturally engrained knowledge and intellectual, voluntary learning or critical thinking which involves the active pursuit of new knowledge. Whilst the distinctions between these categories of knowledge seem elementary, they can be easily overlooked when analyzing the epistemologies and belief systems of the past.

When discussing groups or specific communities of medieval women (and

---

254 Vincent Gillespie’s 2001 catalogue of Syon Abbey library suggests that key texts available to the Syon nuns would have been: The Myrroure of Oure Ladye, The Martiologue and Mechtild of Hackeborn’s Booke of Gostlye Grace among others.

255 Hutchison, p. 208.

particularly those we have little historical evidence about, such as the beguines), it can be tempting to generalize about their education and homogenize a large group of individual women with different abilities under certain social markers or brackets. Linda Olson similarly values Bell’s system on its merits as a useful tool ‘for reminding us that different people in the Middle Ages (as indeed now) would be literate in different ways and for different reasons’. Considering the wealth of manuscripts and printed books possessed by Syon Abbey I would suggest that its learned community is a case in point for Bell’s argument. Remaining until the Reformation ‘one of the most prosperous of the English monasteries’, Syon Abbey possessed a wealth of manuscripts and printed books, which most certainly sponsored the spiritual edification and intellectual improvement of the sisters it housed.

Female Reading Practices

The Myroure of Oure Ladye functioned as an essential part of the spiritual programme at the abbey. This was because it prescribed not only what should be read, but also how it should be read. At Syon, spiritual progress could only be made through the act of reading. Indeed, Elizabeth Schirmer claims: ‘The Myroure of Oure Ladye, in its entirety, is constituted by lessons in reading’. Based upon the assumption ‘that a large part of the nuns’ day is devoted to reading, not only this book but other edifying books as well’, the tripartite work traces the origins of the

---

260 Hutchison, p. 209.
divinely given Bridgettine service. It translates and explains the ‘Hours’ and the manner in which they should be sung, and translates special masses which are specific to Syon. The ultimate goal for a Syon nun is the achievement of ‘entendaunce’. By means of correct reading practices nuns must have intent to truly understand the texts they read, and must also be attentive to what they are reading. Schirmer explains, “‘entendaunce’ is the means by which the reading sisters achieve the crucial “accord” between mind and tongue, heart and mind, reader and text, which is the ultimate goal of the Myroure’s lessons in reading”. The devotional practice of reading was thus a serious exercise in the contemplative life to be correctly executed by all members of the order from postulants and novitiates right up to established, professed members. Using information on expected and advised reading habits from The Myroure of Our Ladye it seems logical to speculate that these nuns meet the criteria of at least the first three levels of Bell’s classificatory system of Latin literacy – that is, they can pronounce the Latin, Bridgettine Office as it reads on the page; they can understand the words they are pronouncing because of their access to Middle English translations such as The Myroure of oure Ladye and because of the schooling they received from their male priests; and they can (in theory) apply their education gained through reading the Latin Office to other less common liturgical texts. Whether or not a Syon nun has ever attained Bell’s fourth level of Latin literacy – the ability to compose and write a text of one’s own – is a matter for speculation only. I would suggest that while it is unlikely that these nuns produced entire, original texts of their own, they read vernacular, devotional texts voraciously, and so it is feasible that they may have been involved with the editing process of some of the devotional texts produced at Syon by male clerics.

261 Schirmer, p. 354.
This argument can be supported by Syon nun Dorothy Coderington, who Bell notes, was a professed member of the house during its suppression in 1539 and during its brief Marian revival when Coderington ‘owned, annotated and corrected a printed copy of The Tree and Twelve Fruits of the Holy Ghost’.\textsuperscript{262} The twelfth-century nuns of Admont monastery also support this view of female authorship. Olson states that these nuns ‘worked as scribes, notarii and authors for their community’.\textsuperscript{263} Studies conducted by Alison Beach and John Van Engen\textsuperscript{264} have shown that texts previously attributed to male authors were in fact the work of the Benedictine nuns at Admont. Following this discovery, it seems important to remain open to the notion that a similar arrangement may have occurred in numerous double monasteries including Syon. Given the strong focus on disciplined learning and the encouragement of the intellectual life at Syon, the adding of simple annotations or readership marks to devotional manuscripts by nuns during the final processes of textual editing such as drafting, correcting and finalizing seem a definite possibility. Such a large community comprised of sixty nuns in total would surely allow for the possibility of collaborative female work on some of the manuscripts received in the nuns’ library at Syon. Michael G. Sargent’s two-volume 1984 study of James Grenehagh develops Deanesly’s 1915 argument about the possible relationship between Syon nuns and Sheen monks illustrated by Joan Sewell (early sixteenth century) and James Grenehagh (d.1530). According to Deanesly, nuns spent their year as a novitiate in training in their own homes or in a house close to the abbey. These women received instruction from older Syon nuns and perhaps also Carthusian monks as in the case of Sewell and Grenehagh. Deanesly suggests ‘it is possible

\textsuperscript{262} Bell, p. 62.
\textsuperscript{263} Olson, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{264} See their respective chapters in Olson, pp. 187-198; pp. 199-212.
that sister Joan became acquainted with the Carthusian monk [...] during this year of
noviciate".265

The evidence for this relationship lies in a copy of Wynkyn de Worde’s 1494
Scale of Perfection which Deanesly claims was given to Sewell by Grenehalgh.
Deanesly’s claim is based on the ‘copious notes’ 266 and marginalia left by
Grenehalgh on the manuscript as well as Sewell’s monogram, which is in imitation
of Grenehalgh’s. The monogram is sensitive to a specifically Bridgettine piety as the
name Johanna Sewell is surrounded by composite elements of the order in the form
of the names: ‘Sanctus Salvator’ (Saint Saviour), ‘Birgitta’ (Saint Bridget), ‘Sanctus
Augustinus’ (Saint Augustine) and ‘Maria’ (Virgin Mary). Speculation has occurred
as to whether or not Sewell actually copied her own monogram. However, whether
Sewell wrote her own monogram or Grenehalgh designed and wrote it for her, the
implication is the same - she did have access to the manuscript and thus, by default,
to many others as well. If nuns were exposed to texts from both their own personal
libraries at Syon and those of their Carthusian neighbours at Sheen, the full extent of
the problems with disregarding learned, female religious as possible authors of
scribal annotations and perhaps even whole texts is realized. Having said this, I do
not wish to suggest that it was a Syon nun instead of a male priest or monk who
translated and compiled The Orchard. Instead I would argue that women probably
had a larger involvement with the editing and reading of devotional texts in the
period than they are given credit for. The collaborative nature of the male/female
relationship within the setting of a double monastery creates a situation whereby
male clerics might translate devotional, Latin works from the Continent into Middle
English before handing their manuscripts over to a trusted individual or group of

265 Deanesly, p. 82.
266 Ibid.
particularly well-educated nuns who could then correct, draft or annotate, either at will, or as instructed by the same cleric. As Olson states:

Intimate networks of exchange become as important as individual readers and writers; intended audience and reading community are partakers along with authors and scribes in the production and circulation of texts.\(^{267}\)

In this sense, women can be said to be empowered if we allow them to become vital parts of the 'intimate networks of exchange' which governed the production and circulation of medieval devotional texts within the period.

**The Orchard of Syon**

Having considered the reception context of Catherine’s text within Syon Abbey, it is now possible to consider the ways in which the anonymous Middle English translator and compiler adapts and utilizes her personal theology in *The Orchard*. By imposing an intricate allegorical structure which retains Catherine’s ideas and concepts, the compiler is able to rewrite the text in many significant ways.

For example, in dividing Catherine’s lengthy one hundred and sixty seven chapters into sections, significantly different weightings are accorded to particular sections of the text. This seems to be in accordance with the compiler’s agenda of rendering the text as a model of Bridgette piety which could be easily imitated, remembered and internalized. For the sake of argument, I will presume the Middle English compiler/translator to be either a male monk, priest or early confessor-general of Syon Abbey – perhaps Thomas Fishbourne. I make this presumption based on the extent of the skilful rearranging and organisational restructuring evidenced in the *Orchard* which I believe would have been incredibly time-

\(^{267}\) Olson, p. 13.
consuming and would also have required an expert knowledge of Latin and the Scriptures. I do not wish to rule out the possibility that Syon nuns had access to devotional texts, and perhaps even unsupervised access, at which times scribal marks could have been added. I in fact support this idea. However, I believe that the practices of female authorship I have previously speculated about would have taken time to emerge and would, most likely, not have been present in the early stages of the Syon community’s formation when The Orchard was most likely composed. The addition of a dedicated prologue (directly addressed to ‘the hous of Syon’\(^{268}\) (and the sisters therein), a detailed calendar and a layering of imagery which complement an overall allegorical structure which constructs Syon Abbey as a hortus conclusus within which Catherine’s text can be read and used by a Bridgettine readership. Divided into seven chapters, each comprised of five parts, the chapter divisions present in The Orchard seem to have biblical significance. Seven as the number of completeness and perfection, and five as the number of Christ’s wounds and of the Old Law or Pentateuch are particularly fitting quantities for structuring a Bridgettine text. The symbolic nature of the name ‘Syon’ itself as representative of God’s covenant to Abraham (Genesis 15:18) and the Promised Land similarly allows the textual apparatus put in place by the anonymous compiler to work on several different levels. In the mind of the Bridgettine reader, Syon Abbey can become a microcosm of the Promised Land.

Another device used by the compiler to adapt the Dialogue into a more useable religious manual is the addition of an intricately detailed calendar at the beginning of the text. Containing a précis of each of the five parts within the seven chapters of the text this calendar acts as an overview and table of contents to the

\(^{268}\) *The Orchard*, 1, p. 2.
contemplative regime of the text, enabling readers to quickly find specific sections or themes for meditation. This would obviously be an incredibly useful tool for the Syon nun who spends the majority of the day reading, singing the Hours and learning texts like The Orchard almost by rote until they become so familiar that they are internalized. Thus, the calendar acts as a text within the text as it is specifically tailored for the reading practices and approaches of Syon nuns. A summary of the précis given in the calendar is appended to the beginning of each chapter and section within the text, while brief subheadings are scattered throughout the body of the text as another aid to reading and understanding the text. For example, at certain points the compiler intercepts Catherine’s rambling dialogue to clarify those parts of the text which appear to be new developments but which are in fact repetitions of an earlier argument or statement: ‘Here is a repeticioun of summe wordis seyd bfore’.269 Instances such as this demonstrate the compiler’s desire to make the text more functional, effective and useful for his Syon readership.

The compiler’s Prologue is another crucial example of his restructuring of the text as it introduces a theme of communal spiritual unity which embeds the various kinds of allegorical textual apparatus used throughout the text in one image – that of ‘a fruytful orcherd’.270 This use of imagery denoting themes of enclosure has similarly been witnessed in the writings of Hadewijch. Dedicating the text to those ‘chosen bisily / to labour at the hous of Syon, in the blessed vyne3erd of oure holy / Saveour’, the Prologue directly addresses the abbess and ‘devoute sustren’271 of Syon. The sisters are encouraged to wander through the pages of the text as if it were ‘a fruytful orcherd’. This choice of image would resonate particularly well with the enclosed nuns of Syon who would have had time to walk and reflect in the

269 The Orchard, 127, p. 27.
270 The Orchard, 13, p. 1.
271 The Orchard, 1-3; 1, p. 1.
Abbey’s actual garden and orchard. Both the ‘mynde & resoun’\textsuperscript{272} should be employed when exploring ‘in his goostli orcherd’\textsuperscript{273}, and so natural, botanical growth is juxtaposed with spiritual growth which is to be obtained by reading the text correctly. Thus, the reading path chosen through the text is transposed onto the path of spiritual growth taken. The compiler urges that ‘be hool orcherd’\textsuperscript{274} be searched and that the entire variety of the fruit it offers be tasted:

\[ \ldots \text{taste of sich fruyt and herbis reasonably \u2013 aftir 3oure affecioun, \& what 3ou you likep best, afterward chewe it \u2013 wel \& ete 3ereof for heelep of 3oure soule.} \textsuperscript{275} \]

The advice to chew and consume spiritual knowledge for the benefit of the soul is a metaphorical call to ruminative action and contemplation when reading the text.

Catherine’s Prologue obviously functioned as a guiding source for the compiler’s, as they both focus on ideas of spiritual growth using the same image of a ‘goostly orcherd’.\textsuperscript{276} However, while both Prologues suggest that the female religious should taste of the various spiritual ‘lympis & trees’\textsuperscript{277} planted in the orchard, Catherine’s Prologue warns that through gathering sweet fruit, ‘ful bittire wedis’\textsuperscript{278} are also found: ‘Bittir & soure ëbei ben to taste, but / profitable to knowe’.\textsuperscript{279} The compiler’s Prologue is much more encouraging and fails to mention the difficulties that the Syon nuns might encounter on their journey to spiritual perfection. Again, this witnesses the compiler’s attempt to encourage his Bridgettine readership to persevere in emulation of Catherine’s theology which centres around five main interdependent

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{272} The Orchard, 22-23, p. 1.
\item \textsuperscript{273} The Orchard, 21, p. 1.
\item \textsuperscript{274} The Orchard, 27, p. 1.
\item \textsuperscript{275} The Orchard, 27-29, p. 1.
\item \textsuperscript{276} The Orchard, 2, p. 16.
\item \textsuperscript{277} The Orchard, 1, p. 16.
\item \textsuperscript{278} The Orchard, 8, p. 16.
\item \textsuperscript{279} The Orchard, 8-9, p. 16.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
aspects: charity, truth based on love, patience and prayer. Petition and prayer are particularly valuable for Catherine as it is by means of prayer that she communicates with God, petitioning him with questions, and giving thanks for the knowledge revealed to her in ecstatic visions. Unlike Hadewijch, Catherine tends not to comment on the experience of the vision itself. Instead her visionary experiences are written as matter of fact occurrences.

The use of gradually building narratives and interweaving, layered images is a specifically Catherinian trait. Her theology is constructed around several basic images which combine through the rhetoric of mystical discourse to create a more complex model for describing the route to ‘be parfyte loue’ of an otherworldly ‘godheed’. A key example of this subtle use of layered imagery can be seen in the interlocking images of the Christ-the-bridge metaphor and the ‘vyne3erd’, which are subsequently grafted onto her teachings about holy tears and the practice of discerning spirits. All of these images combine with and complement the compiler’s use of the orchard motif established in his dedicated prologue. Such imagery is particularly apt for the Bridgettine devotee who like Catherine’s ‘deuoute soule’ wishes to learn the methods of attaining spiritual perfection while remaining firmly within the bounds of orthodoxy. The Christ-the-bridge metaphor has a tripartite effect as it recalls The Great Flood, Christ’s death for our sins, and man’s part in acquiring the original sin which made Christ’s death necessary in the first place. Narratives of the New and Old Testament are thus conflated in this image, creating a sense of foreboding which would not have been lost on the Bridgettine readership at Syon. The collapse of New into Old Testament events produces the effect of an immediacy of sinful deeds which fuels the atmosphere of apocalypticism often

280 The Orchard, 22, p. 8; 15, p. 21.
281 The Orchard, 31, p. 63.
282 The Orchard, 7, p. 7.
present in the text. Adam’s trespasses - when his ‘fleisch debatide a3eins þe spirit’ during The Fall - are cited as the reason for God’s creation of his son Christ as ‘a brigge’. This bridge ‘rechep fro erpe to heuen’ and provides safe passage over the ‘vnrestful flood’ borne of ‘trespas and synne’ below. The righteous soul who lives in true charity and patience in order to please God must avoid the flood of wicked, earthly vice by travelling the perfect way of Christ-the-bridge. Whilst this bridge is raised above the flood it is not actually ‘departid fro þe erpe’. Souls can choose whether to travel the perfect way of the bridge, or the imperfect way beneath the bridge in the flood. There are three ladders or steps on this bridge which correspond with the ‘pré grees’ or three degrees of the soul. Righteous souls travel the way of the bridge and are equated with trees of life who keep the cardinal virtues, while unrighteous souls travel the way of the flood and are equated with trees of death who keep wicked vices. Righteous souls are those who have been given ‘fre choys’ or free will and who have used it correctly to pursue the will of God only in all things. These souls are in receipt of the ‘goostly dowrye’ which was given by God (at creation) and must return to God (after death). Here, we see parallels with Poreitan notions of mystical union as a return or descent. Those unrighteous souls who sin without showing remorse or contrition and by misusing their ‘fre choys’ for wicked deeds ‘receyuen euerlastynge peyne wipouten eende’. As a soul traverses the three stages of the bridge of Christ they become more holy and achieve God’s will.

---

283 The Orchard, 27, p. 61.
284 The Orchard, 7, p. 62.
285 The Orchard, 9, p. 4; 1, p. 62.
286 The Orchard, 17, p. 69.
287 The Orchard, 6, p. 28.
289 The Orchard, 5, p. 27.
290 The Orchard, 16, p. 27.
more perfectly. As the compiler notes, this is because Christ is a sign of 'pe iii
mi3tis of pe soule' 291 - presumably he refers to the Trinity here which must dwell
within those righteous souls to ensure that the soul can persevere and endure the
trials and tribulations of their spiritual journey on the way to 'pe eende of /
perfeccioun'. 292 The three steps also correspond to the transposition of Jesus’s
outstretched position on the cross onto the image of the bridge:

1. the first step on the bridge is Christ’s nailed feet which Catherine is told
have 'ben maad laddris' for her. At this point, the soul is in a state of
'desier and / affeccioun' as they wish to ascend to the second step but also
feel compassion for Christ’s suffering. 293

2. the second step on the bridge is 'pe wounde of pe syde'. At this point,
the soul can witness 'pe pryuetees of pe herte' and so they are nearing the
'parfi3t loue' of spiritual perfection. The soul witnesses how much they
are loved by God through the sacrifice of his son. 294

3. having realized God's love at the second step, the soul can reach up to the
third step on the bridge which is that most holy step of 'pe holy mouh' of
Christ. At this point the soul achieves 'a ful swete / pees' of self-
annihilation after casting off their vices at the first stage, becoming filled
with virtuous love at the second stage, and achieving holy peace at the
third. 295

Immediately following this important section on Christ-the-bridge, the
compiler interrupts and interjects with a brief explanation of the text to follow using
his own subheading. The compiler's use of these subheadings seems to be an

291 The Orchard, 30, p. 6.
292 The Orchard, 32-33, p. 6.
293 The Orchard, 27, p. 68; 26-27, p. 68.
294 The Orchard, 28, p. 68; 29; 32, p. 68.
295 The Orchard, 6, p. 69; 11-12, p. 69.
attempt at drawing the attention of his reader and subsequently focusing their
attention on particular aspects of Catherinian theology which he feels are important
and conducive to proper Bridgettine piety. This section introduces the idea of God’s
community as labourers in a holy vineyard. Presumably the compiler views this
particular Catherinian image as useful for the edification of his enclosed readers at
Syon, whose daily reading and learning practices locate them in a similar position.
The subheading is as follows:

How we ben alle laboreris, and ben sent fro God to labore in þe vyne- / ȝeerd
of holy chirche; and how ech man hæp a vyneȝeerd of him- / sylf.\(^\text{296}\)

The text states that those righteous souls with ‘fre choys’ who are God’s ‘lond tilieris
and laboreris’ must conduct their spiritual labours in ‘þe vyne- / ȝeerd of holy
chirche’\(^\text{297}\) by choosing to live perfectly, and to go the perfect way of Christ-the-
bridge. The compiler’s decision to highlight this section of the text emphasizes his
in-depth knowledge of Catherine’s Dialogue and his subsequent ability to restructure
and adapt his own version of the text to a Bridgettine programme of piety and
devotion. Also, the compiler’s emphasis on the idea that each soul has a ‘vyneȝeerd
of him- / sylf’\(^\text{298}\) (The Orchard 21, 63) suggests the importance of individuals having
their own spiritual vineyard to be nurtured and tended along with the vineyards of
their neighbours as a part of the collective vineyard of the Church (and presumably
also, of the Abbey itself). This notion of the necessity of individual participation in
the spiritual interests of the collective is thus another significant lesson for an
enclosed Syon nun reading The Orchard. Combined with the teaching of the biblical
parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16), this section of the text
speaks to the importance of virtuous behaviour and devotion for divine reward as

\(^{296}\) The Orchard, 19-21, p. 63.
\(^{297}\) The Orchard, 24; 30; 19-20, p. 63.
\(^{298}\) The Orchard, 21, p. 63.
opposed to worldly gains, thus reiterating the Catherinian and Bridgettine insistence on poverty. When souls receive the sacraments (such as baptism) ‘þoru þe handis of þe / mynystris of þe chirche’, they receive a grace which draws out of the soul ‘þe prickyng þornes of deedly synnes’.\textsuperscript{299} This description reminds us of the centrality of the Eucharistic Host within medieval female spirituality and is also a moment of analepsis as Christ’s Crown of Thorns is recalled in conjunction with the punishment of deadly sins. The theme of the salvific powers of Christ’s tortured, bleeding body would have been as poignant for the Syon nuns as it was for Catherine herself, who at one point desired to ‘haue swetyng of blood comyng out fro hir body',\textsuperscript{300} in contrition for her wickedness and that of holy church.

Another affective Catherinian method for cleansing the soul is the crying of holy tears. However, as the compiler notes in his précis of chapter four, this section on holy tears also provides instruction on ‘how a soule / schal come fro vocal preyer to mental preyer',\textsuperscript{301} making it a useful guide for the Bridgettine nuns who spend the majority of their day studying, reading, singing the Hours and in contemplative prayer (\textit{lectio divina}). God warns Catherine that it is often during the noble pursuit of mental prayer (the final stage of contemplation) that ‘þe feend cometh wip manye heuyynessis’,\textsuperscript{302} to tempt the soul with evil visions. This is not a reason to avoid prayer as ‘þe exercise of / holy preyeris [...] is an armour by þe which a soule is defendid / & kepte from alle her aduers[ari]es'.\textsuperscript{303} Righteous souls should continue to persevere ‘in meke contyuel prayer’\textsuperscript{304} for God, themselves and their neighbours, as the protective armour of holy prayer deflects the efforts of the devil to lead

\textsuperscript{299} \textit{The Orchard}, 34-35, p. 63; 1, p. 64.
\textsuperscript{300} \textit{The Orchard}, 13, p. 59.
\textsuperscript{301} \textit{The Orchard}, 6-7, p. 145.
\textsuperscript{302} \textit{The Orchard}, 26, p. 145.
\textsuperscript{303} \textit{The Orchard}, 4-5, p. 146.
\textsuperscript{304} \textit{The Orchard}, 12, p. 146.
righteous souls astray. The difference between vocal and mental prayer is explained to Catherine, although both forms of prayer are vital for the exercise of proper prayer and devotion.

Those who only practice long ‘vocal preieris’ which can be heard and seen by others as a sign of their piety do not live righteously, as this kind of prayer is ‘rapir in wordis ſan in affeccioun’. 305 This sort of prayer can be learnt by rote or read from a page much like a modern atheist can repeat the Lord’s Prayer perfectly without having the belief, faith or devotion necessary to say such a prayer in the first place. Nevertheless, ‘vocal preieris’ lead to the ‘mentale affeccioun’ of mental prayer which involves ‘openynge þe i3e / of vndirstondynge’. 306 Mental prayer is thus the best and most perfect form of prayer which is beyond words or actions, and is instead a form of inward contemplation whereby the soul can internalize God through their devotion. God is thus in the soul during mental prayer and so vocal prayers must not and cannot be said, as God is ineffable. Here, Bridgettine readers gain access through Catherine’s text to levels of serious contemplation which provide them with the opportunity to access God using similar means to their ‘superior’ contemplative male counterparts, as opposed to relying solely on the practices of affective piety available to them as spiritual routes which utilize only the body and bodily. Despite its superior nature, mental prayer can only be reached through vocal prayer, and so it is the intent with which a devotee prays that affects the calibre of the prayer made. God explains to Catherine that just ‘as / a soule is first vnparfí3t eer þanne it be parfí3t, so is her preyer / first vnparfí3t’. 307 The physical act of verbalizing one’s devotion by saying prayers aloud is also viewed as combative of

305  The Orchard, 16; 19, p. 147.
306  The Orchard, 16; 33, p. 147; 22, p. 146.
307  The Orchard, 28-30, p. 147.
the vice of 'ydilnesse'\textsuperscript{308}, and so this interpretation of prayer would be appealing to the Syon nuns who also pray to avoid falling into 'dulnesse of spirit'.\textsuperscript{309}

Catherine's teaching on holy tears is very much an extension of the progressive model of devotion provided in the explication of types of prayer. In contrast to popular depictions of the uncontrollable lachrymations of holy women, Catherine's \textit{Dialogue} intellectualizes the kinds of tears which can be shed and classifies them accordingly. Therefore Catherine takes one of the most common outward forms of affective behaviour available to holy women in the period and elevates its status as a means of spiritual access by imbuing it with an intellectual significance. The sorts of affective outbursts characteristic of women like Marie d'Oignies and Margery Kempe are completely absent from Catherine's teaching on holy tears. Instead, she focuses on the motivations behind the tears as signifiers of their holy worth as opposed to the amount of tears physically shed. Chapter four is devoted to Catherine's petition to God for instruction on 'pe statis & pe fruytes / of holy teeres'.\textsuperscript{310} God explains to her the 'fyue maners of teeris' which are necessary for the righteous soul to pass through on their journey to 'pe very way of trupe'.\textsuperscript{311} The explanations link each different kind of tears to the different emotions and expressions of remorse that a righteous soul might feel when meditating on the Passion or when navigating Christ-the-bridge. The first kind of tears occur when a soul recognizes their sinful actions but selfishly weeps 'for drede of peyne'\textsuperscript{312} – that is, out of a selfish fear of condemnation instead of sadness at the offences done to God through their sins. These tears are shed by the unrighteous. The second kind of tears occur when the fearful soul realizes that their self-pity 'is not / sufficient inouʒ

\textsuperscript{308} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{309} \textit{The Orchard}, 27, p. 151.
\textsuperscript{310} \textit{The Orchard}, 20-21, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{311} \textit{The Orchard}, 3, p. 194; 11, p. 127.
\textsuperscript{312} \textit{The Orchard}, 19, p. 194.
for to graunte [...] be blisse of heuene'. Remorse alone is not sufficient for salvation. The third kind of tears occur when the soul realizes their wrongdoings and begins to hope for God’s mercy by serving him after previously sinning. The fourth kind of tears are tears of ‘tendirmesse’ and yearning which occur out of a desire for him ‘pat sche loue’ and is deprived of (God). However, as she has not yet fully annihilated her own will, the soul cries at her separation from God. The fifth kind of holy tears are joined to the fourth kind and are the most holy, as they only occur when the soul is in complete union with God. These are ‘teeris of oonheed or vnyoun’. At this stage, the soul has annihilated her own will in the will of God thereby attaining his perfect love. Tears at this stage stem from the complete knowledge of the sinful deeds done to God by others as well as by the soul herself who is also tainted by original sin.

The shedding of tears and the act of weeping are imbued with biblical significance and represent a visible sign of remorseful penitence. Bishop Kallistos Ware observes their innate polyvalence: ‘At once physical and spiritual, tears stand at the enigmatic point of intersection between body and soul’. Whilst Catherine’s fivefold system of holy tears is uniquely hers, the concept of the gift of tears is steeped in the Eastern tradition of the Desert Fathers and also in the thought of one of Catherine’s possible sources – the early fourth-century monk John Cassian. Sandra McEntire has focused on the importance of the doctrine of compunction and holy tears in an effort to complement the body of scholarly work extant on the doctrine in an Eastern religious context with her own study of the ambiguity of the doctrine in

313 The Orchard, 27-28, p. 194.
314 The Orchard, 8; 4, p. 195.
315 The Orchard, 25, p. 213.
Western writings. In so doing she hopes to reveal what she has termed ‘a psychology of spirituality’. According to McEntire it is the ambiguity surrounding the doctrine of compunction which acts as a barrier to our better understanding of devotional texts that include instances of penitent behaviour such as weeping. This ambiguity is generated by the fact that despite knowing the traditional, monastic origins of the doctrine and its associations with Cassian, it still remains somewhat of an enigma, as even the word ‘compunction’ has numerous meanings within different texts and languages. Columba Stewart notes: ‘Cassian’s compunctio is a multivalent term, signifying both state and event’. In the main, Cassian uses compunctio in the traditional monastic sense whereby it means ‘sorrow’ or ‘repentance’. In brief, this varied usage of the term enables it to refer to both a state of being and a state of conversion or epiphany. The abstract nature of the term ‘compunction’ seems to relegate it to an otherworldly realm of the ‘unsayable’, with dictionary definitions only managing to describe it as a ‘feeling’ of guilt (OED).

McEntire argues that this indeterminate quality of the doctrine of compunction has led to it being poorly understood by medieval and modern writers and readers alike, resulting in the conflation of compunction with contrition which subsequently affects our interpretation of devotional and mystical writings.

Catherine’s categorical divisions of holy tears depict her attempt to wrestle with the problem of understanding and defining the motivations behind penitent behaviour while also maintaining a standard for judging such behaviours. As ever, petition through prayer is Catherine’s chosen medium for divine revelation, but the

---

318 For an extensive discussion of Cassian’s thought about and use of the gift of tears and doctrine of compunction in his own personal theology see Columba Stewart’s Cassian the Monk (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 114-130.
319 Stewart, p. 125.
320 Compunction: a feeling of guilt or moral scruple that prevents or follows a bad action.
practical inclinations of Catherine's idiosyncratic yet orthodox theology suggest a version of the mixed life which the Bridgettines at Syon would have viewed as inspirational. Denise L. Despres concurs and notes that 'Catherine's visible success in joining the active with the contemplative paths' set her apart from her other extraordinary female contemporaries. It would seem that the compiler of The Orchard valued Catherine's theology and text for similar reasons. Having analyzed Catherine's masterful juxtaposition of different models for attaining an orthodox knowledge of God it is unsurprising that the compiler and translator of The Orchard found her Dialogue to be a prime example for the spiritual education of his learned Syon readership. Catherine's use of layered imagery creates an interwoven theology to be unlocked, as it were, through reading. The structure and content of the Dialogue lend themselves to the steady perseverance and patient study fostered by the Bridgettine ethos, making it the ideal text for adaptation by the Middle English compiler/translator.

As demonstrated by the various holy women examined in this chapter and supported by their mystical doctrines and personal theologies, the female mystical text could function as a significant mode of female empowerment in the period. Whether drawing on the tradition of affective piety in using the body as locus of personal connection and identification with Christ or formulating self-contained, spiritual programmes often steeped in the male-dominated tradition of the via negativa, these mulieres religiosae variously attempt to 'feel' and experience God in a particularly female way. Jacques de Vitry's vita has illustrated the centrality of the reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationship between female devotee/mystic and male confessor/amanuensis, whilst simultaneously highlighting the complex and

oscillating power dynamic which inheres in this relation. The cases of Hadewijch
and Porete have illustrated the Pseudo-Dionysian inflection typical of those beguine
texts which pushed the boundaries of orthodoxy in the period and saw women not
only claiming authority for themselves but also using it to their advantage. Finally,
the anonymous translation of Catherine of Siena’s Dialogue has gestured towards the
ways in which we might reassess current categories and understandings of female lay
literacy in order to allow the myriad female voices (perhaps) concealed within the
margins of the devotional texts they read to come to the fore and to speak for
themselves, as spiritual if not political equals with their male counterparts.
Essentially, all of the medieval women encountered in this thesis indulge in their
own idiosyncratic identifications with God, and with the medieval mystical tradition
which communicates the basis of their scriptural knowledge of him to them. In their
respective discourses of ‘selfing’ and ‘unselfing’, these holy women are enabled by
the visionary literature they read and produce to transcend their stations in life, and
furthermore, to transcend themselves. However, this transcendence is inherently
paradoxical in the sense that the empowerment that most of these women achieve
through their writings is both limited by the apophatic mode which assists their self-
annihilations in God, and also by the patriarchal structures which protect, guide and
regulate their special status as ‘mystic’. Their empowerment as women in receipt of
special divine graces is itself self-negating, in a mirror image of the apophatic logic
which inflects and informs the writings and mysticism articulated by these women.
Nevertheless, as the only mode of empowerment available in the period, the mystical
texts produced by these holy women (couched as they are within oscillating
discourses of ‘oneness’ and ‘self-annihilation’), similarly invite identifications, over-
identifications and misidentifications from the modern women who would recuperate
the medieval mystical tradition in the early twentieth century and play their own part in re-mediating these women and their writings to the modern reader.

The Recapturing of the Female Mystical Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century

Having noted the various identification and personal connections made by medieval mystics with an unknowable God in their respective texts, this chapter demonstrates the ways in which early twentieth-century modernism saw it to recover this mystical tradition by making personal connections with their own arguably unsayable subjects. The chapter works to demonstrate the ways in which modern feminists, scholars, and religious historians recovered and re-mediated the writings of medieval religious women, and the accompanying identifications implicit in this re-mediation. This period saw a re-invigorated interest in the mystical tradition and religious texts in general.

Salvadoran analysis begins in an effort to recuperate this ancient and valuable tradition by identifying authors of anonymous-authored religious texts and manuscript foundations. The process is ongoing to this day, beggning the question why she is unknown. A review published in the 1973 Irish Church Quarterly reviews Reverend W. K. Fleming's then current title, "Mysticism in Christianity" (1913), and summarizes his insistence of interest in the mystical as something that was in the ethos.

Pursuing observe that although "of late [...] the sound of the word Mysticism has been made in the air", "all is no mysticism that professes the name".12 Largely in removal of Fleming's work, the reviewer describes other prevalent attitudes towards mysticism of the time.

Chapter 3
‘Giving people God in a very unofficial way’
Revisiting the Female Mystical Tradition Within Academia: Evelyn Underhill and Hope Emily Allen

The Recuperation of the Female Mystical Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century

Having noted the various identifications and personal connections made by medieval mystics with an unknowable God in their respective texts, this chapter demonstrates the ways in which early twentieth-century medievalists saw fit to recover this mystical tradition by making personal connections with their own arguably unknowable subjects. The chapter works to demonstrate the ways in which modern feminist scholarship recuperates and re-mediates the writings of medieval religious women, and the accompanying identifications implicit in this re-mediation. This period saw a reignited interest in the mystical tradition and mystical texts in general. Scholarly analysis began in an effort to recuperate this ancient and valuable tradition by identifying authors of anonymously authored religious texts and manuscript fragments. The process is ongoing to this day, begging the question: why the interest? A notice published in the 1913 Irish Church Quarterly reviews Reverend W. K. Fleming’s then current title, Mysticism in Christianity (1913), and summarizes this resurgence of interest in the mystical as something that was in the ether.

Fleming observes that although ‘of late [...] the sound of the word Mysticism has been much in the air’, ‘all is not Mysticism that professes the name’.¹ Largely in approval of Fleming’s work, the reviewer describes other prevalent attitudes towards mysticism of the time:

---
Mysticism has attracted considerable attention of late, but the tendency has been to regard it as a sporadic phenomenon and as a by-product of piety.\textsuperscript{2} These comments on the nature of mysticism are perhaps unsurprisingly made by educated, religious men – the traditional voice of patriarchally-determined Western culture. Therefore, it was the responsibility of two female medievalists to reconnect with affective medieval mystical texts and writers of the past. One of these women was Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941), whose seminal work on the topic Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness (1918 [1911]) is currently in its seventeenth edition (hereafter, Mysticism).\textsuperscript{3} This text not only heralded a reengagement with past traditions of knowing one’s self via knowing an ultimate Other (a common theme, as we shall see, in contemporary literary theory and continental philosophy), but it also paved the way for the work of another important medievalist and feminist Hope Emily Allen (1883-1960).

Both of these women were fascinated by the mystical discourses and traditions uncovered in the medieval texts they read and very much identified with their female authors. For this reason, I hope to demonstrate how their work emulates their mystic antecedents and their practices. Underhill describes these ‘women saints’\textsuperscript{4} of the past as follows:

We see them gathering little groups about them, creating spiritual families on whom they exercise a transforming power, giving people God in a very unofficial way [...] is it not here that women seem to find their best place?\textsuperscript{5}

\textsuperscript{2} A.A.L., ['Untitled Review'], Irish Church Quarterly 6.23 (July, 1913), p. 252.
\textsuperscript{3} Evelyn Underhill, A Study in the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1918 [1911]). Hereafter, Mysticism.
\textsuperscript{5} Underhill, 182-183.
Having mentioned Allen’s feminist sympathies, this choice of quotation might seem to suggest a strange disparity within female academic interests at a time when a modern feminist consciousness was nascent. However, it is chosen in order to illustrate the similarities and differences between these two medievalist contemporaries, who shared the common goal of recuperating and empowering the female mystical voice, if perhaps for different yet interrelated reasons. Such a disparity invites speculation about the ways in which we periodize and categorize history as well as the defining concepts developed within each period and viewed as cultural milestones. The dangers of perceiving certain periods in history as reflective of a homogenous world view are nowhere more problematic than in the study of medieval religion and mysticism. Individual belief systems run parallel with those encouraged by Church and State at each point in history, and so while it is inevitable that individual belief systems will be influenced or affected to varying degrees by their cultural moment, this is not enough to justify sweeping generalizations – just as Underhill and Allen illustrate that not every fin de siècle female academic was necessarily a keen feminist, so too do medieval mystics demonstrate the diverse variety of social opportunities and positions available to women as mystics. As Steven Justice notes, ‘belief does not settle the mind, but rules it.’ It is through choosing beliefs that selves are created, defined and shaped over time. All belief systems require an internal, driving logic in order to work, and this is particularly

---

6 For examples of the different individual attitudes towards and values placed on religion and faith within mixed communities see Emanuél Le Roy Ladurie’s *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error*, trans. by Barbara Bray (New York: George Braziller, 2008 [1975]), pp. 306; 320. Many Montaillou villagers had a strong faith and attempted to live pious lives while others such as Arnaud Sicre and Raymond de l’Aire were outspoken in their blasphemies, describing the *Ave Maria* as a ‘worthless [...] invention of the priests’ (Ladurie, 306), and Christ’s conception as a physical, sexual act, ‘just like all the rest of us’ (Ladurie, 320). Ladurie’s book explores Montaillou as a microcosm of a thirteenth-century society in which Cathars and Catholics coexisted for a time while retaining their own belief systems.

7 Steven Justice, ‘Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles?’, *Representations* 103.1 (Summer, 2008), p. 13.
true of the mystical programme and way of life. This case study hopes to understand the position of the early twentieth-century female writer in relation to the affinities and links they apparently felt with their medieval counterparts. In doing so it will be necessary to consider the mystical texts, discourses and themes which appealed to them, and to understand the ways in which they engaged with and recuperated these aspects of mysticism. The self-abnegating subjectivities perpetuated by these medieval mystical texts are of particular interest.

Evelyn Underhill: Modern ‘Mystic’?

Evelyn Underhill’s beliefs about mysticism are largely informed by her perennialist position and an almost ethnographic, quasi-scientific approach to the topic. I use these terms in order to accommodate Underhill’s own modernist beliefs that her approach is informed by the analytical language, critical reasoning and interrogative method characteristic of the traditionally male-dominated realm of science. Before expanding upon the complexities of her approach which is heavily influenced by psychology, it is useful to consider one of the many broad definitions of mysticism she provides us with:

[...]Mysticism, in its pure form, is the science of ultimates, the science of union with the Absolute, and nothing else, and [...] the mystic is the person

---

8 Raised an agnostic, Underhill married a Protestant, Stuart Moore, and on the counsel of Robert Hugh Benson converted to Christianity in 1907. After an initial sympathy with Catholicism, she later became an Anglo-Catholic. Around this time the Vatican was defensive against the perceived threat from so-called modernists like Underhill who it believed sought to integrate historical and scientific knowledge with Catholic doctrine. Pope Pius X issued the Pascendi Dominici Gregis or On the Doctrine of the Modernists on 8 September 1907. The papal decree takes issue with the modernist practice of privileging history and science as ways of accounting for and understanding worldly phenomena – See Section 14 on the modernist as a believer and Section 39 on modernism as, ‘the synthesis of all heresies’: <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_x/encyclicals/documents/hf_p_x_enc_19070908_pascendi-dominici-gregis_en.html> [Accessed: 1 August 2011].
who attains to this union, not the person who talks about it. Not to know about, but to Be is the mark of the real practitioner.\(^9\)

As this quotation highlights, mysticism is very much practical rather than theoretical for Underhill. Mystical union with ‘the Absolute’, ‘the Real’, ‘the Personality’ - i.e. God - can be achieved through a process of self-disciplined perseverance and self-improvement which results in the attainment of higher levels of consciousness.

Highly learned and well-read, Underhill connects Neoplatonic Plotinian metaphysics with Christianity, tracing what she sees as the natural predilection all human beings exhibit towards the attainment of some kind of objective truth; ‘the finding of a “way out” or a “way back” to some desirable state in which alone they can satisfy their craving for absolute truth’.\(^10\) Underhill revives the school of scientific thought known as vitalism which she describes as ‘both a Hellenic and a Christian system of thought’\(^11\) and links it with fifth century BC philosopher Heraclitus.\(^12\) This system essentially depends upon a belief in the divine spark or immanent capacity of the soul to attain transcendent knowledge and experience of the ‘Absolute’ or ‘Real’ to use Underhill’s terminology. Its emphasis is thus on a philosophy of life as a journey of becoming rather than being - hence the connections Underhill makes between its theory of knowledge and that of the mystics ‘if those wide-eyed gazers on reality had interested themselves in any psychological theory of their own experiences’.\(^13\) Certainly Underhill’s interest in the psychological aspects of mysticism is at the forefront of most of her interpretations of mystical interiority, and she quotes

\(^10\) *Mysticism*, p. 3.
\(^11\) *Mysticism*, p. 32.
\(^12\) Underhill’s comparison of mysticism and vitalism is also indebted to the work of the German philosopher Rudolph Eucken (1846-1926) and his principle of ‘spiritual vitalism’ (*Mysticism*, 39) or Activistic Philosophy.
\(^13\) *Mysticism*, p. 33.
excerpts from Walter Hilton (ca. 1340-1345 -1396) to Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) on the subject.

However, her coupling of vitalism – ‘a true “child of its time”’ - with mysticism, stems from their shared adoption of the famous Hermetic principle of analogy taken from Hermes Trismegistus’s *Emerald Tablet*: ‘*Quod inferius sicut quod superius*’.\(^1\) For Underhill, the medieval mystic acts as a worldly microcosm of the otherworldly macrocosm of the universe. Allusions to occult writers and texts are scattered throughout Underhill’s text,\(^2\) allowing us to better contextualize her approach to mysticism as a whole. For example, her occult interests and membership of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1904 have thoroughly informed her understanding of mysticism as ‘an inward alchemy’.\(^3\) This ‘inward alchemy’ is the ongoing life process of ‘a ceaseless changefulness’ and ‘the Great Work’\(^4\) of the transmutation of the soul which finally culminates in apprehension of an Absolute, Ultimate or, to use Underhill’s term, that ‘“only Reality” [...] which some philosophers call the Absolute, and most theologians call God’.\(^5\) In her Preface, Underhill laments that ‘mysticism is one of the most abused words in the English language’, and announces her vision for its much needed restoration ‘sooner or later to its old meaning, as the science or art of the spiritual life’.\(^6\) It is to this attempted restoration that we now turn.

\(^1\) *Mysticism*, p. 31.
\(^2\) *Mysticism*, p. 35.
\(^4\) *Mysticism*, p. 122.
\(^5\) *Mysticism*, p. 35; p. 173.
\(^6\) *Mysticism*, p. 4.
\(^7\) *Mysticism*, Preface, p. 10.
Mysticism is keen to emphasize the importance of recognizing a distinction between a true mysticism which fosters a disciplined ascent through the higher levels of consciousness, and writings and thinkers that theorize and provide commentary on life as a mystic but fail to actually practice it. She makes the distinction between literary artists, mystical philosophers and Magi, and true mystics while also noting that all of these different activities lend themselves to the sorts of concentrated mental exertions which can also be accompanying characteristics of mystical experience. In the category of literary artists Underhill places ‘that great genius’ and Romantic poet William Blake (1757-1827), whose claim to an illuminated vision she compares with that experienced by all artists during the ‘Eureka moment’ within which their masterpiece is conceived or realized. Having said this, she also views Blake as a case ‘in which the mystic swallows up the poet’, and uses a small extract from his poem ‘Jerusalem’ as an introductory epithet for Part II of her text. The category of mystical philosophers and Magi encompasses those ‘“Hermetic Philosophers” or Spiritual Alchemists’ - often the authors of the occult texts she references throughout - and the title of ‘true mystic’ is retained for those who actually embark upon the Mystic Way and ascend through all three stages as articulated by Augustine – purgation, illumination and union. Underhill thereby observes mysticism’s syncretistic propensity to infiltrate or coexist alongside other thought models and systems of belief while preserving the sanctity of the Mystic Way for those ‘wide-eyed gazers of reality’ mentioned earlier.

For Underhill, the practical journey along the Mystic Way is the mark of a true mystic: ‘the true mystic is the person in whom such powers transcend the merely

---

21 Mysticism, p. 282.
22 Ibid.
23 Mysticism, p. 167.
24 Mysticism, p. 33.
artistic and visionary stage and are exalted to the point of genius'. It is through Underhill's analysis of the journeys and experiences described by different medieval mystics that we can understand their relevance to her own epistemological system. In an attempt to view the events and happenings along the Mystic Way and during mystical conversion as a 'psychological process', Underhill breaks with the traditional threefold division of the Mystic Way described above and instead sketches her own fivefold division. This detailed delineation of mystical experience is not necessarily more revealing than the traditional threefold division, but it does allow more space in which to more accurately slot particular types of mystical experience. Mysticism is not concerned with the acquisition of new knowledge for its own sake (as in the case of magic), but aims at attaining transcendent union via the transformative powers of love. Underhill's five divisions are as follows:

1. **Awakening of the self to consciousness of Divine Reality.** These moments of awareness are often epiphanic and are characterized by feelings of intense joy.

2. **The Awakened Self realizes for the first time the vast gulf which separates them and their inadequacies from the perfect beauty and benevolence of the Divine.** A process of disciplined mortification is begun in an effort to hasten union and end separation – this second step is reflective of Purgation.

3. **The Purged Self has cleansed itself of the vanities of the material world and achieved detachment from 'the things of sense'**. At this stage of illumination the soul is prepared for spiritual espousal with Christ, and the sense of God's presence has returned. Underhill notes that many mystics never manage to go beyond this state.

---

25 **Mysticism**, p. 89.
26 **Mysticism**, p. 203.
27 **Mysticism**, p. 205.
4. Mystical Death or *The Dark Night of the Soul* is the penultimate stage in the quest for union with the Absolute and is a mode of purification. This stage of "spiritual crucifixion" is experienced differently by different mystics but is characterized by a suffering due to reinforced knowledge of God’s absence. The self is completely stripped at this point, aware only of its nothingness in comparison to God and willful only of God’s will. It is thus prepared for the fifth and final stage.

5. Union or the Unitive Way is the zenith of the Mystic Way and is characterized by certainty of God’s presence and a ‘oneness’ with God. At this stage a state of equilibrium has been attained and the soul is engulfed by and within God via the salvific, redemptive qualities of Christ’s blood and the transformative love of the Holy Spirit. At this point, purgation, purification and illumination have reached their highest points thus enabling the mutual indwelling and interpenetration of Soul and Trinity.

As the above summary illustrates, Underhill’s aim is to create an optimal framework within which to create a ‘composite portrait’ of different mystical types and temperaments. This detailed framework creates a more thorough schema through which to understand the different and often ephemeral moments of divine experience reported by different medieval mystics in their respective texts.

Underhill’s survey covers a wide range of medieval mystics but focusing on certain instances from specific texts is best suited to our purposes here. In terms of analyzing particular features of mystical texts which appealed to Underhill and aided the beginning of the early twentieth-century recovery of the mystical tradition within

---

29 This summary is created from Underhill’s more detailed outline (*Mysticism*, pp. 205-206). It would seem that she specifically prioritizes the Christian mystical experience.
30 *Mysticism*, p. 204.
academia, Marguerite Porete's *Mirour of Simple Soules* provides an interesting entry point. At the time Underhill began her study of this text, its authorship was unknown. It is a prime example of the many anonymous religious or mystical texts which survive to us through manuscript copies and fragments. Thirteenth-century beguine Porete of Hainaut (d.1310) was finally identified as that 'unknown French ecstatic'\(^{31}\) author by Romana Guarnieri in 1946\(^{32}\) after the text was misattributed to Jan Van Ruusbroec (1293-1381). Porete scholarship is an increasingly rich area of study but the Middle English translation of this controversial text is still in the early stages of scholarly investigation, as we know comparatively little about its author, albeit more than Underhill did in the early 1900s. Nevertheless, Underhill’s concise and brief synopsis of the text has yet to be bettered in my opinion. She claims: ‘The statement of the “French Book” is direct and uncompromising: well calculated to startle timid piety’.\(^{33}\) This is certainly an apt description for a text which sent its author to her death at the stake as a relapsed heretic. The text’s dialogic structure supports an ongoing conversation between the allegorical personae of Soul/Soul Nourished, Love/Fyne Loue and Reason. The allegorical structure is a narrative representation of the internal dialogues Underhill believes can occur at certain stages along the illumination of the Mystic Way. The *Mirour* is thus obviously appealing for Underhill as its focus on the annihilation or ‘noughting’ of the soul represents exactly the self-emptying process of mystical conversion she argues for: ‘only with the annihilation of selfhood comes the fulfilment of love’.\(^{34}\) Underhill uses the popular image of the Ground of the Soul as that most inward point at which worldly

\(^{31}\) *Mysticism*, p. 263.

\(^{32}\) Initially announced in a letter to the *Osservatore Romano* on 16 June 1946 but now reprinted in Guarnieri’s ‘Il movimento del Libero Spirito’, *Archivio Italiano per la storia della pieta* 4 (1965), pp. 661-663.

\(^{33}\) *Mysticism*, p. 263.

\(^{34}\) *Mysticism*, p. 110.
and otherworldly can meet.\textsuperscript{35} For Porete, this is a kind of subterranean ground zero of no-thingness, the point of creation at which the image of the Trinity was received, and a point which the mystic life aims to return to via a deconstruction and reconstruction of the self within God. Such ‘noughting’ or self-stripping is the epitome of Underhill’s fourth stage of mystical conversion – Mystical Death or The Dark Night of the Soul. For Underhill conversion is an ‘unselfing’ and this decentring of the self enables an ascent to higher levels of consciousness and is ‘the necessary beginning of any process of transcendence’.\textsuperscript{36} In the case of Porete, not only is this idea of ‘unselfing’ used as a rhetorical device within the text, as a metaphor for the transition from the absence to the presence of God attained during union, but she also literally ‘unselfs’ and annihilates herself when she gives her life for her text.

In a debate between Reason and the Noughted Soul about the detached nature of the soul and its inability to will selfishly once annihilated by God’s perfect love (Fyne Loue), a familiar image is introduced connecting Porete’s Continental, heretical text with the divine Showings of fourteenth-century English anchoress Julian of Norwich (1342-c.1416). The Noughted Soul accuses Reason: ‘Thou takest þe schelle or þe chaaf and leuest þe kernel or þe grayne’.\textsuperscript{37} This metaphor works on the understanding that the smallest, most powerful and valuable part (the grain of truth) is contained and enfolded within the larger, less important whole (the chaff), thus recalling Julian of Norwich’s vision of the ‘haselnott’.\textsuperscript{38} Underhill credits this

\textsuperscript{35} The notion of the Ground of the Soul as the intersection and interpenetration of the soul with the divine is a key feature of Meister Eckhart’s mysticism. See Eckhart’s Sermon 5b: ‘Here God’s ground is my ground, and my ground is God’s ground’ in Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense, trans. by Edmund College and Bernard McGinn (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 183.

\textsuperscript{36} Mysticism, p. 213.

\textsuperscript{37} Porete, Mirrour, 22, p. 265.

particular vision as being 'one of the best recorded instances of pure mystical vision'. The clarity and vivid imaginative force behind this vision of 'a little thing' in the palm of the speaker's hand is strongly illustrative of the Trinity, and also of that popular Hermetic analogy described earlier which posits the mystic as microcosm of the macrocosm of the universe. The hazelnut represents 'all that is made' by a 'God that is unmade', prompting Julian to embrace an 'unselfing' similar to Porete's, as 'no sowle is in reste till it is noughted of all thinges that is made'. It is within Julian's noughting process of perichoretic union that the mystic can 'fulle truly' see 'God in a poynte', and become the 'little [...] haselnott' enclosed within God's palm.

The tendency of the English mystics towards elaborate, imaginative and intellectual visions is particularly appealing for Underhill, as she also quotes extensively from two of Julian's male counterparts – that 'father of English mysticism', Richard Rolle (1290-1349) and Walter Hilton (c. 1340-45 - 1396). Rolle's reliance on music as a mode of interpreting and describing his visions is one which Underhill approves of herself, claiming that it is better suited to describing mystical experience than words and symbols which can potentially be misconstrued and misunderstood. She cites the example of a person hearing a piece of classical music for the first time. This person has no language with which 'to describe it objectively; but could only tell us how it made him feel'. Here Underhill captures the essence of Rolle's description of the soul's transition from a state of "burning

---

39 *Mysticism*, p. 133.
40 *Showings*, Revelation I, 5, p. 9.
41 *Showings*, Revelation I, 5, p. 9; 5, p. 10.
42 *Showings*, Revelation III, 11, p. 21; 11, p. 20; Revelation I, 5, p. 9.
43 *Mysticism*, p. 92.
44 *Mysticism*, p. 401.
love” to “songful love” – from Calor to Canor⁴⁵, as the presence of God is understood as heat, song and sweetness (Incendium Amoris, cap. xiv). Like the majority of thirteenth and fourteenth-century mystical writings, Rolle’s work was strongly influenced by the Canticles or the Song of Solomon. Underhill quotes an anonymous fifteenth century poem Quia amore langueo which translates as, ‘Because I am sick for love’.⁴⁶ Susanne Greer Fein has since published this short poem which she has titled, ‘In a Valley of This Restless Mind’ (1998). Fein notes that while the poem’s repeated refrain, ‘Quia amore langueo’ is clearly derived from Canticles 2.5 (Vulgate 2.8) – ‘Stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples: for I am sick of love’ – a contemporary gloss of the phrase exists in Richard Rolle’s Form of Living and is further elaborated in Ego dormio. Underhill’s interest in recovering certain mystical texts is thus shown to be vital for current and future medieval scholarship. Whereas Rolle’s symbolic use of music intrigued Underhill, Walter Hilton’s Scale of Perfection represented the theme of mystical pilgrimage which was crucial to her understanding of the Mystic Way. The soul begins its quest for God and throughout three stages of contemplation, endures the purgative and illuminative process until, ‘Love opens the “inner eye” of the soul’.⁴⁷ Hilton’s choice of symbolism for divine union as pilgrimage chimes with Underhill’s insistence on the practical nature of mysticism. Underhill’s quasi-ethnographic approach of classifying the mystics according to their different temperaments and uses of symbolism certainly has its uses. However, due to our lack of concrete knowledge regarding the exact production contexts of many of these mystical texts, it is difficult to claim with any certainty the exact author or holograph version of a text, never mind extrapolating definite characteristics of specific types or forms of mysticism.

⁴⁵ Mysticism, p. 92.
⁴⁶ Mysticism, p. 162.
If any mystical work justifies the view that all mystical texts should be judged on a case by case basis it is Catherine of Siena’s *Dialogue*. This text boasts the famous and complex Christ-the-bridge metaphor described by Underhill as an ‘exquisite allegory’. Catherine’s deft interlinking of images (discussed in Chapter Two) gives a somnambulant quality to the text as she remembers and connects her visions in her mind before dictating them to be written down. Despite the artistry involved in the composition and presentation of Catherine’s rich, allegorical text, Underhill observes that Catherinian mysticism also requires an ‘unselling’, a retreat inside that ‘cell of self-knowledge’ where selfhood is forgotten and the divine Other can be truly recognized. Underhill discusses the mystical topos of the *Ludus Amoris* (Game of Love) which refers to those oscillating periods along the Mystic Way when the mystic shifts between certainty and uncertainty of the presence of God. This *Ludus Amoris* corresponds with the first two stages of Underhill’s fivefold conception of the Mystic Way, and is particularly prevalent in ‘that inspired psychologist’ Catherine and her text, due to its length. The climax of this game of love occurs during Catherine’s 1368 alleged mystical espousal to Christ, but far from a fanciful flight of imagination to be believed or disbelieved at will, Underhill notes the likelihood that this mystical marriage is ‘borrowed intact from the legendary history of St Catherine of Alexandria’ whose legend Catherine would have been familiar with.

The inclination towards mimicry and imitation within these mystical texts perhaps seems to damage their credibility and contradict the visionary status they aspire to. However, their repetitive quality is the mark of an age-old tradition. It is

---

48 Mysticism, p. 103.
49 Mysticism, p. 241.
50 Mysticism, p. 274.
51 Mysticism, p. 349.
during moments like Julian’s vision of God ‘in a poynete’, Hilton’s description of the opening of an ‘inner eye’ and the vivid immediacy of Catherine’s highly visual Christ-the-bridge metaphor that those small but potentially authenticating marks of difference emerge, thereby demanding attention for a text which stands alone as an individual production while also belonging to a thematically driven mystical corpus. Underhill notes that ‘the very latest creation is generally a revival of forgotten fashions of the past’.

This statement holds as true of contemporary female writings as it does of their inspirational medieval counterparts, and Underhill’s role in bridging this gap is pivotal. Positioning Underhill in relation to the developing feminist undercurrents of the time creates an interesting and perhaps surprising picture of early twentieth-century female academia. Throughout her text Underhill consistently references Coventry Patmore (1823-1896) – author of the Victorian poem credited with creating a popularised antifeminist image of the feminine: The Angel in the House (1854).

Conversely, Underhill’s occult interests, membership of the mixed Order of the Golden Dawn and later appointment as the first female lecturer in Philosophy of Religion at Oxford (1921-1922) suggest a strong female presence in a male-dominated academic sphere. An essay on the topic of ‘The Ideals of the Ministry of Women’ (1999) encapsulates Underhill’s opposition to women priests and her almost beguine sentiments regarding the position of women in the Church. Opposed to titular recognition for women in the church, Underhill instead argues for a more pragmatic, ‘properly rooted and grounded in lives of real simplicity and self-abandonment’. Carol Poston has observed Underhill’s own ‘very active communal

---

52 *Mysticism*, p. 33.
life within the Anglican Church, which perhaps explains Underhill’s comment on such activity as ‘the sacred privilege of the lowest place’. However, this period marked the beginnings of feminism and so presentist bias might encourage certain expectations of Underhill’s views on the issue which are not met on analysis of her work. I would suggest that Underhill’s perennialist position and worldview overrides this particular aspect as her interests are not preoccupied with ideas of gender in the way that her contemporary, the medievalist and independent scholar Hope Emily Allen’s might have been. If Underhill wanted to make spirituality more ‘unofficial’ by opening up the spiritual lives of historical contemplatives to everyday devotees through scholarly channels, Allen wanted to escape the officialdom of the university institution altogether by embarking on the same project independently. Underhill believes that ‘though each wayfarer may choose different landmarks, it is clear from their comparison that the road is one.’ One particular protofeminist ‘wayfarer’ linking Underhill with her contemporary Allen is fourteenth-century mystic Margery Kempe.

**The Feminist Undertakings of Hope Emily Allen**

Of the three main strands of Allen’s research (the *Ancren Riwle*, Richard Rolle and Margery Kempe), *The Book of Margery Kempe* perhaps provides the best illustrative case study of the idiosyncratic research methods she has been both celebrated and criticized for over the years. In a little-known early essay entitled ‘Relics’ written around 1912 and printed for the first time in 1989 by John C. Hirsch,
Allen makes a revealing admission regarding her relationship with the past and present:

My inclination for "relics" is something inscrutable and inevitable in my composition, which forms a chain of connection with my most distant borderland of infancy [...] I seem to have always a craving to touch the great human mystery of Time, and a sensitiveness of emotion / when it strikes me by concrete example.58

This quasi-mystical statement is indicative of Allen’s entire textual approach, which values historical accuracy, personal histories and biographical detail overall. Without these facts (often impossible to attain as they are lost to us), Allen finds research to be incomplete. However, her time-consuming methods of comprehensive and rigorous codicological analysis did not always bear fruit, as will be discussed later. Nevertheless, this personal admission alludes to Allen’s own deeply nostalgic and passionate connections with and investments in the past. In many ways, and in a key motif for this thesis, this statement seems to represent a kind of inverted mysticism whereby the quest for knowledge of God is displaced by a quest to recover knowledge of the past. From this perspective an inverted mysticism becomes a model of Allen’s own historical and political interests. By means of the recovery of and identification with the absent medieval Other and mystical author, Allen manages to locate herself through the recovery of a historically distant Other. The strong identifications Allen makes with the anchoritic and hermit-like writers of the texts she studies perhaps explain her persistent need for accurate biographical detail, and painstaking research methodologies.

However, Allen’s penchant for understanding the life and history of an author before attending to the language, structure and form of their text broke with the established tradition of German philological practice in medieval studies,\(^\text{59}\) gaining her immediate opposition and in some cases, animosity from her colleagues. If any text illustrates this animosity and ill-feeling within academic circles, it is the *Book of Margery Kempe* (hereafter, BMK). The disagreeable and contentious working relationship between Allen and the eventual co-editor of the text Sanford Brown Meech has been well documented by John C. Hirsch.\(^\text{60}\) It was Allen’s discovery of this particular text which was to become the spur of her retreat from the public forum of academia and into her own private, anchoritic world of independent scholarship.

A relative of Underhill’s, Allen was incredibly grateful when Underhill recommended that she should be called to ‘the Victoria and Albert Museum at South Kensington to see the manuscript’,\(^\text{61}\) which she later identified as the BMK. Having made this discovery (albeit facilitated by Underhill), it would seem that Allen should have been the obvious first choice as editor of the Early English Text Society edition of the book published in 1940. However, an ambitious Sanford Meech managed to displace Allen and attain the editorial position for himself, thereby reducing Allen’s contributions to a short Prefatory Note and a comparatively small appendix (five pages compared with Meech’s twenty-four). Allen even explains in her Prefatory Note that the paltry textual notes which she has been permitted to contribute are in


\(^{61}\) *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. by Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen (Oxford: EEETS 212, 1940, Preface, p. 61.)
fact signed ‘- H.E.A.’ to differentiate between their very separate contributions. Indeed, despite her admirable display of professionalism throughout the writing of this Prefatory Note, the underlying tension between Allen and Meech (who, according to Marea Mitchell, Allen actually invited to work on the Margery Kempe manuscript\(^{63}\)) is at times palpable, and is witnessed by Allen’s following remark:

Where no explicit statement is made to that effect, neither of the editors of the volume (who have worked as independent collaborators) can be taken as necessarily agreeing with the conclusions of the other. Fortunately, we have come to virtual agreement as to the general chronology of the *Book*.\(^{64}\)

Another recurring feature of this Prefatory Note is Allen’s constant allusion to her plans for her unwritten ‘introduction’\(^{65}\) to her planned second volume on Margery Kempe, the *BMKII*. Unfortunately this work never came to fruition.

Carolyn Dinshaw has noted the problems Allen had in organizing her thoughts on *BMKII* and retaining the critical distance necessary in order to complete the work.

Dinshaw suggests that:

Allen’s experience of connectedness bred yet more and more connections, with perhaps less and less distance, so that finally the closed form of the professional, scholarly book was unable to accommodate them.\(^{66}\)

However, Allen’s plans for the book were clear, as she explains in her note that she will ‘trace consecutively [...] the remarkable contemporary feminist movement to which Margery seems to belong’.\(^{67}\)

\(^{62}\) For example, see *BMK*, p. 315 n. 126.


\(^{64}\) *BMK*, Prefatory Note, p. 62.

\(^{65}\) *BMK*, Prefatory Note, p. 59.


\(^{67}\) *BMK*, Prefatory Note, p. 59.
Having acknowledged Allen’s fascination with Margery Kempe it is useful to consider what might have attracted her to Margery’s idiosyncratic and somewhat melodramatic performative piety. Prior to her discovery of the BMK (often credited with being the first autobiography in English), Allen’s work had focused on texts such as The Ancrene Riwle68 (hereafter, AR) and the work of Richard Rolle. The strain of mysticism displayed in these works was one of serious and high contemplation of ‘pe hy lufe of criste’, 69 and disciplined self-enclosure based on strict ‘innore’ and ‘vttre’70 rules. In contradistinction, Margery appears to authorize herself as being in receipt of divine communication and draws her authority for doing so from God himself. She claims that God assured her: ‘Ther is no clerk in al this world that can, dowter, leryn the / bettyr than I can do, and yfy thy wilt be buxom to my wyl, I schal / be buxom to thy wil’.71 It would appear that this seemingly neat arrangement is self-serving and mutually beneficial as opposed to being based on the sort of binding, disciplined relationship of altruistic reciprocity observed earlier in other mystical texts, where a selfless love of God is a literal requirement.

Nevertheless, it is important not to be too dismissive of Margery’s particular strain of mysticism or ‘emotional and egotistic demonstrations’72 as Allen puts it, as some junctures in the text hint at a serious and more traditional relationship with the divine. For example, God tells her: ‘Therfor, dowtyr, thu hast gret caws to lovyn / me right wel, for I have bowt thi lofe ful der’.73 Instances such as this suggest that while Margery herself may well have consciously over-exaggerated elements of her

70 AR, 3, p. 4.
72 BMK, ed. by Sanford Meech and Hope Emily Allen, Prefatory Note, p. 55.
73 BMK, ed. by Barry Windeatt, 6409-6410, p. 345.
piety, it was still founded on a genuine belief in and fear of God. One option is to follow Allen’s lead in understanding Margery to be ‘a minor mystic’. The motivation behind Allen’s labelling here seems to be born of the fact that Margery’s text is easily read as a compelling and entertaining fiction which covers everything from her struggles to convince ‘hir husband to levyn chast’ while also being tempted to ‘ly be’ another man on the feast day of legendary virgin martyr St Margaret of Antioch, to her endless and overblown ‘greet sobbyngys and syhyngs’, and Christ’s informal promise to her in church: ‘within the twynkelyng of an eye, thou shalt hav the blysse of hevyn’. The tendency to dismiss Margery’s text as mere flamboyant performativity for its own sake is thus understandable. I would suggest it is also unwise, as although the BMK unquestionably fails to parallel the high learning and complexity of the great works of mystical contemplation, this does not discount it as a reputable source of an English devotee’s piety and beliefs at the time. Indeed, the BMK takes its influences by osmosis from precisely the modes of mystical knowing articulated in these great works. To make the distinction between minor and major mystics is thus a risky endeavour as mystical conversion is by definition sui generis – it is an idiosyncratic pursuit governed by a specific, internal logic suited to each mystic or devotee. The level of learning possessed by the devotee/mystic should not have a bearing on the legitimacy of the mystical relationship between the worldly and otherworldly, if such a mystical union is believed possible in the first place. Categories such as ‘minor’ and ‘major’ thus tell us more about our own desire to impose an elitist taxonomy as opposed to clarifying what it actually means to be a mystic or have mystical knowledge. This sort of ‘true’ mystical experience should surely transcend classification.

74 BMK, ed. by Meech and Allen, Prefatory Note, p. 61.
Allen observes an ‘English tradition of medieval piety’ running from the early thirteenth-century AR, through Rolle, Hilton and the Cloud-author, and believes Margery and her confessors were possibly unaware of her Continental counterparts with the exception of Bridget of Sweden (1303-1373). Despite Margery’s understandable admiration for the sainted Bridget, twelfth-century ascetic Marie d’Oignies (1177-1213), Richard Rolle (‘Richard Hampol, hermyte’) and Elizabeth of Hungary (1207-1231) are all mentioned in Chapter 62 of the BMK as being instrumental in convincing Margery’s detractor friar that ‘God yaf / hys grace to whom he wolde’. Whether this evidence merely supports Allen’s view of Margery as a mimic and ‘victim of suggestibility’, the performative nature of Margery’s text makes it peculiarly her own. As Allen observes: ‘Margery’s originality seems to me indisputable’. It was perhaps Margery’s ‘feminist’ enterprises in the text, as opposed to her ‘egotistical reminiscences’, which piqued Allen’s interest. Deanne Williams concurs: ‘by identifying The Book of Margery Kempe, Hope Emily Allen produced not only a text, but also a model for locating the self in the object of study’. Certainly Allen’s investments in the past and particularly the mystics she studies, signal the strong identifications she makes with them in her recovery of their texts and traditions. Educated at Bryn Mawr under what Williams terms the ‘muscular feminism’ of Carey Thomas (1857-1935), Allen’s passion for feminism was nurtured and encouraged. Instances such as Margery’s appearance before the ‘clerkys’ at York and her subsequent vociferous outbursts emphasize her status as a

76 BMK, ed. by Meech and Allen, Prefatory Note, p. 58.
77 BMK, ed. by Windeatt, 5151-5152, p. 294.
78 BMK, ed. by Meech and Allen, Prefatory Note, p. 65.
79 BMK, Prefatory Note, p. 57.
80 Ibid.
82 Williams, p. 139.
83 BMK, ed. by Windeatt, 4079, p. 247.
strong if marginalized woman, subverting traditional power roles in a potentially
dangerous situation. Margery effortlessly quashes the remarks of her detractors,
shaming those who call her ‘Loller’ and ‘heretyke’.84 She then appears before the
Archbishop of York dressed in white, and answers him back rebuking him for being
‘a wikkyd / man’, 85 thus cleverly levelling the accusations made against her back at
her accuser. Margery’s empowered presence in the text coupled with her ‘unabashed
sexuality and unembarrassed emotion’86 made her an attractive project for Allen
who aptly notes that ‘even where most imitative, Margery Kempe of Lynn was
evidently to some degree a precursor’.87

Hirsch has observed that:

Hope’s own feminism was exemplary rather than confrontational in practice,
but it was profoundly concerned to identify and defend those values, attitudes
and assumptions that medieval women had made their own.88

In a later article he discusses Allen’s belief in the connection between the BMK and
the AR:

The connection [...] is not immediately apparent, but as an examination of the
manuscripts Allen left at the time of her death makes clear, she had come to
believe that the Ancren Riwle stood at the head of a native English devotional
tradition, one which emphasized silence and moderation, but which did a
good deal to protect women’s interests and to give them a degree of
autonomy, physical as well as spiritual.89

---
84 BMK, 4116, p. 248.
85 BMK, 4174-4175, p. 250.
86 Williams, p. 137.
87 BMK, ed. by Meech and Allen, Prefatory Note, p. 68, my emphasis.
89 Hirsch, ‘Hope Emily Allen and the Limitations of Academic Discourse’, Mystics Quarterly 18.3
(September, 1992), p. 95.
Allen’s sympathy for the marginalized in society is a defining feature of her work and so it is unsurprising that she always strove to recover those historical figures she saw as isolated. Despite Margery’s strongly feminized presence in her text, the fact that her experiences are ventriloquized by two different male scribes creates a degree of uncertainty as to how many of her ‘egotistical reminiscences’ were in fact reminiscences of actual events, as opposed to the creations of her imaginative male scribes. For this reason, Allen may have counted Margery’s text among those ‘relics’ which stirred her ‘antiquarian impulse’, and with which she felt such a strong bond with since childhood. Indeed, the swell of emotion she speaks of ‘at the sight of any material thing with which [she] could connect a long past’, seems reminiscent of Margery’s own frequent and emotional, tear-filled responses. It is this deeply personal connection of identification with the subjects of her study which caused Allen to receive the criticisms of her younger male colleagues so badly. The increasing popularity of English as a professional discipline within the American Academy in the early twentieth century led to independent scholars such as Allen and her small female coterie being somewhat disadvantaged.

That said, Allen’s work on both the Ancreone Ritwe and the canon of Richard Rolle brought her much praise and professional standing. However, these two main focal points of Allen’s scholarship became easy targets for her younger, university-affiliated colleagues. A particularly scathing critique of Allen’s landmark work, Writings Ascribed to Richard Rolle, Hermit of Hampole, and Materials for his Biography (1927, hereafter, Writings), came in 1937 from E.F.J. Arnould. Arnould later produced his own edition of Rolle’s Latin Melos Amoris (1957), but not before attacking Allen’s overall findings and approach to Rolle from a perspective that

90 BMK, ed. by Meech and Allen, Prefatory Note, p. 57.
91 Allen in Hirsch, 1989, p. 54; p. 55.
92 Allen in Hirsch, p. 54.
Hirsch describes as being completely ignorant of ‘the historical moment in which she
– and he! – wrote’. Arnould’s initial grievance appears to be with Allen’s
determined efforts to identify persons alluded to in Rolle’s text but not named via the
use of contemporary legal documents such as The Patent Rolls. This sort of
time-consuming ‘detective work’ is the hallmark of Allen’s research and what Carolyn
Dinshaw has characterized as ‘Allen’s historicizing work on Margery Kempe’. As
conjecture and speculation are an innate part of the process of analyzing historical
texts, Allen should not be too heavily criticized for tending towards a hermeneutic
pitfall which is unavoidably built into her object of study.

Two years later, Arnould highlighted ‘another slip Hope Allen had made in a
text better known as Handlyng Synne. Arnould proceeded that same year to attack
assumptions made by Allen (and others) that a reference in a French manuscript
applied to Rolle when in fact it did not exist. Superficially, Arnould’s criticisms
could be said to be valid in that some (comparatively small) aspects of Allen’s
research could potentially perpetuate false information which would be damaging to
the development of Rolle scholarship. However, I would concur with Hirsch that
Arnould’s criticisms were more likely to be the result of a self-serving personal
vendetta after being refused Allen’s help with his own 1957 edition of Rolle’s Melos
Amoris. Arnould privileges Carl Horstmann’s 1895 and 1896 editions of Rolle over
Allen’s significant contributions, and complains that she endorses ‘Horstmann’s
conjectures too readily’; while at the same time failing to share his admiration and
respect for Rolle as writer and mystic. A particular target for Arnould was the

---

93 Hirsch, ‘Hope Emily Allen, the Second Volume of the Book of Margery Kempe, and an Adversary,
96 Hirsch, p. 15.
section of *Writings* which Allen seemed most invested in - Rolle’s life and materials for his biography. Certainly, this section does contain a large amount of conjecture on Allen’s part. However, at no point is it ever disguised or portrayed as anything but speculation. Allen’s enthusiasm for recovering unnamed historical figures when she encounters them in manuscripts or legal documents is a result of personal preferences, and does not render her approach invalid or affect the respectable status of ‘her work, extraordinary and esteemed in its day’. Hirsch’s succinct description of Arnould’s motivations for what Allen considered a personal attack seems to capture the marginalizing disadvantages of independent scholarship:

Throughout, Arnould loses no opportunity to suggest that Hope Allen is amateurish and slapdash [...] Behind its mask of objective scholarship, his attack upon Hope Allen, by then 74 years old and in failing health, is unpleasantly *ad hominem*, and seems the product of a peculiarly scholarly kind of odium.

Despite the damage done to Allen’s confidence during this particular intellectual quarrel, it should also be noted that not all criticisms were poorly received. For example a much earlier and more constructive criticism came in 1928 from J.R.R. Tolkien. Williams has observed that Tolkien ‘rejected [Allen’s] conclusions about the date of the *Ancren Rivle*’ and found her overall approach to the text and suggested reception context to be ‘too sentimental’ – an accusation often levelled at female scholars, as evidenced by David Aers’s attack on Caroline Walker Bynum’s ‘“empowerment” thesis’ discussed in Chapter 1. After initially

---

97 For example, *Writings*, pp. 490-500. Allen presents her musings on Rolle’s ‘possible sojourn in the Sorbonne’ which at 10 pages long are insightful if lengthy in their treatment of a question unlikely ever to be resolved.
98 Hirsch, p. 16.
99 Ibid.
100 Williams, p. 145. See ‘The Origin of the *Ancren Rivle*’, *PMLA*, 33.3 (1918), pp. 477-478 for Allen’s speculative date of approximately 1140.
101 Williams, p. 145.
being disheartened by Tolkien’s thoughts, Allen regained composure on receiving a letter explaining that the criticism was not intended as a personal attack. In her 1918 paper on the \(AR\), Allen presents her findings as ‘a preliminary statement of a new conjecture as to the origin of the *Ancren Riwle*’\(^{102}\) which aims to identify the text with three noble young women of Kilburn Priory named Emma, Christina and Gunhilda. In 1935, Allen rewrote her thoughts correcting her misunderstanding of the word ‘puellae’, and postulating that the women the \(AR\) was written for were in fact not young maidens, but were ‘a trio of Westminster associates’ who Allen refers to as the ‘three daughters of Deorman’\(^{103}\). If Allen’s hypothesis is correct then the point of origin of the \(AR\) would be disproved as being Kilburn Priory due to the ‘extraordinary court connections’\(^{104}\) she claims to have found during her research.

Allen’s capacity and preference for this sort of biographical research is thus a recurring theme. On the topic of Allen’s inability to tolerate the criticism of her younger male colleagues, Williams has argued for a consideration of Allen’s personal ‘investments in masculinity’\(^{105}\). Using Allen’s short fiction from the 1920s as evidence she argues that ‘Allen was writing short stories that adopt the perspective of a male protagonist’ while ‘[...] women function as potentially tragic objects to be admired or, more frequently, pitied’\(^{106}\).

I would suggest that Allen’s portrayal of male and female roles within her short fiction might be better understood if not taken quite so literally. It is unlikely that a woman as well-read in the often gender-fluid works of medieval mysticism as Allen was would be unaware of the effects of gender characterization within a fictional narrative. Perhaps the patent dismay exhibited by Allen on receipt of

---

\(^{102}\) *The Origin of the Ancren Riwle*, p. 474.
\(^{104}\) Allen, p. 902.
\(^{105}\) Williams, p. 146.
\(^{106}\) Ibid.
criticism is aligned more with the fact that she identifies with the subject of her study so strongly that she neglects to maintain a critical distance, as opposed to the idea that she feels discriminated against purely on the basis of being a female scholar. Furthermore, if she is indeed intentionally critical of her male protagonists it would seem that she is critical of their inability to ‘feel’; to feel compassion for their female relatives, and to feel appreciation for the importance and centrality of the past. For Allen, this is very much a female domain. For example, in 1923 Allen published two short stories: ‘A Glut of Fruit’ and ‘Ancient Grief’. Both tell the story of American male protagonists who return to or visit England in order to learn about their family history, often discovering more than they bargained for. These male characters are portrayed as outsiders, ‘solitary stranger[s]’\textsuperscript{107} who lack even ‘a bit of sentiment’\textsuperscript{108} or regard for the past. ‘A Glut of Fruit’ sees Allen gender an interest in the past through the characterization of her male protagonist, James Turner. James is said to become restless due to ‘the stirring of memory’,\textsuperscript{109} and is confused by his wife and daughter’s fascination with what he considers ‘an unnatural turning to the past [...]’\textsuperscript{110}. Sentimental reflection and nostalgic retreats to the past are thus a peculiarly female pastime and form of regression for James. Allen opens with an image of fertile abundance, describing the fruit-bearing hedgerows in James’s hometown ‘near the East Anglian coast’\textsuperscript{111}. The image acts simultaneously as a metaphor for the past. The image is picked up again when, on passing through the fruit-laden hedge which surrounds James’s old home, he has a moment of childhood nostalgia before returning to being ‘satisfied with the moment – which [the narrator tells us.] was his

\textsuperscript{109} ‘A Glut of Fruit’, p. 344.
\textsuperscript{110} ‘A Glut of Fruit’, p. 343.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
natural condition’. Allen’s carefully considered, gendered characterization thus seems significantly more complex than Williams’s interpretation allows. Rather than attempting to ‘adopt the perspective of a male protagonist’113 in an attempt at somehow levelling the gender playing field, as Williams implies, Allen instead uses the fictional mode to significantly criticize what she portrays as a masculine inability to identify with and appreciate the past.

All of Allen’s learned knowledge of English and Continental mystical texts considered, it was her landmark study of Rolle in Writings which illustrated her innate need for self-justification through the recuperation of historically distant others. While a large amount of conjecture dominates her discussion throughout the study, Allen’s attention to detail and thorough, methodical approach results in a work which easily meets its author’s intended purpose: ‘To collect the materials for an understanding of Rolle’s place in literary and religious history’114 and to determine his canon. For Allen, Rolle’s writings and life were inextricably linked and should be studied as such. The biographical bent of her approach is what led numerous male colleagues to castigate her work as flawed and overly-sentimental, and certainly she devotes a large amount of time and attention to probing and discussing biographical details that are impossible to prove – for example, she labours over Dom Noetinger’s suggestion that Rolle ‘lived in the Sorbonne in 1326 and […] for some time at least, in the period 1315-20’, before concluding that ‘Rolle led a wanderer’s life always’ and was ‘one of those who fell by the wayside’ at the Sorbonne and failed to gain his doctorate.115 Other areas of biographical interest to Allen were tracing and identifying Rolle’s possible patrons, understanding Rolle’s

---

112 'A Glut of Fruit, p. 344.
113 Williams, p. 146.
115 Writings, p. 493; p. 497; p. 498.
alleged removal and relocation to a new cell and tracing his overall movements as a means of dating his texts. This method necessitates lengthy discussions and cross-referencing of texts, legal documents and records, often to no significant avail.

However, leaving this aspect of Allen’s research aside, texts such as the Office, The Fire of Love (Incendium Amoris) and also her discussion of Rolle’s disciple and Cistercian nun Margaret Kirkeby provide an insight into Allen’s attraction to the project of recovering his particular strain of mysticism. According to Allen: ‘Rolle, offered the lover as the ideal religious type, [and] added to religion a pattern rich in the glamour of the most highly civilized traditions of secular medieval life’. Chapters 14 and 15 of The Fire of Love (written for Margaret Kirkeby) detail Rolle’s description of the triple ecstasy which characterizes his particular mysticism. The divine love of God is experienced as heat, song and sweetness which are said to be ‘tokyns of lufe moiste parfyte’. After the ‘unselfing’ entailed by ‘the flight to the alone’ of solitude and enclosure, it is said that ‘Lufe forsoth in hart dwellis of pe solitary, if he / of vayn lordschip no-binge seeke’. The burning love of the unitive way is described as a ‘heet vnmade’ which is accompanied by the ‘song of pe lemman’ or sweetheart. The homely elements of Rolle’s mysticism thus come to the fore in moments like this, and seem to chime with the writings of the female mystics. His mysticism was practical in that the devotee should live a life which was a concentration of the affections that made possible ‘the wonderful joy of God’s love’, while the fact that it ‘depended upon the personal and emotional

---

116 Writings, pp. 444-466; p. 463; pp. 474-476.
119 The Fire of Love, Book I, 22-23, p. 32.
120 The Fire of Love, Book I, 9, p. 34; 7, p. 34.
121 Writings, p. 6.
element in his religion” would certainly have appealed to Allen. Also, his involvement with female spirituality documented by the texts he wrote for women like Margaret Kirkeby would likely have intrigued Allen. However, despite Rolle’s kindly spiritual assistance towards Margaret Kirkeby, Rosamund Allen has remarked that Rolle’s *Judica Me Deus* (probably written some time in the early 1300s) represents ‘some of the most critical comments on the female sex to have come out of the notoriously antifeminist Middle Ages’.  

If we accept Allen’s dating for the composition of this text, Rolle would have written it ‘in about the twenty-first year of his life’, and thus, before the *Form of Living* (written for Margaret when she became a recluse 1348-1349), and the *English Psalter* (written about ten years prior to Rolle’s death according to Allen). Both of these works were written explicitly for the guidance of female nuns and are encouraging and understanding in tone, implying that perhaps the antifeminist attitudes of the *Judica* lessened as he matured.

Despite the complex process of appending composition dates to Rolle’s large corpus, it is obvious from Allen’s text that she views the Office as a vital template of Rolle’s life. Allen takes it as her entry point into acquiring the sorts of historical and biographical details required in order to locate and identify the unnamed persons so often alluded to in his writings, and so it features heavily in her concluding chapter on Rolle’s biography. According to Allen, the Office was intended for the secular clergy and ‘was prepared at a time when [Rolle’s] canonization was hoped for’. Likely to have been composed by Rolle’s followers, the text includes several miracles which perpetuated his extremely popular Cult of the Holy Name up until the Reformation. Allen uses these miracles to suggest a date of composition for the text.

122 *Writings*, p. 5.
124 *Writings*, p. 494.
125 *Writings*, p. 51.
of ‘a short time’\textsuperscript{126} after 1383, some thirty-four years after Rolle’s death. The notion that Rolle’s friends and supporters outlived him makes possible a scenario in which Margaret Kirkeby may in fact have contributed to the Office herself in some capacity, as one of the closing miracles involves her healing by Rolle.\textsuperscript{127} Allen notes that this particular section ‘shows signs of disarrangement both in its position and its length’\textsuperscript{128} (\textit{Writings} 55) suggesting that as Rolle’s cult flourished, new miracles could have been added to the text in order to speed canonization.

While the Office is divided into nine lessons, Allen observes that it is possible that it ‘was originally written in twelve lessons (hence for monastic use, as at Hampole)’. The first six lessons cover all of the main events typically associated with Rolle’s early conversion to the mystical life – his education at Oxford University, his decision at nineteen to leave home and become a hermit ‘lest he should be taken in the snares of sin’;\textsuperscript{129} his donning of the hermit’s garb in front of his sister, and his introduction as a practicing hermit to his first patron, esquire and keeper of Pickering forest, John de Dalton. Allen extrapolates from this data all sorts of detail for exploration in her concluding chapter, scouring legal records for the name ‘Richard Rolle’ and researching Dalton’s significant involvement in the 1322 rebellion against King Edward II. However, the last three lessons of the Office concern Rolle’s relationship with Margaret Kirkeby, and these allow us an insight into Allen’s theories on their friendship. Interestingly certain manuscripts omit the healing scene between Rolle and Kirkeby from the narrative. Allen suggests that this

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{127} Elizabeth Freeman points out in her 2012 article ‘The Priory of Hampole and its Literary Culture’ that the Hampole community of nuns was very much ‘involved in the world of books’(p. 25). Thus, it is necessary to bear in mind their possible and indeed, likely roles in the facilitation of literary compositions and also annotation.
\textsuperscript{128} \textit{Writings}, p. 55.
\textsuperscript{129} \textit{Writings}, p. 56.
might have been an effort to suppress the ‘evil thinking’\textsuperscript{130} sure to arise in some quarters on reading of a hermit’s close and tactile relationship with his disciple – as Jennifer Brown’s interpretation of a possible sexual relationship between Jacques and Marie illustrated in Chapter 2, these sorts of speculations often accompany the devotee/confessor relationship. For example, during a seizure Margaret is said to have rested against Rolle before falling asleep and then suddenly awaking into loud prayer accompanied by him. Whereas Allen is often accused of having an overly-sentimental approach to her research it would seem that in this instance she certainly does not. Allen notes that ‘some of the facts are being stretched a little’\textsuperscript{131} in the Office regarding Margaret’s return to Hampole after her second seizure and Rolle’s death in 1349. According to Allen,

[...] Margaret did not become a recluse til December 1348, and the Holy Thursday in which her thirteen days’ seizure began must have been April 9, 1349, less than half a year before Rolle’s death.\textsuperscript{132}

This sort of analytical approach privileges the attainment of concrete historical details and so rather than romanticizing the text as Arnould might accuse Allen, she instead proves herself capable of reasonable, critical analysis.

In conclusion, Allen’s predilection for a ‘bottom up’ as opposed to ‘top down’ reading of history led her to seek out texts and authors with which she could identify, and which in turn validated her own life choices. As Williams neatly puts it:

Allen sought medieval counterparts to herself, charting a historical genealogy for the alternative, independent lifestyle she had chosen: one that eschewed marriage and childbirth, and favoured, instead, intimate female friendships

\textsuperscript{130} \textit{Writings}, p. 53.
\textsuperscript{131} \textit{Writings}, p. 61.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid.
that were devoted to the shared pursuit of some form of higher calling or profession.\textsuperscript{133}

As I argued earlier, Allen’s attraction to the mysticism of the \textit{AR}, Rolle and Margery Kempe is perhaps best understood as a metaphor for her own historical and political interests. Mapped onto the mysticism of the writers she studies, Allen’s fascination and identification with the past absent and historical Other can be understood as a kind of inverted or backwards mysticism which aims to recuperate an unknowable and thus transcendent past.

Both Evelyn Underhill and Hope Emily Allen have been shown to participate in the recuperation of the female mystical tradition for their own personal ends. Mystical discourses of ‘self-noughting’, ‘unsayability’ and ‘unknowability’ have prompted them in the recovery of a medieval female voice and subjectivity, which has proven a vital contribution to the history of women’s writing. Whether mysticism is viewed as a practical way of life and form of science (Underhill), or as a means of affording new opportunities to the marginalized in society (Allen), its enduring relevance to female authorship witnesses its central importance as a means of exploring female interiorities from the medieval to the modern. The mediation and communication of these female interiorities in the early twentieth-century can now be fruitfully analysed in the following chapter.

\textsuperscript{133} Williams, 2004, p. 140.
Chapter 4
‘An eyewitness account.’
Male Mediation of the Female Mystical Voice: Adrienne von Speyr
and Hans Urs von Balthasar

Many of the *vitae* written during the twelfth and thirteenth-century flourishing of female spirituality would lay claim to the above rhetoric of first-person witness. The claim of being ‘an eyewitness account’ is taken from the opening line of twentieth-century systematic Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar’s (1905-1988) Foreword to his 1968 text on the life of Swiss mystic and Roman Catholic convert Adrienne von Speyr (1902-1967). The title of the work, *First Glance at Adrienne von Speyr*,1 similarly undergirds his powerful opening line - ‘This book is an eyewitness account.’2 - which acts as a ringing endorsement for all that is to follow, no matter how unlikely or otherworldly the mystical or visionary experiences claimed seem to be. The very first page contains the remnants of a long-established medieval tradition whereby the relationship between female devotee and penitent, and male amanuensis and confessor, is a locus of power, authority and protection for male and female alike. Janette Dillon has summarized the relation as follows: ‘the alliance of female visionary and male confessor was more resistant to scepticism than either could have been in isolation’.3 These relationships were mutually beneficial and rooted in a symbiotic interdependence. As witnessed in Chapter 2, the ‘alliance’ between male confessor/amanuensis and female mystic/devotee was very much borne of necessity in the medieval period for myriad reasons, but at the most

---


2 *First Glance*, p. 12.

fundamental level, this relationship facilitated the recording of the female (mystical) voice. Not only is the female devotee’s mystical or visionary experience necessarily filtered through the hand of the male confessor/amanuensis, but also the experiences recorded are likely to be largely preoccupied with fictionalizing and myth-making.

Matthew Lewis Sutton has recently commented on the relationship between von Balthasar and von Speyr as ‘inextricably interwoven’ and thus ‘difficult’ to understand. Indeed, his observation that ‘[…] he and she have different roles that are not only complementary but also inherently directed toward each other’ neatly summarizes my comparison between their relationship and that of the traditional medieval devotee/mystic and confessor/amanuensis. Perhaps it is unsurprising yet slightly troubling that this ‘alliance’ should recur in the twentieth century in order for the visionary experiences of a learned female doctor to be recorded. In this scenario, the female mystic is fully equipped to write her own text, yet still we witness a return to that traditional medieval relationship of textual production. By juxtaposing Balthasar’s writings on Speyr with Jacques de Vitry’s archetypal life of Marie d’Oignies, this chapter works to suggest possible reasons for this return to past tradition, and attempts to understand Balthasar’s writings as a sort of ‘quasi-hagiography’. The ways in which male mediation of the female mystical voice is achieved and the impacts of this for the receiving culture of modern scholarship and feminist historiography will then be considered in the remainder of the thesis.

---

2 Sutton, p. 55.
Marie d'Oignies: ‘Crystes mayden’ – An Analogue

The well-known Christian motif of the ‘handmaid of the Lord’ (Luke 1:38) from the canonical gospel prophecy of the birth of Christ has a long tradition, and both Speyr and Marie are aligned with this role in their respective texts. As the Lord’s handmaidens, female religious were imitating the blessed attributes of Christ’s mother, occupying a sacred space through their pious, homely and maternal attributes. Certainly Jacques de Vitry was keen to ensure that his readers made the connection between the Virgin Mary, mother of Christ and his own chaste Marie, ‘the pitevous mayden of Criste’ and ‘modir / of the brether of Oegines’. As noted in Chapter 2, Jacques persistently writes himself into the narrative, inserting himself, as Jennifer Brown notes, ‘both overtly and surreptitiously into nearly every aspect of Marie’s life’. His omnipresence throughout the text reflects a combination of his concern to authorize and sanction Marie with his desire to further his own episcopal ambitions at Rome. The relationship between female devotee and male confessor is crucial throughout the period, as male confessors not only wrote and recorded the often dangerous visionary experiences claimed by these female devotees, but also vouched for the sanctity and validity of these visions using their knowledge of the method known as discretio spirituum defined by. Although written in Latin around 1213, Jacques’s vita appears in translation in the Middle English Douce 114 which Brown dates as fifteenth-century. While certain elements of Jacques’s text seem to prefigure the tenets of discretio spirituum later articulated in the fourteenth century,
it is likely that the fifteenth-century Middle English translator and compiler of Jacques’s *vita* enhanced these elements in accordance with the doctrine.

Before attending to the impact of *discretio spirituum* on female spirituality it is useful to recall that this flourishing of female piety occurred at a point in Church history when the prohibitions of Lateran IV (1215) were in motion, with minimum requirements for mandatory confession in place. As Mary Flowers Braswell notes:

> It was not until the early thirteenth century that confession was made mandatory and the confessional process [...] could come into being. The twenty-first canon of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, known as the *Omnis utriusque sexus* decree, required all the faithful to confess their sins to their own parish priest at least once a year at Easter time. Up to this point, penance had been voluntary, and neither the specific act of confession nor the presence of the priest was necessary for forgiveness of sins.\(^\text{10}\)

In the centuries prior to Lateran IV, a person was permitted ‘only one formal repentance for sins during his lifetime’,\(^\text{11}\) with the result that any further sins would result in perpetual damnation. Up until Lateran IV, such philosophies of penance were voluntary, and so it is unlikely that they were respected despite the sinister connotations of condemnation they seemed to carry. Not only were lay folk expected to aspire to a new level of piety with Lateran IV but also, the clergy (charged with the care of souls and with being pro-active in disseminating Church teaching in the vernacular), must ensure that their parishioners were in compliance with the new regulations. However, Braswell observes that when Pope Innocent III (papacy: 1198-1216) made annual confession to a priest mandatory, ‘neither clergy nor laity were prepared to meet the new responsibilities suddenly thrust upon

---


\(^{11}\) Ibid.
them. However, the existence of this legislation did not guarantee compliance. Instead, it is more likely that the threat of being labelled 'heretic' in a dangerous thirteenth-century climate of inquisition spurred a certain percentage of the laity to take advantage of the sermons, confessional manuals and devotional materials available to them in order to sufficiently adhere to the new spiritual programme outlined by the Church, and meet the minimum requirements for salvation. The relationship between male priestly confessor and female penitent and devotee thus played a vital role in such an atmosphere of Church reform, distrust and suspicion. Many female devotees came to view confession as a necessary daily penance arousing further suspicion from male detractors. For example, women now sainted and considered orthodox such as Saint Bridget of Sweden insisted on multiple confessions despite proscribing less confession in their Rule. The expiatory qualities of confession perhaps functioned as validation and reassurance for these women given their choice to lead a semi-religious life in the face of patriarchal distrust and persecution. However, these multiple confessions did arouse significant suspicion - Margery Kempe’s multiple daily confessions are an example here: ‘Sche was schrevyn sumtyme twyes or / thryes on the day’. In order to resolve this matter and develop a method of regulating ‘true’ from ‘false’ claims to spiritual authority, the method of discretio spirituum was employed.

The discourse of discretio spirituum originates in Alfonso Jaén’s Epistola solitarii ad reges (1375 or 1376), which was written in defence of Saint Bridget of Sweden (1303-1373) and her fourteenth-century revelations. Jaén outlined seven main attributes characterizing a true visionary:

---

12 Ibid.
14 BMK, ed. by Windeatt, 368, p. 63.
1. The visionary must live a virtuous life under the guidance of a spiritual director.

2. After a vision, the soul should feel inflamed by God’s love and its faith and obedience to Holy Mother Church should increase.

3. The visionary should feel a deep and inward knowledge of the truth of revelation.

4. Revelations are always and only of true things and they must correspond with Scripture.

5. A true vision is known by the fruit it bears.

6. True visionaries will have the day and hour of their death revealed to them.

7. Posthumous miracles will establish the status of the visionary beyond dispute.\(^{15}\)

While some of Jaén’s points are open to interpretation (for example, point 5 is particularly abstract), they formed the basis of popular knowledge of \textit{discretio spirituum} at the time and were derived from sources of authority on the topic such as Cassian, Augustine, Jerome and Hugh of St Victor to name a few. Jean Gerson (1363-1429) was to develop the discourse further by building on Jaén’s work when he wrote a series of treatises in the early fifteenth century in response to Bridget of Sweden’s claims to visionary status and canonization. As Dyan Elliott notes, these treatises were to be used as evidence against Bridget’s claims ‘before the fathers of the Council of Constance in 1415’.\(^{16}\) Strongly distrustful of both male and female claims to visionary experience, Gerson’s writings responded to Scriptural prohibitions against false visions (for example, II Corinthians 11: 13-14: ‘For Satan

\(^{15}\) These seven points paraphrase Voaden’s description (Voaden, 1999, pp. 49-50). She notes that Alfonso’s seven points summarize his review of his sources on \textit{discretio spirituum}.

himself transforms himself in an angel of light’). Hilda Graef observes that ‘against the false mystics Gerson insists that, however close the union, God and man always retain their identities, man is not as it were swallowed up in God’. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Gerson also wrote in support of two different female mystics/visionaries: Ermine of Reims (d.1396) and Joan of Arc (c. 1412-1431). Robert Lerner notes ‘Gerson’s concern was with the speculative errors ascribed to the beghards who led devout female beguines astray, ‘by simulating devotion and thus making them the playthings of their passions’ Gerson’s opposition was thus borne of a desire to protect the charm of discretio spirituum as opposed to simply discrediting all female claims to visionary experience automatically. As Elliott suggests, and in a point with which Caroline Walker Bynum concurs, it is too ‘simplistic’ to reduce male opposition to female visionary claims to simple misogyny, and to speak of ‘the medieval attitude toward women’. The matter is much more complex than this and requires assessment on a case by case basis with attention turned ‘back toward questions about men as well as women’ and toward the internal gender politics of male/female relationships such as those of confessor and penitent devotee.

Nevertheless, Gerson’s early treatises undoubtedly evidence an opposition to female claims to prophecy. In the wake of a burgeoning affective piety amongst the laity in the late twelfth-thirteenth-century Franciscan and Dominican mode, it became difficult to define what constituted orthodox and heretical forms of religious living. Barbara Newman contextualizes the period as follows:

---

19 Elliott, p. 31.
21 Ibid.
Beginning around 1200, the elevation of the consecrated host at Mass, amplified by later customs such as its display in monstrances and Corpus Christi processions, led to an emphasis on “seeing God” instead of receiving Communion as the culmination of the layperson’s religious experience.\(^{22}\)

This sort of visionary experience is precisely the kind which so perturbed Gerson. If anyone could ‘see God’ then what of the traditional Church hierarchy of apostolic succession which structured and delimited lay religion? According to this model, learned theologians and Schoolmen were displaced by lay religious. As Newman observes, ‘the line between “visualization” and “vision” is a fine one’,\(^{23}\) and I would suggest it was Gerson’s aim to probe this further. In his 1401 treatise *On Distinguishing True from False Revelations*,\(^{24}\) Gerson makes a distinction between the simple, unlettered laity, illiterate in Latin, and the ‘men dedicated to the religious life and to contemplation’.\(^{25}\) His aim is to expose the acts of ‘diabolical trickery’\(^{26}\) perpetrated by evil spirits. In formulating his argument Gerson provides examples of two separate female false claimants to the gift of *discretio spirituum*. One of these women is most likely a beguine and is described as ‘a married woman with children’\(^{27}\) from Arras in France who lived the unenclosed life of an ascetic, indulging in the practice of inedia, without affiliation to any order and without a confessor.

As Elliott points out, Gerson ‘associates women with a dangerous immoderacy in asceticism’.\(^{28}\) Their particular form of imitating Christ is sinister and

---


\(^{23}\) Newman, p. 16.


\(^{25}\) *On Distinguishing*, p. 334.

\(^{26}\) Ibid.

\(^{27}\) *On Distinguishing*, p. 343.

\(^{28}\) Elliott, 2002, p. 28.
threatening to male control, as they identify bodily as well as spiritually with Christ as human. A second woman described as having 'erred' because of her 'intellectual pride, combined with passionate love' is identified as Marie of Valenciennes. Both Robert Lerner and Dyan Elliott have followed Romana Guarnieri in identifying this woman as Marguerite Porete. Gerson's complaint about this woman's 'excessive love [...] disguised as devotion' and her interpretation of Augustine's famous maxim are used as proof. Overall church reformers like Gerson did not necessarily wish to refute the possibility of divine revelations per se, as prophecy is a cornerstone of Christianity. Instead, the aim was to control who could have doctrinally sound access to divine revelations with a view to creating a spiritual elite which was virtuous and learned enough to be in receipt of 'this gift of counsel'. This atmosphere of Church reform, male scepticism towards female visionaries seems and general debates about the doctrine of discretio spirituum seem to have been pre-empted by Jacques de Vitry's vita. His elaborate rhetorical style and emphasis on the thaumaturgical aspects of Marie's life thus conform not only to the generic conventions of hagiography, but also to the political limitations enacted upon female religious of the time.

Jacques's construction of Marie - 'Crystes mayden' - as earthly counterpart to the Virgin Mary was to be carefully exercised if it was to aid her canonization. Elliott notes 'the kind of meritorious tenderness of conscience that had come to be

22 On Distinguishing, p. 356.
24 On Distinguishing, p. 345.
25 VMO, I, 111, p. 91.
closely associated with medieval holy women since Jacques's vita was written. In many ways, it provided a standard template and was the first female biography of its kind, eventually becoming a paradigmatic vita. Brown notes the immense popularity of Marie's vita at the time, with the text appearing 'in several collections of saints' lives'. Having explored Jacques de Vitry's VMO in Chapter 2, it is sufficient at this point to select a sample of moments from the text. These will illustrate the complexity of the confessor/devotee relationship argued for in the initial section of this case study, and highlight how the text functions as a hagiography. Written around 1213 and not long after Marie's death, it seems that Jacques 'encourages the establishment of a cult of Marie d'Oignies among the people and beguines of Liège, presenting a text that will contribute to her canonization'. The immediacy with which the vita was written is the result of an attempt to avoid opposition or suspicion of this particular holy woman. Janette Dillon argues that 'it was in the interests of both holy women and the church to establish the orthodoxy of women who claimed special grace'. This certainly also applies to male confessors such as Jacques, whose rhetorical efforts were informed by an impressive knowledge of that discourse which both restricted and empowered female religious in the period: discretio spirituum. For example, Marie's vita illustrates how she meets many of the popular criteria for a true visionary later outlined in Alfonso Jaén's seven points.

Jacques skillfully emphasizes Marie's holiness throughout the texts by comparing and juxtaposing her with three main biblical figures: the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ and Saint Peter. However at all times, Jacques ensures his presence is

---

37 Brown, p. 248.
registered by inserting himself into the narrative. The result is that the credibility of
the narrative as a whole is strengthened, thereby sustaining the reader's trust in
narrator/hagiographer, and producing somewhat of an 'eyewitness account', as we
shall see, in the vein of Balthasar's biographical work on Speyr. At Marie's death,
Jacques takes pains to assert his presence: 'we were presente'. In one short sentence
Jacques implies not only his physical presence at Marie's deathbed, but also his
indispensable position as a trusted and loved friend as well as confessor. After
receiving Extreme Unction\textsuperscript{39} we are told that Marie revealed more prophecies which
'she knewe by reuelacyone and byheste of the Holy Gost'.\textsuperscript{40} These revelations were
allegedly passed on to 'a pryue man of vs'\textsuperscript{41} that is, Jacques. On many other
occasions Jacques refers to himself throughout the text as 'a frende of hirs',\textsuperscript{42}
indicating the intimacy of their confessor/devotee relationship. The \textit{vita} represents a
masterful justification of Marie as holy woman and visionary. It prefigures
Alfonso's seven points providing evidence of Marie's chaste, virtuous conduct under
the guidance of 'a prechor' and confessor (that is, Jacques), who she thanks God for
during her death song.\textsuperscript{43} Jacques also buoys his reputation and status in the text by
introducing himself in the third person at junctures which see a discussion of Saint
Paul and his charismatic gifts.

Two separate instances of this juxtaposition occur: the first instance occurs in
Jacques's Prologue which is excised from the Middle English version of the text,\textsuperscript{44}
and a second instance occurs during Marie's death song whereby Jacques introduces

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{39} \textit{VMO}, II, 12.
  \item \textsuperscript{40} \textit{VMO}, II, 1423, p. 185.
  \item \textsuperscript{41} \textit{VMO}, II, 1422, p. 185.
  \item \textsuperscript{42} \textit{VMO}, II, 756, p. 153.
  \item \textsuperscript{43} \textit{VMO}, II, 1315, p. 180; pp. 176-181.
  \item \textsuperscript{44} Due to this excision from the Middle English text I follow Jennifer Brown and others in discussing
\end{itemize}
the valuable gift of 'a prechor' (himself) after discussing how Saint Stephen received 'Seint Poule in gyft'. John Coakley suggests that Jacques presents himself - this 'prechor' - in the narrative as a gift for Marie, 'granted to her in compensation for her ineligibility for priesthood'. However, Dillon makes a valid point regarding Marie's death song which illustrates how the power dynamic that structures Jacques and Marie's relationship is constantly shifting. For example, 'it is she who has a vision of his sins on the point of death'. Having 'in a meruelous maner [...] rekeny whole the temptacyones of hir prechour, and welnly alle his synnes', Marie momentarily becomes confessor and takes the dominant role in a brief role reversal. However, an equally viable argument might suggest that this instance instead demonstrates Jacques's rhetorical skill in a self-deprecating manoeuvre which emphasizes his own flawed humanity, thus increasing his readership's belief and trust in the miraculous Marie. Jacques's lengthy Prologue establishes his own authority as author of the vita, addresses the patron of the text Bishop Fulk of Toulouse (c.1150-1231), and explains that despite the widespread phenomenon of holy women at the time, he has chosen to record Marie's life as she exemplifies all of the characteristics of this female piety. Jacques speaks of having 'discovered the fullness of almost all the graces in one precious and surpassingly excellent pearl', before modestly deferring to the patron of the work (Fulk), and predicting that the vita will be of great use 'to the many people who will read it'. Jacques then equates himself with the apostle Paul and his survival of a deadly viper bite (Acts 28:3): 'Paul, however was not harmed by the viper nor do I greatly fear that I will

45 VMO, II, 1310-1311, pp. 179-180.
47 Dillon, p. 129.
49 VMO, Prologue, 9; 10, p. 49.
incur any harm from the bites of detractors. Such a statement gestures towards Jacques’s overwhelming sense of the vast importance and impact of his work, and perhaps also himself as ambitious preacher, theologian and writer. Despite his refutation of the impact ‘detractors’ might have on him, Jacques concedes that he has exercised caution by limiting the amount of miracles from the life of ‘this handmaid of Christ [...] for it would be impossible to gather together all the miracles from her life’. This disclaimer, coupled with the various other narrative techniques employed by Jacques in the Prologue, seem to provide evidence that the vita is more a labour of necessity than love as he might lead his readership to believe.

In terms of characterizing Marie’s virtuous nature, Jacques describes how ‘this spouse of Cryste’ convinced her husband John to remain chaste, and received a ‘visyone’ as reward. Also, although Marie’s family ‘abounded in riches and / many worldly goodes, neuertheles worldly godes never enticed hir mynde’. Marie is also described as feeling compelled to indulge in multiple genuflections and to pray to ‘Oure Lady’ by ‘knelynge a thowsande sythes and an / hundirde, contynuynge this meruelos and vnharde offys of salutacyone / fourty dayes togedir’. Marie allegedly receives numerous visions throughout the text of the imaginative variety, which correspond with Augustine’s second order of vision. During the Feast of Saint Peter and Saint Paul (29 June), Saint Peter shows Marie the ‘disesyd’ souls of Purgatory, revealing to her the ‘peynes and the causes of the peynes’ in a moment which recalls Peter’s receipt of the keys to the Church in Matthew 16:19: ‘And I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven’. Interestingly, immediately after this

---

50 VMO, Prologue, 10, p. 49.
51 VMO, Prologue, 11, p. 50.
52 VMO, II, 1133, p. 171; I, 89, p. 90; 92-93, p. 90.
53 VMO, I, 32-33.
54 VMO, I, 361-363, p. 103.
55 VMO, II, 221; 222, p. 131.
revelation, Christ instructs Peter ‘not to tell anyone that he was the Christ’ (Matthew 16:20). In drawing this parallel between Peter and Marie, Jacques makes of his devotee a living, female counterpart to the obedient humility of Saint Peter, who saw and spoke to Christ as documented in Scripture, thus bolstering his case for Marie’s own holy nature. In terms of Marie’s responses to her visions, we are told that after her vision of ‘Oure Lady’ at a ‘religious widowe[’s]’ deathbed in Williambroux, ‘she felte [...] a wonder sauour of swetnesse, that she myghte not, for / gretnesse of ioye, contenye hereselfe’.\(^{56}\) This particular example is rich in allusion, as Marie’s vision of Mary resonates with the anointment and preparation of the dying Christ.\(^{57}\) Fanning the dying woman who was also the wife of a merchant who ‘hadde goten / summe goodes be gyle, as is merchants maner’, Mary is said to have ‘temper mercifully the hete that disseased hir’ in a compassionate act which recalls the use of that famous acheiropoieton, Veronica’s Veil or the Sudarium.\(^{58}\) Although this is not included in the canonical gospels, it is one of the fourteen Stations of the Cross. Jacques’s comparison here between the fanning of the dying widow and the wiping of the dying Christ illustrates the powerful, intertextual nature of hagiography as a genre: while writing Marie’s \textit{vita} and constructing his own saint, Jacques draws on the mythmaking of others. This particular vision thus represents Jacques’s talent and adept skill as a rhetorician, as he interweaves vision, sermon and scripture with edifying effect for the reader. The devout, dying widow is infected by the ‘gyle’\(^{59}\) of her merchant husband and refused safe passage into heaven and avoidance of purgatory. Seemingly this moment is Jacques’s opportunity to take centre stage as

\(^{56}\) \textit{VMO. II}, 237, p. 132; 234, p. 131; 266-267, p. 133.
\(^{58}\) \textit{VMO. II}, 248-249, p. 132; 238, p. 132.
\(^{59}\) \textit{VMO. II}, 249, p. 132.
preacher rather than to defend or prove Marie’s holiness as her confessor. As I have already argued, none of these things are mutually exclusive within the realm of the hagiographical text. However, this instance does imply Jacques’s own self-interest as author.

On yet another occasion, Jacques describes Marie as being ‘stired with an houge spirite’\(^{60}\) and having forgotten herself. Marie thus fulfils Alfonso’s second criteria for true visionary status. Although the majority of Marie’s visions appear to be imaginary or spiritual, Jacques informs us that for the ‘laste yeere of hir / temental lyfe’, ‘oure Lorde Hysmely presencyally apperid to hir’.\(^ {61}\) During the period of sickness which precedes her death Christ appears ‘often to hir’ and beholds her with ‘compassyone’, while ‘His blessed modir Mary was welny alwey bisyde hir’.\(^ {62}\) Marie is also visited by ‘the fende’\(^ {63}\) prior to her death. It is thus open to interpretation as to whether these ‘appearances’ of the Lord constitute the true intellectual union of \textit{unio mystica}. Of course, such union is also incommunicable and thus could not be recorded by Jacques by definition. In this respect Jacques skilfully manipulates the hagiographical genre while strengthening his case for Marie’s holiness. Another area which illustrates Marie’s visionary status is her prophetic knowledge of her death: Jacques claims, ‘And she shewed to me afterward a place in the chirche [Church of Saint Nicholas at Nivelles] where hir brycels / shulde be whan she dyed, as the ende after proued’.\(^ {64}\) According to Jacques, Marie ‘knewe in a wonder maner disposicyone’ and ‘prophecyed that she shulde /make hir ende in the same place’ as Saint Nicholas.\(^ {65}\) However, Alfonso’s sixth criterion for

\(^{60}\) \textit{VMO. II}, 1210, p. 174.
\(^{61}\) \textit{VMO. II}, 1181-1182, p. 175; 1180, p. 173.
\(^{62}\) \textit{VMO. II}, 1351; 1352.
\(^{63}\) \textit{VMO. II}, 1481, p. 188.
\(^{64}\) \textit{VMO. II}, 1167-1168, p. 173.
\(^{65}\) \textit{VMO. II}, 1163; 1165-1166, p. 173.
true visionary experience is the stipulation that true visionaries will have the day and hour of their death revealed to them. In Marie's case we are told: 'she prophclyed to vs often booth the yeere [and] the tyme of hir / passynge, but she expressed not the daye'.

Presumably Marie told Jacques and a few of her intimate friends (perhaps brothers of Oignies) about the details of her death which were divinely revealed to her. However, it is imperative to note that she does not reveal the exact day as Alfonso's rules stipulate she must. Instead it could intimate that she simply did not pass such a personal piece of information on to Jacques, and therefore he could not record it in the *vita*. More likely is the idea that this instance again illustrates Jacques's rhetorical skill in manipulating the hagiographic genre for his own purposes. The inclusion of several qualities popularly known to be indicative of visionary status coupled with the omission of small details, engages and encourages the reader, inviting them to question Marie's holy status while reassuring them with a plethora of evidence in the form of miraculous tales of a woman 'meruelosly inspired of God'.

In other words, by making Marie's life just believable enough, Jacques aims to guarantee the support of his readership and future canonization of his devotee. However, it is also important to note that as in the case of Porete's *Mirrour*, it is difficult to disentangle the possible interventions of our fifteenth-century Middle English translator and compiler from the original text. Thus, it is possible that the Middle English translation of Jacques's *vita* has been somewhat adapted in order to fulfil the criteria outlined by Alfonso.

Alfonso's final category decrees that posthumous miracles will establish the status of the visionary beyond dispute. Again, the text does not disappoint. We are told that after death, Marie's appearance did not accord with normal physiological

---

67 *VMO*, II, 421, p. 139.
processes. Instead she had ‘an aungels contenauns and douvely symplnesse, white and clere in visage’. Through ‘hir deth she stired many to deuocyon’. These people found themselves subject to a ‘plenevous flode of teerys’, which they considered to be evidence that they had been ‘visityd of God thrugh hir prayers’. At this point, Jacques indulges in a moment of complex analepsis – a technique he uses throughout the vita to draw comparisons between Marie, the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ and Saint Peter. Jacques claims that after death, Marie did not forsake those ‘whome she loued in hir lyfe, but to / summe she come ageyne’. In other words, she appeared to them in visions, strongly resonating with notions of the resurrected Christ of the Gospels. Similarly, the description of Marie’s hideously emaciated body recalls Christ’s tortured and broken body:

Forsoth, whan hir body shulde be washen in hir obyt, she was founden / so smalle and lene thrugh infirmitie and fastynge that the rigge bone of hir bak / was clungen to hir wombe. And as vndir a thinne lynnyn clothe, the bones of / hir bak semyld vndir the litil skynne of hir bely.

This description of Marie’s frail body immediately signals her humanity, juxtaposing her mortality with her maternal attributes by using the ‘wombe’ as the focal point of the entire image. Like Mary (whose utterance consented to the birth of Christ), Marie is handmaiden and obedient servant of the Lord, as was Christ on the Cross. However, this handmaid metaphor works on another level if we consider that the VMO also posits Marie as Jacques’s handmaid, with miraculous tales of her life story as a holy woman bent to his will for their mutual advantage. In this respect, female devotees can be seen to occupy the inferior position within the confessor/devotee

---

68 VMO, II, 1495, p. 188.
69 VMO, II, 1496, p. 188.
70 VMO, II, 1497; 1498, p. 188.
71 VMO, II, 1505-1506, p. 189.
72 VMO, II, 1501-1504, p. 189.
relationship. However, I would argue that while in many instances this might appear to be the case, the nature of the devotee/confessor relationship lends itself to a collaborative, mutual interdependence on both parts, resulting in an inter-personal gender politics and power dynamic which is in a state of constant flux. The balance of power thus varies accordingly from pair to pair, and so definitively assigning superior and inferior roles within such relationships (to males and females respectively) can only ever result in useless generalizations. As Voaden notes, 'because the woman visionary spoke as God's mouthpiece, she was able temporarily to transcend her gender'. Therefore, she was also able to temporarily tip the balance of power in her favour - if only long enough to communicate her mystical experience with the assistance of a male amanuensis. She cannot authorize her own voice as a female, but a male confessor can authorize her voice as divinely inspired and ventriloquize it accordingly. The removal of female self enacted by the patriarchal need for male authorization is thus a necessary trade-off in a medieval context, and the hagiographical text with its commingling of 'history and fiction' provides the ideal format for the playing out of this power game.

Adrienne Von Speyr: 'Handmaid of the Lord'

Having considered the traditional devotee/confessor relationship as a typically medieval convention, it is now possible to analyze the ways in which this tradition works in an early twentieth-century context. While Hans Urs von Balthasar's (1905-1988) editorial involvement with Adrienne von Speyr's (1902-1967) writings was not strictly in the capacity of hagiographer, I would like to argue that Speyr's texts

---

suggest that the devotee/confessor relationship at the heart of medieval hagiography ultimately informs his treatment of her. This is particularly true of Balthasar’s biography of Speyr entitled, *First Glance at Adrienne von Speyr* (1981 [1968]). Balthasar’s life of Speyr was published in 1968 just one year after her death, much like Jacques’s *VMO*. Balthasar and Speyr’s relationship is highly reminiscent of the medieval model outlined above in the case of Jacques de Vitry and Marie d’Oignies. Balthasar takes the role of male confessor/amanuensis as Speyr’s editor, ‘confessor and spiritual director’, while Speyr’s Trinitarian theology with its emphasis on compassion and a suffering with and in Christ mirrors the mystical writings of medieval female devotees/visionaries. By analyzing the similarities between these two different lives I wish to argue that ultimately the mystical text as a genre fosters a sort of inter-personal gender politics of its own, which depends on a constantly shifting oscillation between ‘selfing’ and ‘unselfing’ in the process of attaining mystical knowledge of God. Such mystical knowing is, as I have been arguing *sui generis*, as is the mystical text itself.

In this respect, I do not claim that *First Glance* is a hagiographical text *per se*. However, it is undoubtedly heavily informed by the medieval tradition, as the juxtaposition of medieval and modern devotees and confessors proves. Perhaps *First Glance* is better understood as quasi-hagiographical. It is certainly a biography of sorts and is perhaps best understood as an example of life-writing, in order to incorporate the diverse range of personal information recorded about Speyr’s life and selfhood. However, it is also pertinent that Speyr’s numerous different

---

75 *First Glance*, p. 13.

76 For a discussion of life-writing see Thomas Mayer and D.R. Woolf’s *The Rhetorics of Life-Writing in Early Modern Europe: Forms of Biography from Casandra Fedele to Louis XIV* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), pp. 1-37. Life-writing is characterized as follows: ‘As history and literature have increasingly parted company since the Enlightenment, they have left life-writing suspended between them, a bastard child that neither wishes to claim’ (p. 2).
autobiographies were compiled by Speyr at Balthasar’s request. These various works cover different short periods in Speyr’s life, and are dictated and written retrospectively to reflect Speyr’s age and life-outlook at the time. This is all done on Balthasar’s instruction. For example, Balthasar begins the first chapter of First Glance by detailing the numerous biographical and autobiographical sources available on Speyr. An autobiography covering the first twenty-four years of Speyr’s life and written while she was in her fifties appeared in 1968, under the initial title From My Life (the autobiography was eventually printed under the title My Early Years). Balthasar states: ‘she wrote [From My Life] at my request’.

A second autobiography followed under the title The Mystery of Youth (again, this work was also eventually included in the title My Early Years). This title details Speyr’s life from her early years up to her conversion in 1940. Balthasar claims: ‘my command enabled her under obedience to recount her life from the level of consciousness of her childhood and youth’. Balthasar thus instructs Speyr to record and retell her life ‘from the perspective she had as a child or as a young woman’. However, he clarifies this with a footnote which acts as a disclaimer of sorts, accounting for the chronological discrepancies in the two biographies which he is ‘unable to adjust’. Balthasar is quick to point out that ‘they may be due to the fact that in the memory of the older woman small events are not recalled in the exact order in which they happened’. Arguably this critique of female memory signals a latent antifeminism, as it implies not only that the practice of recall can be divided into male and female forms, but also it suggests that one is more reliable than the other. Balthasar’s influence on the development of Speyr’s personal theology can thus be seen to be

77 First Glance, p. 17.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
incredibly controlling, whether to harmful or beneficial effect. Balthasar not only functions as Speyr’s confessor, spiritual director and editor but his prolific publishing company established in 1947 at Einsieden (Johannes Verlag or St John’s Press), also printed her works, which all include the disclaimer alongside the publisher details of being printed ‘with ecclesiastical approval’. Therefore, Balthasar’s editorial hand guides and shapes the recording of Speyr’s life and self on all levels, in a fashion which inescapably gestures towards medieval hagiography. The traditional devotee/visionary and confessor/amanuensis relationship endures because it promotes a kind of mutual protection for both male and female religious who symbiotically depend on one another’s collaboration for the consolidation of their orthodoxy and social and political status.

Joan Roccasalvo has argued that Balthasar genuinely believed that Speyr’s spiritual gifts as a visionary mystic represented God ‘calling them within a double and complementary mission to special service within the Church’.\(^2\) However, there are certain moments of tension throughout Speyr’s writings which witness Balthasar’s ultimate concern with preserving his own authority. Indeed it is likely that his intentions also may have been to force Speyr to submit to his own auctoritas as respected theologian. Footnotes and Forewords often provide an insight on this matter. For example, in his Foreword to First Glance, Balthasar claims: ‘on the whole I received far more from her, theologically, than she from me, though of course, the exact proportion can never be calculated’.\(^3\) The difficulty in calculating exact proportions is also apt when applied to the problems associated with distinguishing between truth and fiction in the hagiographical text. However, there seems to be a certain modesty topos at work here, as Balthasar credits Speyr with


\(^3\) First Glance, p. 13.
being the wellspring of his own idiosyncratic theology, before negating this praise in claiming the impossibility of knowing who is more indebted to who within their relationship. Moments such as this witness the truly collaborative nature that forms the foundation of the devotee/confessor relationship in both a medieval and modern context. Elsewhere, Balthasar self-deprecatingly claims that he 'had some influence upon the formation of her ideas and attitudes' in a statement which again resonates with the idea of a modesty topos that frames his purposeful and rhetorical deferral to Speyr. Such a shift between praise and critique is a defining feature of Balthasar's editorial notes and overall composition of Speyr's writings. For example, he claims, 'she often gave me suggestions for sermons, conferences and so on' before adding: 'only rarely - and with increasing blindness, less and less often - did she read my books'. Thus, Balthasar is extremely keen to protect his own authorial reputation within this relationship. For example, Sutton notes a revealing admission from Balthasar that the greater part of his writings are 'a translation of what is present in more immediate, less technical fashion in the powerful work of Adrienne von Speyr'. Again we have the female mystic figured as an emotional, irrational, 'less technical' theological counterpart. For Balthasar, Speyr (and the texts he produces about her) are a mere receptacle for the refined 'translation' of his 'powerful', original and thus superior thought. Speyr is credited with 'the authentic mission that was hers', and is frequently constructed and described as 'saint-like', but it is always implicit that her theology has sprung from Balthasar's influence and

---

84 First Glance, p. 12.
85 First Glance, p. 13.
86 Sutton, p. 51.
87 Ibid.
88 First Glance, p. 13.
89 Balthasar's portrayal of Speyr calls to mind the recently canonized medieval mystic and physician Hildegarde of Bingen (1098-1179). Indeed, Speyr is fittingly reported to have died on Hildegarde's Feast Day: 17 September 1967.
guidance. Balthasar’s insertion of himself into the narrative of his devotee’s life is thus a more subtle imitation of Jacques’s.

Having observed Balthasar’s crucial role in developing Speyr’s personal theology in conjunction with his own after her conversion from Protestantism to Catholicism in 1940, it is now possible to consider the central elements which drove her theology as a visionary mystic. Trinitarian, Marian and Ignatian in character, Speyr’s theology is practical as well as contemplative, with a heavy emphasis on the importance of the mystery of the sacraments. As with the majority of medieval mystics surveyed in Chapter 2, the maternal qualities of the feminine structure and inform Speyr’s theology, particularly in her 1948 work, *The Handmaid of the Lord*[^90] (1985). This particular text sees Speyr’s articulation of Mary as mediatrix and co-redemptrix - a crucial strand of Speyr’s theology. For Speyr (as for the medieval holy women), Mary functions as an ultimate origin. The common origin of suffering is ‘the heart of the Mother [...] who does not belong to herself but serves her divine mission’.[^91] Having made her ‘unique act of surrender and devotion’[^92] in agreeing to carry the Christchild, Mary becomes the root of the Lord’s flesh for Speyr. She is the point from which ‘his whole human nature originates, ever anew and mysteriously, from her as a source’.[^93] For Speyr, Mary ‘becomes handmaid through her assent’, just as ‘the priest and the whole community become servants of God through the Offertory’.[^94] However, this ‘assent was only a response, a seconding of God’s word’[^95] as opposed to an independent utterance. All of the power and selfhood gained in assenting and also consenting to carry the Son of God is thus

[^93]: Ibid.
[^94]: *Handmaid*, p. 152.
[^95]: Ibid.
eradicated here in Speyr’s portrayal of Mary’s agreement as an inevitable formality. Elsewhere, Speyr argues convincingly for Mary’s strength in Luke 1:38, suggesting that ‘her silence is at once surrender and perfect indifference’. Her passive silence and role within the Scriptures are an effort to protect the mystery of the Son. This theme of mystery and revelation is highly prominent throughout Speyr’s writings, gesturing towards her new-found zeal for this particular aspect of Catholicism as a recent convert. At times Speyr attempts to emphasize the latent strength in Mary’s decision to ‘submit completely’, subordinating herself to the will of God and illustrating her ‘real merit in the redemption’. Again this trope, whereby God’s creatures are in possession of a grace which allows them to speak their assent, leaving them ‘free to subordinate themselves, lovingly to him’, is a typical characteristic of self-abnegating subjectivity perpetuated by medieval mysticism. For example, this description is reminiscent of Porete’s Annihilated Soul character or the ‘soule þat is nouȝted’, who wills only the will of God/Fyne Loue in her Mirour. However, I would maintain that Speyr also subordinates herself to her confessor and editor Balthasar, raising the question of how much strength really lies in assenting to male requests or instruction.

A ‘twice-married Protestant physician’, Speyr never had children, yet she appears to strongly identify with Mary, virgin mother of Christ. Written eight years after her conversion to Catholicism, Handmaid highlights the centrality of the Virgin Mary to Speyr’s theology, portraying her as a figure which Speyr models herself on as much as does Balthasar. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger has described Balthasar as

---

96 Handmaid, p. 22.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
99 Handmaid, p. 37.
100 Ibid.
‘above all a Marian person’, stressing that ‘he knew of the significance of the feminine in the Church [and] of the great symbolism of the virginal and the maternal’. Indeed Balthasar’s coinage of the term ‘betende Theologie’ which translates as ‘praying theology’ or ‘theology on one’s knees’ suggests his awareness of the importance of prayerful obedience as exemplified by Mary (and demonstrated by Catherine of Siena’s text). The figure of Mary functioned for Balthasar as an example of humble obedience and of ‘how our faith is to be enfleshed and [...] responsible in temporal matters’. The comparison of holy women to the Virgin Mary (as paragon of feminine virtue) is certainly a commonplace in medieval mystical texts and hagiographies. I would suggest that Handmaid illustrates Balthasar’s awareness of this tradition: Speyr becomes his own Virgin Mary and handmaid much as Marie d’Oignies became Jacques’s.

Before considering the centrality of the sacrament of confession in Speyr’s writings, it is helpful to consider Balthasar’s outline of her mysticism:

Mysticism is a particular mission, a particular service to the Church which can only be properly carried out in continual and complete movement away from oneself, in self-forgetfulness (she loved the word ‘effacement’) and virginal readiness for the Word of God. The self-erasure or self-oblation evoked by Speyr’s concept of ‘effacement’ is the absolute cornerstone of her personal theology, and it resonates with her thought on Marian assent discussed above. Thus, obvious parallels can be drawn between Speyr’s thought and that of her medieval counterparts who aim to transcend themselves in a similar ‘unselfing’ which annihilates the self with, in and through the

103 Ratzinger, p. 294.
104 First Glance, p. 36.
love of God. This particular instance of *effacement* recalls Porete’s similar concept in the form of the name ‘Forjeel'\(^ {105} \) which is applied to the soul who wishes to lead a life of spiritual perfection and translates as ‘Forgotten’ or ‘Oblivion’. The name is provided in the text by Fyne Loue/God to aid Reason’s understanding. Like the speculative mysticism of Porete’s *Mirrour*, Speyr is acutely aware either independently or through Balthasar’s teaching, of the limitations of logic and reason in spiritual matters. Only by forgetting and abandoning oneself can one come closer to God and be ready to receive his Word. For Speyr, the method of attaining this closeness was confession, an outlet and mode of self-expression previously unavailable to her as a Calvinist Protestant.

Speyr’s entrance into the Catholic Church came in 1940 at the relatively late age of thirty-eight. Born in Lucerne, Switzerland, Speyr had a strict Calvinist upbringing and came from a well-educated background. Although Speyr (like many *mulieres religiosae*) is alleged to have been in receipt of charismatic gifts from early childhood, it seems that it was following the sudden loss of her father and first husband (1934) that she began to move towards Catholicism. Heavily discontented with her own religion, Balthasar has noted Speyr’s commentary on the failings of Protestantism as follows: ‘The Protestants miss the ultimate seriousness of the Incarnation, the becoming-flesh. That is why everything often remains so theoretical, speculative’.\(^ {106} \) Indeed, he asserts: ‘the Protestantism offered to her seemed so empty to her’.\(^ {107} \) The sacrament of confession thus provides a form of intimate contact with the Trinity for Speyr. Whilst her 1960 work *Confession* (1985) provides a comprehensive description of the various types of confession and the correct roles of both penitent and confessor, it is conspicuously silent on the topic of

\(^{105}\) *Mirrour*, 260, p. 18.

\(^{106}\) *First Glance*, p. 247.

\(^{107}\) *First Glance*, p. 20.
her own life-changing conversion under Balthasar’s spiritual tutelage and guidance at
the University of Basel. Nevertheless, confession can be said to be at the heart of
Speyr’s personal theology. Balthasar claims that Speyr’s ‘thirst for true sacramental
confession’ increased over the years until her conversion, and ‘remained the most
powerful motive which finally led her to the Catholic Church’. ¹⁰⁸ Before considering
Speyr’s understanding of the sacrament of confession it is useful to contextualize it
with Thomas Tentler’s definition, which identifies four elements that characterize
sinning and confession:

First, to be forgiven, sinners have always been required to feel sorrow at
having lapsed. Second, they have consistently made some kind of explicit
confession of their sins and sinfulness. Third, they have assumed, or had
imposed on them, some kind of penitential exercises. And fourth, they have
participated in an ecclesiastical ritual performed with the aid of priests who
pronounce penitents absolved from sin or reconciled with the communion of
believers. ¹⁰⁹

For Speyr, confession is the vital and ‘decisive way of God’. ¹¹⁰ This overwhelming
‘gift of confession’ ¹¹¹ requires certain behaviours from both penitent and confessor,
and Speyr takes pains to clarify these in her work (along with Balthasar’s guidance
and editorial input). According to Balthasar, all of Speyr’s books ‘revolve around
the act and attitude of confession [and] around the personal and ecclesial-sacramental
encounter between sinner and God’. ¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ First Glance, p. 23.
¹¹⁰ Confession, p. 15.
¹¹¹ Confession, p. 101.
¹¹² Confession, p. 9.
However, certain moments in the text suggest that Speyr also feels able to criticize the Church. For example, she notes:

Confession [*Beichten*] is above all precisely that: a confession [*Bekenntnis*] not only of my sins but also a confession to God and to God’s precepts and institutions, indeed to his Church with her own weakness and her myriad ambiguous, even disturbing, aspects.\(^{113}\)

This commentary on these ‘myriad ambiguous, even disturbing aspects’ seems to echo the moment of role reversal discussed earlier, in relation to Marie becoming Jacques’s confessor. By making this comment, Speyr momentarily steps outside of her submissive role as penitent devotee in a transgression which enables her to criticize the very institution her texts are written to elevate and praise. Moments such as this therefore justify Balthasar’s self-deprecating and perhaps disingenuous deferral to Speyr’s position as ‘the author’.\(^{114}\) Nevertheless, these moments of empowered self-expression are infrequent at best, and Balthasar’s input as Speyr’s confessor remains evident. At one point Balthasar claims that even prior to Speyr’s conversion, ‘the outline of Catholic truth [was] hollowed out in her like the interior of a mould’.\(^{115}\) This portrayal of Speyr’s innately Catholic disposition establishes her as a passive receptacle for Catholicism – she is incomplete without it and prior to conversion, has been lacking as a person due to its absence.

Balthasar’s influential role in the development of Speyr’s theology as her confessor and spiritual director thus emphasizes the significant part this relationship plays in the writing and production of mystical texts in both medieval and modern contexts. This relationship can be best examined in relation to Balthasar’s *First Glance*. Heavily informed by the medieval tradition of the devotee/confessor

\(^{113}\) *Confession*, p. 18.
\(^{114}\) *Confession*, Foreword, p. 9.
\(^{115}\) *First Glance*, p. 12.
relationship, this text records Balthasar’s impressions of his saint-like ‘Didi’ after ‘twenty-seven years of close collaboration’.116 Certainly the title of Balthasar’s book - *First Glance at Adrienne von Speyr* - hints at an inherent if unconscious subordination of the female to the male gaze. However, in the interest of providing a balanced account due to the shifting power dynamic I have argued for within the devotee/confessor relationship, it could also be said that this title represents Balthasar’s attempt at maintaining a critical distance from the subject of his work. Both Balthasar and Speyr appear to influence each other’s thought to the point that their personal theologies become intertwined. Balthasar claims: ‘I also strove to bring my way of looking at Christian revelation into conformity with hers’.117 Indeed, this aligning of their personal theologies is best witnessed by the Community of Saint John (*Johannesgemeinschaft*) – an Ignatian secular institute established in 1945 by Speyr and Balthasar and referred to as ‘the child’118 according to Maximilian Greiner’s conversation with two founding members of the order. Speyr was also instrumental in Balthasar’s decision to leave the Jesuit Order, which he finally did in February 1950 due to their disapproval of his counselling a woman. Roccasalvo notes: ‘it was understood that Jesuits would not assume the regular spiritual direction of women’.119 However, this was a decision which Balthasar was to try and rectify throughout the rest of his life despite having his reapplication denied. Edward Oakes and David Moss maintain that it was the encounter with Speyr ‘more than any other event in his life that led to Balthasar’s isolation from the

---

116 *First Glance*, p. 22; p. 11.
119 Roccasalvo, p. 52.
wider guild of professional theologians'. Balthasar’s belief in Speyr’s charismatic graces was borne of her yearly ‘passions’ on Holy Saturday and her visionary experiences or her ‘travels’ and ‘transportations’, with the two main graces being her respective visions of St Ignatius of Loyola and the Virgin Mary.

Balthasar informs us that even as a small child, Speyr ‘had her own mysterious relationship’ with Ignatius and learnt more from him than she did from Balthasar as her confessor. This ‘mysterious encounter’ is alleged to have taken place on Christmas Eve when Speyr was just six years old. The encounter is described as being fleeting, with Ignatius appearing to a young Speyr at the top of a flight of stairs before taking her hand and inviting her to come with him. Ignatius is described as ‘small [...] poor’ and with a slight limp – gesturing towards his own conversion experience after being wounded during the Battle of Pamplona (1521).

Despite the brevity with which Speyr sketches the encounter, Saint Ignatius plays a pivotal role in her theology. His structuring influence on her thought is witnessed by her insistence on the importance of ‘the call’ to the religious life and of the four-week Spiritual Exercises as a complementary and superior form of confession. However, in terms of analyzing the power dynamic at play between Balthasar and Speyr it is perhaps interesting to consider Balthasar’s interjection regarding this vision. While discussing Speyr’s encounter with Ignatius, Balthasar interrupts by including the following statement in parentheses: ‘(she showed me the exact spot later)’. Jacques’s similar claim to being shown Marie’s final resting place is recalled. Not only is Balthasar undermining Speyr’s authority here as the one in

---

120 Oakes and Moss, pp. 4-5.
121 First Glance, p. 39.
122 First Glance, p. 39.
123 First Glance, p. 21.
124 First Glance, p. 117.
125 Confession, p. 124.
126 First Glance, p. 21.
receipt of the ‘charism’\textsuperscript{127} of mystical graces, but he is also forcefully including himself in the narrative in a style very much reminiscent of Jacques de Vitry. By claiming he has seen ‘the exact spot’ in which the vision occurred we are encouraged to suspend our disbelief and trust in the narrator’s word, much as we are in the traditional hagiography. As with his choice of title, here we see Balthasar’s attitude towards his own importance as friend, confessor and editor of Speyr’s life. Ultimately, we see Speyr through his eyes only – the ‘seer’ becomes the ‘seen’ through the patriarchal gaze of the theologian.

Speyr’s vision of Mary ‘the Mother of God’\textsuperscript{128} occurs at the age of approximately fifteen years old in November 1917, and is described by Speyr and Balthasar alike as having the qualities of a tableau vivant. Balthasar describes it as follows: ‘Mary appeared to her, surrounded by angels and saints (among whom Adrienne recognized Ignatius)’.\textsuperscript{129} In an echo of the ecstatic experience of sixteenth-century mystic Teresa of Avila, he also claims that ever since her vision of Mary ‘Adrienne had a small wound under the left breast, over the heart’.\textsuperscript{130} According to Speyr, ‘the whole thing was like a picture [...] it did not occur to me that I could be the victim of an illusion’.\textsuperscript{131} She also claimed that ‘the memory of this vision remained intensely alive’\textsuperscript{132} for her, thus negating Balthasar’s earlier assertion about the fallibility of female memory in older age. Unsurprisingly both of these visions (which formed the basis of Speyr’s theology) occurred pre-conversion, thus formulating the narrative basis for the assertion of her sanctity. According to Balthasar the visions after Speyr’s conversion ‘lost this tableau quality for they

\textsuperscript{127} First Glance, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{128} First Glance, p. 28.
\textsuperscript{129} First Glance, p. 23.
\textsuperscript{130} First Glance, p. 28.
\textsuperscript{131} First Glance, p. 115.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid.
became total, intimate reality’. Presumably Balthasar refers here to Speyr’s 1941 vision, which occurred just months after her conversion and during one of his ‘absen[ces] from Basel’. An angel appears to Speyr and tells her: ‘Now it will soon begin’. From this point on, Speyr’s yearly Easter ‘passions’ were to follow, with her first receipt of the stigmata occurring after Holy Week in July 1942. This vision of an angel is of course highly (and purposefully) reminiscent of Gabriel’s appearance to Mary (Luke 1:26-38), again representing Balthasar’s attempt at reinforcing the connection between his handmaid and mediatrix Speyr and the Lord’s handmaid Mary.

Balthasar provides several other examples of Speyr’s visionary experience which are of Augustine’s second order of vision. He characterizes these visionary experiences as having a ‘dense [...] Marian veil’. These range from Speyr’s epiphanic moment ‘beside the coffin of a child whose death had caused one of her friends infinite sorrow’, to the speaking tabernacle lamp in Leysin during her three-year period of illness where ‘the tabernacle lamp spoke to her of the presence of the Lord’ (and finally to the auricular vision received whilst driving home – Speyr hears a voice which states: ‘Tu vivras au ciel et sur la terre’ (You shall live in heaven and on earth). These experiences undoubtedly witness Speyr’s holy status and certainly bolster her authority as a recipient of mystical charisms. However, it is imperative to note Balthasar’s significant control over Speyr’s personal theology and self-expression. I would suggest that there are moments of tension in First Glance which seem to represent Balthasar’s attempt at mythologizing rather than simply

---

133 First Glance, p. 24.  
134 First Glance, p. 35.  
135 First Glance, p. 34.  
136 First Glance, p. 35.  
137 First Glance, p. 34.  
138 Ibid.  
139 First Glance, p. 25.  
140 First Glance, p. 34.
recording Speyr’s life in a manner which again recalls the hagiographical genre. For example, when discussing Speyr’s birth and early years in Part I of the text, we are presented with a shift in tense while Balthasar discusses Speyr’s birth. In the space of a short paragraph we shift from the present tense: ‘Adrienne put up a stubborn resistance to being born’, to the past tense: ‘Adrienne was born at last on September 20, 1902’. 141 This narrative technique creates a novelistic effect and seems to represent Balthasar’s conscious attempt at framing his subject in such a way that her otherworldly and saint-like qualities are emphasized.

Having noted the shifting power dynamic which informs the devotee/confessor relationship it is important to note that Balthasar’s own complex system of thought on gender is also based on a similar oscillating dynamic. Corrinne Crammer notes the following observation from Rowan Williams: ‘Balthasar believes that notwithstanding very distinctive sexual differences, woman is essentially equal (wesensgleich) to Man, although personally unlike him (personal-ungleich)’. 142

According to Balthasar’s thought, ‘despite the equality of the sexes before God, Man is also both more and less than Woman’. 143 This paradoxical understanding of gender difference is made possible by Balthasar’s concept of the twofold sexuality of human beings (Zweigeschlechtlichkeit) which he also relates to the Trinity. The perichoretic mutual indwelling and interpenetration of the Trinity enables each member of the Trinity to experience and share in both female and male qualities at different times, making them neither one nor the other. As Williams puts it, ‘the Zweigeschlechtlichkeit, the twofold sexuality of human beings is somehow grounded

141 First Glance, p. 18.
143 Crammer, p. 96.
in the doing and being-done-to of the several hypostases'. 144 I would argue that such a fluid relation fosters the notion of flux in the act of ‘doing and being-done-to’ which characterizes Speyr’s personal theology as developed and articulated by Balthasar. For example, when he constructs Speyr as ‘the interior of a mould’ 145 or as a passive receptacle for Catholicism, there is a direct ‘being-done-to’ which relegates the female visionary and mystic to a realm of passive silence and submission to the will of the patriarchal Catholic Church. At the same time, Speyr’s position as visionary and recipient of divine grace paradoxically brings her closer to God and elevates her status far beyond that of her male confessor and spiritual director. In this way, Balthasar’s concept of the Zweigeschlechtlichkeit reflects the power dynamic of the male/female, confessor/devotee relationship.

In conclusion, through the juxtaposition of a medieval and modern example of the traditional devotee/confessor relationship, this case study aimed to highlight why and how this relationship has persisted and endured throughout history, and also how male confessors/editors mediate and re-mediate the thoughts and writings of their female devotees. As Janette Dillon observes, ‘woman and confessor/scribe are bound together by the secrecy and exclusiveness of their spiritual relationship as well as by their common project’. 146 Focusing on the shifting power dynamic which delineates and regulates the confessor/devotee relationship, it has been possible to observe a kind of inter-personal gender politics which sees the balance of power oscillate between male and female. The fact that this relationship endures and recurs at different historical moments gestures towards a quality within mystical thought and writing which cites it as a paradoxical space for the silencing and empowerment of the female voice. The female voice is undoubtedly mediated and re-mediated

145 First Glance, p. 12.
throughout history, but the aim of this chapter is to uncover the positive as well as the negative effects of these mediations. It is hoped that this case study has demonstrated that the peculiar yet powerful nature of this paradoxical relationship can similarly be transposed onto the genres of the hagiography and more broadly, the mystical text. While Jacques de Vitry and Hans Urs von Balthasar both indulge in the hagiographical practice of mythmaking about their respective female devotees and penitents, moments of role reversal within the texts make it apparent that female handmaidens Marie d’Oignies and Adrienne von Speyr are both very much empowered during such instances of ‘unselv{ing}’ or ‘éffacement’ to borrow Speyr’s term, if only momentarily. The following and concluding case study examines the ways in which this self-abnegating subjectivity is utilized in the writings of modern women Simone Weil and also to a lesser extent, Anne Carson, who rely on the apophatic discourses which drive the medieval mystical tradition in their respective modes of chosen self-expression.
Chapter 5

decreating the Mystical Self: ‘Unselfing’ in the Writings of Simone Weil and Her Male Mediators

There is absolutely no other free act which it is given us to accomplish – only the destruction of the “I”.

The process of decreation is for her a dislodging of herself from a centre where she cannot stay because staying there blocks God.

We begin this chapter with the juxtaposition of quotations from two modern female writers who were both equally intrigued and influenced by medieval mystical ideas and discourses of ‘unselfing’ and ‘self-noughting’ as evidenced above. While the main focus of this chapter is on the writings of Simone Weil and the ways in which these have been edited and transmitted to a modern audience by her male editors, Anne Carson’s assimilation of the medieval tradition is strongly influenced by Weil and so she functions to demonstrate the ways in which modern women receive, incorporate and develop the medieval mystical tradition in their own writings. What is the connection between an anorexic French political activist, philosopher and mystic of Jewish heritage and an American Classicist, poet, translator and graphic artist? As the above quotations intimate, an admiration and respect for the tradition of medieval mysticism and particularly the discourses of self-stripping, self-annihilation and ‘unselfing’ engendered by the apophatic genre unite the intellectual projects and forms of self-expression articulated by these two women. Heavily

influenced by Simone Weil’s (1909-1943) writings, Anne Carson (b. 1950) builds upon Weil’s concepts and ideas in order to complement the poetic fusion of past and present in her own creative and critical writings. However, we are met with a significant problem in the fact that the main body of Weil’s work has survived to us in note form, often incomplete, and written in a cerebral aphoristic style. This has allowed the two sole inheritors and male editors of this corpus (Roman Catholic priest, Father J.M. Perrin (d. 2002) and Roman Catholic philosopher, Gustave Thibon (1902-2001)) a particularly free hand in the editing and dissemination of these works, as well as, I will argue, in the construction of the controversial persona of ‘Sainte Simone’ as she has survived to us today.

In this sense I approach the biographies generated by Perrin and Thibon as ‘quasi hagiographies’ which function to single-handedly construct and mediate Simone Weil and the majority of her most important concepts, many of which had only nascent potential in their original notebook form before being left to these male writers. As in Chapter 4, the use of this term is intended to highlight the similarities between the editorial influences and practices of male clerics and intellectuals on the mystics or holy women under their guidance both in a medieval and modern context, and the subsequent effects for the mediation and re-mediation of these women to a modern audience. Therefore, I do not intend to suggest that male editors always purposefully attempt to have a harmful effect on the women they portray. However, I would argue that these ill-effects, whether consciously or unconsciously perpetrated, have an unavoidably detrimental effect in that they silence the female voice in certain ways and in specific instances. It should also be noted that this

---

3 This derisive application of the title of ‘saint’ is taken from George Steiner’s largely unfavourable review of Richard Bell, *Simone Weil’s Philosophy of Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) included in his essay collection *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), pp. 171-179. I return to this essay and Steiner’s contentions with Weil at a later point.
silencing is in fact a complication of biography as a genre in and of itself. For example, we are necessarily always at a remove from the subject when reading a biography, and so the potential for mythmaking is ever present. Due to this fact, it is crucial to temper our readings of Weil’s biographies with the knowledge that just as she aimed to renounce herself in pursuit of God and of ‘the destruction of the “I”’, it is in fact her male biographers and ‘quasi hagiographers’ who have the ultimate control over the definition, dissemination and perhaps even creation of the female ‘I’ in Weil’s case.

The Function of Biography

Issues of mythmaking and anxieties surrounding the idea of indulging and perpetuating the legend of cultish figures such as Simone Weil have been faced by every one of her biographers in some shape or form. For example, Thomas Nevin comments that although ‘competent… and generously documented’ the two standard French biographies\(^4\) of Simone Weil ‘are not wholly free of hagiographic language\(^5\). As I suggested earlier, this is undoubtedly a necessary condition of the biographical text. However, it is perhaps in texts documenting the lives of mystical women that the gap between medieval and modern can be seen to be almost entirely closed. The use of language, discourse and rhetorical tropes in describing these women is strangely similar, and so despite calls signalling the end of the biography or lamenting its decline in the face of a burgeoning genre of life writing in popular

\(^4\) Gravity and Grace, p. 23.
culture, I suggest that the conventions of medieval hagiography explored in the previous case study are also present to certain extents in the contemporary biography. Perhaps the opportunities both for the limiting and advancement of knowledge embodied by the biographical text are best understood in light of Weil’s image of worldly life and the suffering and afflictions it entails as a metaxu or bridge to the otherworldly after death: ‘The world is the closed door. It is a barrier. And at the same time it is the way through’. In the case of Weil’s autobiographical writings (left in note-form to Perrin and Thibon), she herself - perhaps unknowingly - constructed a barrier between the modern reader and her ‘world’ so to speak. If autobiographical writing is ‘a writing where concepts of subject, self, and author collapse into the act of producing a text’ then Weil’s self-sacrifice in handing her texts over and inviting Perrin and Thibon to do what ‘[they] like[d]’, ensured the inevitable editorial interventions which ensued. These interventions result in the realistic and truthful detection of a person’s life as admirable and is presented as impossible to attain. Just as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht was shown to provide an analytic insight which is real, so too Perrin and Thibon charted we write on our own life, and our life’s value, in every way. Wherever we are, we do not see an unchangeable image. We are always being shaped, and are always changing. We are always being shaped, and are always changing. We are always being shaped, and are always changing.

---

7 See Kathryn Hughes’s 2008 online article entitled, ‘The Death of Life Writing’ in The Guardian which discusses the recent ‘falling-off’ in numbers of biographical manuscripts currently submitted for review and references the increase in popular culture of ghost-written celebrity autobiographies which document ‘minor lives’. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/jun/28/saturdayreviewsfeatres.guardianreview> [Accessed: 1 September 2012].

8 *Gravity and Grace*, p. 132.

9 Ibid.


12 Sprinker, p. 322.
Perrin and Thibon as ‘Editors’

Nevertheless, texts such as Perrin and Thibon’s *Simone Weil As We Knew Her* are insightful and valuable as long as a tentative approach is taken and respect is paid to the fact that with a figure like Weil, whose work was mainly published posthumously, it is imperative that we are sensitive to the legend we ourselves partake in creating through our reading of the text. In this sense, Simone Weil and the hagiographical subjects which were her medieval and mystical counterparts are closely intertwined. In the introduction to his biography of Weil, Jacques Cabaud comments that ‘biographies themselves suffer from glory’s conformism’. He also witnesses the fundamental intention of the biography to run ‘counter to the myth-making trend of the times’, placing the ultimate interpretative onus on the reader who sees truth ‘in the facts which are placed before him’. While this pursuit of a fair, realistic and truthful depiction of a person’s life is admirable and is promised by every one of Weil’s biographers individually, I suggest it is a goal which is perhaps impossible to attain. Just as Hans Urs von Balthasar was shown to provide an arguably self-interested ‘eyewitness account’ in his *First Glance at Adrienne von Speyr*, so too Perrin and Thibon claim: ‘we will confine ourselves to bearing witness to what our eyes have seen and our ears have heard, and also to the feelings which rose in our heart when we were with Simone Weil’. However, as this case study hopes to show, much like medieval hagiography, Perrin and particularly Thibon’s accounts of Weil are couched in the rhetoric and discourses of conscious self-promotion, illustrating an overarching self-awareness and concern for particular and

---

14 Cabaud, 1964, p. 11.
15 Ibid.
16 *Simone Weil As We Knew Her*, p. 10.
personal agendas. For example, Perrin established his own secular institute Caritas Christi in 1937 (inspired by the life of Saint Catherine of Siena) with a little-known female mystic Juliette Molland (d. 1979), while Weil (still obstinately refusing baptism and membership of the Church) had at Santa Maria degli Angeli chapel in Assisi been compelled ‘for the first time in [her] life to go down on [her] knees’. I would speculate that it is possible that Weil might have made a valuable and perhaps more effective figurehead for Perrin’s institute had she not been so opposed to means of collective power and control within society. In light of this, Perrin’s frustrations with Weil’s refusal to convert and fully commit to crossing over ‘the threshold of the church’ perhaps take on a new significance. On the other hand, Thibon seems troubled throughout by tensions between his own two conflicting roles as logical philosopher and creative poet. The fact that he at times interrupts his own discussion of Weil in order to interject with fragments of his own unpublished poetry suggests that much like Balthasar, he is ultimately concerned with his own literary reputation and with promoting himself through and alongside Weil.

Regardless of the possible ulterior motives Perrin and Thibon might have had in their respective relationships with Weil it is important to remember just how ephemeral their contact with her actually was. Father Perrin describes his relationship with Weil as ‘a dialogue which was spread over ten months’ beginning in June 1941 with one of their ‘first conversations’, while Thibon’s relationship with Weil was presumably of similar length. The uncertainty arises here from the fact that Weil’s movements during the height of the Second World War are difficult to reconstruct and must be pieced together using censored letters and

17 Waiting on God, p. 20.
18 Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 156.
19 Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 128.
20 Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 13.
21 Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 22.
surviving correspondence often written in code.\textsuperscript{22} However, we can be sure it was limited to the short time she spent on his farm after requesting experience of hard manual labour from Perrin - Thibon’s friend. During this time Thibon claims they ‘cultivated the soil and broke bread’\textsuperscript{23} together, before Weil requested less comfortable living conditions and took up residence in Thibon’s wife’s parents’ ‘half-ruined house on the banks of the Rhône’\textsuperscript{24} while still continuing her work on the farm. In May 1942, Weil unwillingly left for the relative safety of New York at her parents’ request after meeting Thibon one last time in Marseilles.\textsuperscript{25} Nevertheless, the fact that these men only knew Weil for a short time does not detract from the fondness the three seem to have shared, and neither does it negate the mutual benefits seemingly gained from the relationship. However, as we are attempting to analyse the ways in which Weil’s voice may have been intentionally or unintentionally distorted by the editorial efforts of these two men – her self-appointed ‘quasi-hagiographers’\textsuperscript{26} – it is important to bear in mind the ephemeral nature of their relationship with her.

On reading Simone Weil As We Knew Her it becomes apparent that unexpectedly, Father Perrin’s interpretation and description of Weil is undoubtedly harsher than Gustave Thibon’s. I have previously referenced a few of my own theories as to why this might have been the case and will develop them further. However, taking the format of the text in itself, I would suggest that we have quite an

\textsuperscript{22} Richard Rees’s Simone Weil: Seventy Letters (London: Oxford University Press, 1965) is the authority and ‘comprehensive collection’ (Rees, p. 9) here. However, more work needs to be undertaken in order to recover and also translate from the French those unpublished fragments and sources still remaining – see Thomas Nevin’s Bibliographical Essay ‘Unpublished Primary Materials’ (Nevin, p. 453).

\textsuperscript{23} Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 112.

\textsuperscript{24} Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 117.

\textsuperscript{25} Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 131.

\textsuperscript{26} It is alleged that Weil gave materials including her ‘Spiritual Autobiography’ to Father Perrin which appears in Waiting on God, pp. 15-33 as Letter IV, with the remainder of her notebooks being given to Gustave Thibon who compiles them in Gravity and Grace.
unusual text which flouts the conventions of the traditional biography. For example, it is divided into two relatively even parts with each part representing the views of the two Roman Catholic men whose friendship and guidance encouraged Weil towards conversion\textsuperscript{27} – Part I is approximately ninety-five pages long and written by Father Perrin with Part II written by Thibon at approximately sixty pages. Part I also includes a Foreword from Perrin while the twelve-page Introduction is provided by Thibon. As I have already mentioned, these two men have a significant influence on the dissemination of Weil’s writings. They were particularly influential in their articulation of her concepts and ideas, as these were still in the early stages of their formulation at the time of her death in the Ashford ‘sanatorium…where she died on 24 August 1943’\textsuperscript{28} at the young age of thirty-four. Both Perrin and Thibon provide us with an overall aim for their particular descriptions and interpretations of Weil’s thought and life in the text, with both men professing their disapproval of those who ‘misrepresent the thought of Simone Weil, either by distorting it, or by using it as a cloak for [their] own prejudices’.\textsuperscript{29} Whilst I believe that Perrin was never consciously or intentionally malicious in his portrayal and construction of Weil, I do feel that certain instances suggest that Thibon might have been as guilty of using Weil’s writings and thoughts as a ‘cloak’ as those ‘admirers’\textsuperscript{30} of hers whom they accuse of having done the same.

Perrin begins his Foreword by outlining his aim in the text, which is to ensure that in recreating the ten-month dialogue he shared with Weil, her side of the

\textsuperscript{27} Of course, Weil never actually converted or received the sacrament of baptism despite controversial debate on the topic. In \textit{Simone Weil: An Anthology} Sian Miles claims that after her time on Thibon’s farm, Weil was closer to the Church than ever, and Perrin ‘by this time made no secret of the fact that he wanted to give her baptism’ (p. 41). However, also see Claire Wolfleich’s ‘Attention or Destruction: Simone Weil and the Paradox of the Eucharist’ where Wolfleich maintains: ‘at this time, it is unknown whether she was baptized on her deathbed’ (p. 362).
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Simone Weil As We Knew Her}, p. 24.
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Simone Weil As We Knew Her}, p. 14.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
‘conversation’\textsuperscript{31} is heard also. He describes the text as ‘a marginal
accompaniment’\textsuperscript{32} to \textit{Waiting God}, implying that this text will in some way amplify
Weil’s voice. He also seems to allude to the fact that up until this point, scholarly
treatment of Weil and her writings has somewhat silenced her: Perrin writes:
‘Everyone has pulled the thread that suits him, and this is one of the things against
which I think it is my duty to protest’.\textsuperscript{33} Father Perrin pledges that in Part I he will:

\[\ldots\] try to give a faithful account of the ideas and the searchings of Simone
Weil showing what were the causes of her inner conflict and the directions in
which she might have found the peace of truth in charity.\textsuperscript{34}

His treatment of Weil certainly appears to reflect this initial aim as Perrin is fair in
his assessment and classification of Weil’s ‘fragmentary writings’ as being produced
at a time when Weil ‘knew herself to be in a state of evolution and incompleteness’.\textsuperscript{35}
Perrin is of course referring here to the period from the late 1930s when Weil
underwent three mystical experiences and found herself, as a non-practicing Jew,
drawn and called to the Roman Catholic Church. Nevin has described Weil’s Jewish
background as ‘mostly “inauthentic”’, noting that due to the xenophobic culture
prevalent in French society at the time, ‘Weil’s parents, like most Jews of bourgeois
professional rank and education, were non-practicing’.\textsuperscript{36} Despite her maternal
grandmother’s observance of Jewish dietary laws, Weil’s Jewish heritage was of
course something she was born into, thus eradicating any element of individual
choice. For a person such as Weil this lack of free choice was presumably
particularly hard to bear, and so I would suggest that Weil’s perceived anti-semitic

\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Simone Weil As We Knew Her}, p. 13.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Simone Weil As We Knew Her}, p. 14.
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Simone Weil As We Knew Her}, p. 17.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{36} Nevin, p. 238.
sentiments were as much a form of rebellion against her unchosen rather than necessarily unwanted ancestral identity as they were a true hatred for her own people. However, George Steiner (himself of Jewish descent) has taken great offence at ‘a human being who, at the time when her own people were being harried to bestial extinction, refused baptism into the Catholic Church because “Roman Catholicism was still too Jewish”’. Perrin observes that some of Weil’s most troubling statements are borne out of her perennialist notions, and a religious syncretism which enable her to construct a system wherein the main points and spiritual truths of ‘all religious traditions originated in revelation’, with their ‘message transmitted in legend or folklore’. From this position, Weil could make speculations which saw continuous lines amongst and between disparate religious traditions. For example, in *Letter to a Priest* (1942) which articulates Weil’s main issues with the Church and documents her desire for ‘definite’ and ‘categorical’ answers from a French priest living in New York while she was there in 1942, we see an example of such religious syncretism:

There have perhaps been among various peoples (India, Egypt, China, Greece) sacred Scriptures revealed in the same manner as the Jewish-Christian Scriptures. Some of the texts which still exist today are possibly either fragments or echoes of them.

However, just as for Christian medieval mystics drawing on past traditions of Neoplatonism, there is a fine line between religious syncretism and heresy in organized religion, as Weil’s later statement illustrates:

---

38 *Simone Weil As We Knew Her*, p. 58.
40 *Letter to a Priest*, p. 10.
41 *Letter to a Priest*, 4, p. 17-18.
There is not, as far as I can see, any real difference – save in the forms of expression – between the Manichean and Christian conceptions concerning the relationship between good and evil.\textsuperscript{42}

Perrin’s response to controversial statements such as this is largely to defend them, claiming that of course Weil ‘would have revised more than one of the hasty intuitions which she had dashed off haphazard in a first rough draft and had never looked at again’.\textsuperscript{43} However, even he finds her issues with Judaism and with the Church as totalitarian to be unacceptable at some points.

Perhaps it was Weil’s qualities as a mystic which excuse her indiscretions regarding the Church for Perrin. Nevin has noted the tendency in the ‘mass of literature’\textsuperscript{44} produced on Weil’s life and thought to apply ‘useless tags, whatever their positive or negative ring: mystic, heretic, gnostic, saint’.\textsuperscript{45} I would suggest that Weil’s three mystical experiences certainly engaged Perrin’s interest and contributed to the perpetuation of labels such as ‘saint’. In her ‘Spiritual Autobiography’ written to Father Perrin around 15 May 1942 (and included in Waiting on God, pp. 15-33), Weil tells us she ‘had three contacts with Catholicism which really counted’.\textsuperscript{46} The first of these experiences occurred after her ‘year in the factory, before going back to teaching…’ where Weil claims ‘she received for ever the mark of a slave…’.\textsuperscript{47} During a family holiday to a small fishing village in Portugal, Weil attends a patronal festival. Weil claims ‘nothing can give any idea’ of the atmosphere she experienced here, remarking instead that it suddenly became clear to her ‘that Christianity is pre-

\textsuperscript{42} Letter to a Priest, 16, p. 41.
\textsuperscript{43} Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 59.
\textsuperscript{44} Nevin, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{45} Nevin, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{46} Waiting on God, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
eminently the religion of slaves’ and ‘that slaves cannot help belonging to it’.

From this point on, Weil considered herself one of these slaves. Weil’s language alludes to the particularly ‘medieval’ form of death she would eventually suffer after a life of self-abasement and self-deprivation, dying prematurely of anorexia. Even in death Weil mirrors the life and practices of her self-abnegating medieval counterparts. The second of Weil’s mystical experiences occurred in 1937 in Assisi at the thirteenth-century Romanesque chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli. Weil explains: ‘[...] something stronger than I was compelled me for the first time in my life to go down on my knees’. The final experience came in the Easter of 1938 at Solesmes where Weil was able ‘through extreme effort of concentration’ to find relief from her ‘splitting headaches’ by taking comfort and ‘a pure and perfect joy in the unimaginable beauty’ of the plainsong being chanted in the church. It was at this time that Weil also famously met the ‘young English Catholic’ man who was to give her her ‘first idea of the supernatural power of the Sacraments’. In this arguably contrived narrative, she meets this man after he has received communion – a grace Weil perhaps longed for herself but could not attain due to her position on the outskirts of the Church. This man introduces Weil to the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets, and in particular, to George Herbert’s ‘Love’ or ‘Love bade me welcome’. Weil allegedly committed this poem to memory and her fascination with it culminated in a further mystical experience whereby ‘Christ himself came down and took possession of [her]’.

Judging whether or not this event actually took place can only be speculation and another indulgence of the ‘useless tags’ mentioned earlier by Nevin, as with the majority of mystical and visionary experiences claimed

---

48 Waiting on God, p. 20.
49 Ibid.
50 Waiting on God, p. 21.
51 Nevin, p. 9.
by the holy women examined in this thesis, both medieval and modern. However, I find it interesting that the second volume of Weil’s *Notebooks* compiled and edited by Thibon, ends with a very similar description of a mystical encounter with Christ which is couched in a language of submission and possession; of rendering and withholding – namely in the discourse of medieval bridal mysticism. Weil appends an interesting statement to the beginning of this passage which refers to her plans for the ‘beginning of the book’. Thus we have a conscious admission here from Weil of her future plans for a publication (‘the book’) which will contain ‘these [mystical] thoughts and many others’. During this somnambulant episode, Christ is only ever referred to as ‘He’. We are told that ‘He’ enters Weil’s room and addresses her as a ‘poor creature’ who knows and understands nothing. She continues:

> He took me into a church. It was new and ugly. He led me up to the altar and said: ‘Kneel down’. I said ‘I have not been baptized’.

Weil’s passion for tradition is encapsulated in these few sentences in her dislike for the ‘new’ church, suggesting her concerns and issues with the totalitarian institutional Church as she perceived it.

Further markers and evidence of Weil’s awareness of the medieval tradition within which she was writing are found in the use of courtly language reminiscent of beguine spirituality, such as the instance in which he brings her out of the church and makes her ‘climb up to a garret’ overlooking ‘the whole city’, before allusive reference is made to a romantic/erotic relationship: ‘At other times we would stretch

---

53 *Notebooks*, II, p. 638. Although it is most logical to presume that this statement is made by Weil herself as the text of both volumes of the *Notebooks* is said to represent her own personal notes as they were left to Thibon, it is not clear whether this is perhaps an addition of Thibon’s. This should be kept in mind as in the other main work that he edits and compiles (*Gravity and Grace*) he groups and divides Weil’s writings under a set of broad headings he devises himself.
54 Ibid.
ourselves out on the floor of the garret, and sweet sleep would enfold me’\textsuperscript{55}. Christ’s final departure in the passage is instantaneous and sudden: ‘One day he said to me: “Now go”’, emulating ‘the dark night of the soul’ which of course is a trope common to mystical experience. At another point Weil alludes to an episode whereby she and Christ share the Eucharistic bread:

At times he would fall silent, take some bread from a cupboard, and we would share it. This bread really had the taste of bread. I have never found that taste again. He would pour out some wine for me, and some for himself – wine which tasted of the sun and of the soil upon which this city was built.\textsuperscript{56}

In essence, Christ metaphorically consumes himself here with Weil. The discourses of self-obliterration, self-effacement and ‘unselfing’ characteristic of medieval mysticism are referenced here in what Weil would consider an act of decreation.

Weil provides us with a broad and inexact definition of her idea of decreation in \textit{GG} by defining it in relation to ‘destruction’. In other words, she follows the apophatic tendency of juxtaposing opposites in order to define things by what they are not:

\begin{itemize}
  \item Decreation: to make something created pass into the uncreated.
  \item Destruction: to make something created pass into nothingness.
\end{itemize}

A blameworthy substitute for decreation.\textsuperscript{57}

As with the majority of philosophers and theorists, Weil’s concepts depend very much on each other for their definition – for example, to achieve decreation one must engage the attention\textsuperscript{58} of the will in a patient waiting for the decentring and decreation of the self. A caveat must be added here, in the sense that the majority of

\textsuperscript{55} Notebooks, II, p. 638.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57} Gravity and Grace, p. 28.
\textsuperscript{58} In The Hands of Simone Weil Critical Inquiry 27.4 (Summer, 2001), p. 612 Françoise Meltzer notes that ‘Attention specifically requires the passivity of the ‘I’ and the disappearance of the subject’. 231
her concepts are in fact shaped, defined, articulated and mediated to us posthumously by her male editors/compilers (Perrin and particularly Thibon). However, the logic which informs Weil’s idea of *decreation* as a paradoxically active passivity and vice versa can be seen to be completely embodied by the above imagined encounter with Christ. In consuming the Eucharistic Host there is a metaphorically cannibalistic self-stripping and self-consumption which speaks to the experience of mystical unity with the divine. Invoking the ascetic, affective ethos of the *mulieres religiosae* examined in Chapter 2, this *decreation* - achieved through consumption of the Host - represents an ‘undoing’ of the self in order to connect with God in his human form - Christ. Such a relation could be described as a sort of mutual consumption whereby in consuming the Host, the consumer is also ‘consumed’ in a relation of momentary ‘oneness’ which mirrors the interpenetrative, mutual indwelling of the Trinity. Here then, Weil is able to go beyond her usual and restricted form of consuming the Host via only the gaze (as her medieval counterparts would have done) in order to imagine physical consumption of the blood and body of Christ. Anne Astell remarks, ‘Weil found in the Eucharist a sacramental foretaste of, and guarantee for, that heavenly looking and eating’. ⁵⁹ It is in the act of Eucharistic transubstantiation that the bread changes ‘its very substance, leaving only its appearance’ thereby representing for Weil ‘the perfect *decreation*...’ ⁶⁰ As Weil urges in the chapter on *decreation* contained in *Gravity and Grace*: ‘We must become nothing, we must go down to the vegetative level; it is then that God becomes bread’. ⁶¹ As Anne Carson puts it: ‘she has to disappear from herself in order to look’. ⁶² Returning to the passage itself, I

---

⁶⁰ Astell, p. 231.
⁶¹ *Gravity and Grace*, p. 32.
suggest that the dream-like quality exhibited represents her imagining of the ‘real contact, person to person, here below, between a human being and God’ which she believed could be possible after her epiphanic discovery of Herbert’s poem.

Given the innately mystical bent of Weil’s thought and writings it seems natural that Father Perrin might be drawn to an intellectual woman claiming mystical experience and on the verge of conversion to the Roman Catholic faith. For example, he reassures us: ‘Her great preoccupation... was always the religious question’. A cursory look at the literature written by and about Weil signals Father Perrin’s importance and centrality to her concerns about her possible position within the institutional Church. For example, in her ‘Spiritual Autobiography’ there is a strong sense of Weil’s eagerness to comply with Perrin’s desire to baptize her and officially welcome her into the Church. However, despite this sense of regret she appears to have at disappointing her friend and spiritual guide she holds fast to her decision to remain outside the Church:

I think that if you could really understand what my spiritual state is you would not be at all sorry that you did not lead me to baptism. But I do not know if it is possible for you to understand this.

On the contrary, it would seem that Perrin was fully aware of Weil’s predicament and in Part I of Simone Weil As We Knew Her, he elaborates upon the reasons for Weil’s failure to comply with his wishes and join the Church.

According to Perrin, ‘kind and merciful as she was, [Weil] would sometimes tend to make the exacting demands of a merciless logician’. This was most likely due to her familiarity with and aptitude for classical philosophy. Both Simone and

---

63 Waiting on God, p. 21.
64 Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 23.
65 Waiting on God, p. 15.
66 Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 31.
her brother Andre were schooled from a young age in the Classics. A significant sibling rivalry existed between the two with Simone feeling an intense need ‘to overcome the accident of birth, her femaleness, by sheer exertion of will’. As Nevin points out, ‘it may fairly be wondered whether a pivotal idea in her mature thinking, the decreation or willed annihilation of the ego, the self of personality, would have come to her independent of this private wretchedness’. Furthermore, Weil’s penchant for rigorous and logical enquiry was supported by her ‘exacting demands’ of other priests and religious. For example, in Letter to a Priest she insists upon ‘definite’ and ‘categorical’ answers. Indeed, Weil’s complete incompatibility with the institutional Church can be aptly summarized in her request: ‘All I ask for is a categorical answer’. Weil’s rejection of the catechism of the Council of Trent as indicative of a religion she ‘had nothing in common with’ gestures towards her own particular mystical programme. Due to her cerebral, rational and inward character, what she perceived as the blind faith required for membership of the Roman Catholic Church was a step too far for Weil. Her overall concerns regarding the Church can be summarized in the following passage taken from the letter she wrote to Perrin including her ‘Spiritual Autobiography’:

After the fall of the Roman Empire, which had been totalitarian, it was the Church which was the first to establish a rough sort of totalitarianism in Europe in the XIIIth century, after the war with the Albigenses. This tree bore much fruit. And the motive power of this totalitarianism was the use of those two little words: anathema sit.  

67 Nevin, p. 5.  
68 Nevin, pp. 5-6.  
69 Letter to a Priest, p. 10.  
70 Letter to a Priest, p. 9.  
71 Waiting on God, p. 32.
Weil feels an innate and intimate contact with Christianity which she believes all individuals can attain and which should not be controlled, monitored or restricted by the collective legislations of the institutional Church. Thibon surmises: ‘The central ideal of Protestantism, that the Church is not the Kingdom but a simple means of access to the Kingdom seems to me to represent her position fairly accurately’.  

The doctrine of *anathema sit* from Galatians 1: 1-9, which details the conditions for excommunication from the Church, commands that: ‘if any one preach to you a gospel, besides that which you have received, let him be anathema’ (Galatians 1:9).

That any collective should have the power to expel an individual and deprive them of the holy sacraments jarred completely with Weil’s sense of the grace innately possessed by the created human being and bestowed by the creator-God. It is for this reason that she makes the startling and controversial comparisons between the Church and the fascist dictatorships of the time. Thibon observes: ‘How many times did she not tell me that Catholic totalitarianism was…infinitely worse than that of men like Hitler or Stalin’,  

while in *Gravity and Grace* she compares the church to Plato’s ‘Great Beast’,  

claiming that the church as a ‘collective is the object of all idolatry’.  

She concludes that the church - normally considered as a route to Christ and divine contact while on earth - in fact ‘chains us to the earth’,  

consequently hindering rather than helping in our pursuits to come closer to God. Weil informs Perrin that the Church ‘would have to say openly that she had changed or wished to

---

72 Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 159.
73 Ibid.
74 See Plato’s *Republic* trans. by Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 8, 493b, pp. 214-215 for a discussion of the ‘Great Beast’. The ethical problems inherent in subjecting the multitude to the preferences and prejudices ‘of a huge strong beast’ (439b 214) without thought for the moral implications of forcing conformity to the whims of an institution, are to the detriment of the personal pursuit of truth and goodness by the individual.
75 *Gravity and Grace*, p. 144.
76 Ibid.
change. Otherwise who could take her seriously when they remembered the Inquisition?  

Interestingly, Weil poses a rhetorical question here but is so self-assuredly and stubbornly convinced of her own argument that she does not even insert a question mark. This sort of instance clearly supports Perrin's comments regarding her predisposition towards being a 'merciless logician'\(^{78}\) at times. However, he does attempt to correct Weil's 'misinterpretations' or 'attacks'\(^{79}\) on the Church throughout the text, and at times his disapproval slips towards a tone tinged with contempt. For example, he is harsh but arguably fair in his critique of Weil's propensity for collapsing religious traditions and eliding historical periods:

> When she invented a history of Catholicism, she forgot that Rome is not the capital of Christianity because of Caesar or Augustus, but because it was there that Peter and Paul bore witness with their blood.\(^{80}\)

Weil was obviously aware of Perrin's disapproval of her concerns about the Church and her tone is almost regretful and apologetic as she concludes her letter to him with a sort of disclaimer, exonerating herself of the 'Luciferian pride'\(^{81}\) with which she speaks of high matters. She claims that 'ideas come and settle in [her] mind by mistake, then, realising their mistake, they absolutely insist on coming out'.\(^{82}\)

Presumably it is precisely this unpredictable nature of Weil's which ensured her exclusion from involvement with Father Perrin's secular institute Caritas Christi.

Whereas Father Perrin often references 'unpublished fragment[s]' and sources in his discussion of Weil and perhaps misrepresents his own presumptions as
evidence which ‘enable [him] to affirm’ Weil’s acceptance or belief in certain church dogmas, I would argue that on the whole, his treatment is fair and true to his original aim of ensuring that Weil’s voice is heard. Converse, I would suggest that Gustave Thibon’s treatment of Weil in this biography hints towards his own possibly unconscious agendas. In many respects, Thibon functions as a modern-day ‘hagiographer’ for Weil. In his Introduction to the text he ‘observes the tendency towards hagiography in ‘the reception’ of Weil’s message. At the beginning of Part II - his biography of Weil entitled: ‘How Simone Weil Appeared to Me’ - he claims that he will be ‘disregarding the immense halo of commentaries, discussions and legends which surround her’. I would like to suggest that of both male biographers, Thibon rather than priest Father Perrin is in fact closest to practicing the tropes explored in Chapter 4 as illustrative of the medieval hagiography. Both men were educated and committed Roman Catholics, and so it is quite probable that they consciously wrote within this medieval tradition. For example, Thibon’s use of language constantly emphasizes Weil’s otherworldliness or ‘saintliness’, subsequently negating his attempt at a ‘balanced’, unsentimental and ‘unadorned likeness of Simone Weil...’ He remarks upon Weil’s ‘elevation of soul...as a kind of unconscious defiance of mediocrity’ before explaining that ‘...before her, one felt stripped bare, pierced through and through... [as] her saintliness and radiance could at times wound’.

Unsurprisingly, Thibon claims to be unbiased and fair in his account of Weil. His appraisal of the biographical genre aligns the biographer with the ‘narrator’ who tends to insert facts from biographies ‘into ready-made frameworks and to force

---

83 Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 33; p. 40.
84 Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 5.
85 Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 111.
86 Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 113; p. 112.
87 Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 126.
them into the artificial unity demanded by the legend’. Arguably, he is particularly interested in achieving this ‘artificial unity’ in effecting his own version of the Weil legend. He admits that ‘this portrait may appear complex and contradictory’ but ultimately concedes that although he will ‘lay bare [his] evidence...this does not mean that it will be perfect’ as indeed, it reflects only his opinions and personal interpretations of Weil. In this painfully self-aware disclaimer provided by Thibon at the beginning of Part II he manages to fall into the very habit he accuses Weil of - that is, a self-consciousness which limits the self and prevents it from true detachment (required in Weil’s case for truly loving the Other - God.) Thibon claims: ‘Simone Weil’s ego was not dead...In so far as she despises herself Simone Weil forgets to forget herself’. I would suggest that Thibon’s section of the text implies that he is guilty of the very same thing. Whilst I believe his preoccupations with his own literary reputation as poet and philosopher are not always consciously or intentionally promoted, this does occur throughout the text. As Thibon himself comments, ‘Every witness is obliged to say: ‘I saw’. What matters is whether he places the accent on the I or the saw, on the subject or the object’. However, he follows this statement with a somewhat cloying tone which throws the accuracy and neutrality of his account of Weil into question. He beseeches: ‘may those angels who restrain our self-complacency and absurdity keep me from speaking about myself in writing of Simone Weil!’.

It would seem that Thibon fails in this aim and more often than not shows himself to be guilty of the same faults he finds in Weil, as represented by his criticisms in Part II. For example, he comments on the paradoxical nature of Weil’s

---

88 Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 111.
89 Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 112; p. 113.
90 Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 138.
91 Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 114.
92 Ibid.
aim of *decreation* or ‘unselfing’ whereby the desire for self-effacement is contradicted by the stubborn self which wills its own destruction: ‘On the one hand there was a longing for self-effacement... and on the other, a terrible self-will at the very heart of the self-stripping...’.\(^{93}\) Certainly the echo of Thibon’s protests regarding the difficulties of extracting himself from his biography of Weil can be heard here. These accusations of self-interested egoism recur throughout the text, with Thibon emphasizing the paradoxical selfishness of Weil’s selflessness. In pursuit of the self-denial, suffering and affliction which she believed was a necessary part of worldly life, Weil refused to stay with Thibon in his comfortable house instead preferring to stay alone in a ramshackle house ‘on the banks of the Rhône’\(^{94}\) while working on the farm. In this respect, Thibon is justified in his belief that despite aiming for complete detachment and self-annihilation, Weil’s ‘I’ voice continually reappears, asserting her subjectivity and will in the face of her project of *decreation*, self-destruction and self-surrender. He comments:

> Though utterly and entirely detached from her tastes and needs, she was not detached from her detachment. And the way she mounted guard around her emptiness still showed a terrible preoccupation with herself. In the great book of the universe spread often before her, her *ego* was, as it were, a word which she may perhaps have succeeded in *effacing*, but which was still *underlined*.\(^{95}\)

Another interesting feature of Weil and Thibon’s relationship are the instances of role reversal which are revealed at different points in Thibon’s text. For example, in her ‘Spiritual Autobiography’ Weil tells us: ‘last summer, doing Greek with T..., I went through the ‘Our Father’ word for word in Greek. We promised

\(^{93}\) *Simone Weil As We Knew Her*, p. 114.
\(^{94}\) *Simone Weil As We Knew Her*, p. 117.
\(^{95}\) *Simone Weil As We Knew Her*, p. 119.
each other to learn it by heart'. Weil’s informal description here reveals that she in fact occupied the role of teacher in educating Thibon in Greek language and philosophy during the summer she spent at the vineyard. Thibon confirms this stating: ‘she read Plato to me for long stretches, supporting the halting steps of the poor Greek scholar that I am with a thousand explanations’. This is in stark contrast to the misogynistic opinions held and statements typically made by male commentators on Thibon and Weil’s relationship. For example, in his 1951 Preface to Weil’s *The Need for Roots*, T.S. Eliot congratulates Weil on ‘a kind of genius akin to that of the saints’ and on ‘a wisdom in avoiding extremes, astonishing in anyone so young’. However, this compliment turns out to be back-handed as the typical criticism of the female intellect is employed: ‘Simone Weil begins with an insight; but the logic of her emotions can lead her to make generalisations so large as to be meaningless’. This patronizing analysis is further compounded by Eliot’s misapprehension that Weil’s brilliance and saint-like ‘genius’ was the product of her education by Thibon: ‘It may be that in her conversations with Gustave Thibon she profited more than she knew from her contact with that wise and well-balanced mind’. In fact, I would argue that as the role reversal described above illustrates, Thibon and Weil shared a mutually beneficial relationship, and Thibon’s text reveals that on more than one occasion, Weil adopted the traditionally male position of teacher and in some cases, editor. For example, Thibon claims that before leaving the farm ‘[Weil] asked [him] to let her have all [his] unpublished work so that she

---

96 *Waiting on God*, p. 23.
97 *Simone Weil As We Knew Her*, p. 124.
100 Eliot, Preface, p. 11.
103 Eliot, Preface, p. 11.
could read it quietly’. ¹⁰⁴ Again, Thibon is inserting himself into the narrative here, but whether the motives for doing so are born of a desire to show his respect for Weil’s opinion or some other less flattering reason, can only be speculation. Regardless, Weil provides her response to this unpublished work of Thibon’s which was presumably a mixture of philosophical writings and poetry. In doing so she employs that medieval trope of ‘the dark night of the soul’ in her critique, adopting the voice and tone of a dispassionate yet informed editor: ‘You have already experienced the dark night, but it is my belief that a great deal of it still remains for you to pass through before giving your true measure’. ¹⁰⁵ Thibon (perhaps inadvertently) allows us a glimpse into the workings of the power dynamic which structured his relationship with Weil. Although he has the power to construct and define her posthumously, she was not such a submissive subject when she was the ‘impossible person’¹⁰⁶ living on his farm.

Thibon echoes Jacques de Vitry in his constant emphasis and reiteration of Weil’s holy, otherworldly and even saint-like status. On several different occasions he seems to juxtapose Weil with the suffering Christ on the Cross, aligning Weil with the ultimate event of suffering, self-sacrifice and affliction. One anecdote playfully gestures towards stigmata-like marks caused by Weil’s only pair of sabot shoes which ‘fitted her badly…[,] made her ankles bleed and left a mark on them in two places’. ¹⁰⁷ While this episode could have been innocently included by Thibon, I would suggest that the next example leaves no room for argument. Thibon divulges his most treasured memory of Weil, which involved a discussion regarding her use of her wages to buy tobacco (her only vice):

¹⁰⁴ Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 122.
¹⁰⁵ Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 123.
¹⁰⁶ Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 113.
¹⁰⁷ Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 129.
Of all the pictures I have kept in my mind of Simone Weil, no other moves me as much as that one. It is in those moments when the hero, the saint, or the God embraces the needs and weaknesses of men that his greatness is brought home to us most clearly and penetratingly. When Christ says, “I thirst”, these humble words remind us of the tenderly fraternal aspect of the inaccessible being who proclaimed, ‘I am the Beginning’. This is undoubtedly a rather lofty comparison and while it may not be intended, I would argue that Thibon’s later reference to ‘that thirst’ of Weil’s ‘for pure goodness which drew her towards heaven’ would imply that he is aware of the mirror images he is establishing and the comparisons he is inviting his reader to make. Also crucial here is the fact that after elevating Weil to the status of ‘the hero, the saint, or the God’, Thibon includes a significant digression in the form of one of his own unpublished poems. This poem is religious and concerns the nature of God:

    This God who decreed measure and number,
    And instituted unalterable order throughout the universe,
    Behold him under the weight of his creation…

The poem is in no way linked to Weil. Arguably this is a perfect example of Thibon’s inability to escape his own ego as he cannot refrain from inserting himself into the text. It would seem that Thibon’s account of Weil ‘as he knew her’ is also being used as a means of protecting and/or reinforcing his own literary reputation as philosopher and poet. Even when expressing his admiration for Weil’s genius which

---

108 Simone Weil As We Knew Her, pp. 127-128.
109 Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 133.
110 Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 127.
111 Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 128.
he claims ‘is of a philosophic and religious order’, it seems that Thibon’s own self-interested ‘I’ voice is constantly hovering in the subtext of his critique. For example, he laments the fact that ‘no genius is a mere witness... he invents; his productions are an amalgam of revelation and creation. Everybody admits this in the case of poets. Why not in the case of philosophers?’ There is a sense that although superficially this is a statement in defence of Weil, Thibon is also doggedly defending his own position as both poet and philosopher, thereby indulging in his own egoism and committing the very offence he constantly accuses Weil of throughout his biographical study of her. His own writerly anxieties thus come to the fore and further obstruct our view of his subject Weil – a view which is already significantly blurred by the conventions and limitations of the biographical genre.

Anne Carson’s Mystical Inheritances From ‘Sainte Simone’

If Simone Weil’s goal in her programme of decreation was ‘the destruction of the “I”’, poet Anne Carson’s goal can be described as an attempt to remove the distraction of that ‘I’. Carson attempts to do this in various ways but a method characteristic of her style is her idiosyncratic fusion of disparate historical periods, moments and voices. She also experiments with form in her poetry, resulting in the creation of poetry collections which are also art objects in and of themselves. Her 2010 collection Nox is one such example which was created with the help of her husband Robert Currie. This work is an elegy for her brother Michael which is interspersed with family photographs, scraps of handwritten letters to and from Michael, and with definitions of various Greek words and legends. Due to her

---

112 Simone Weil As We Knew Her, p. 141.
113 Ibid.
114 Gravity and Grace, p. 23.
115 Anne Carson, Nox (New York: New Directions, 2010).
background as a Classicist, Carson also interweaves sections from the famous Greek
elegy ‘Catallus 101’ into her text resulting in a strange format whereby the recto
pages are usually reserved for writing related either to Michael or to ‘Cattallus 101’,
while on the verso pages Carson translates each word from the poem, providing her
own glosses. The work folds out of its surrounding box leaf by leaf, much as an
accordion would be decompressed. Carson’s latest work Antigonick (2012),\textsuperscript{116} a
translation of Sophocles’s Antigone, is similarly creative in format as it is
interspersed with illustrations by poet and illustrator Bianca Stone which overlay the
text, resulting in Emily Stokes’s review in The Guardian describing Antigonick as ‘a
“comic book” of Sophocles’ tragedy.’\textsuperscript{117}

As these two works demonstrate, Carson’s poetic style is brave and varied,
and to use one of the ‘useless tags’\textsuperscript{118} Nevin complained of earlier, it is postmodern.
In a 2004 interview with Will Aitken Carson responds to Aitken’s questioning of her
style of fusing old and new and of linking the as yet unlinked by commenting that
‘individuality resides in the way links are made’.\textsuperscript{119} I would also suggest that as
Carson began writing in the wake of the Confessional poetry of the 1960s (Sylvia
Plath, Anne Sexton, John Berryman) she was perhaps drawn to the medieval
mystical tradition and its focus on self-effacement as a conscious attempt at moving
away from the ever-present, personal and therefore limiting ‘I’ voice. Certainly both
Weil and Carson were drawn to the discourses of self-emptying, self-surrender and
self-abnegation which characterize medieval mysticism. Carson has described this
logic as:

\textsuperscript{116} Anne Carson, Antigonick (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2012).

guardian.co.uk/books/2012/jun/08/antigonick-anne-carson-review> [Accessed: 4 September 2012].

\textsuperscript{118} Nevin, p. 9.

[...] the state of standing outside one's own soul that constitutes ecstasy, but which also constitutes what many mystics strive to achieve in cancelling their selfhood so that they can be empty vessels for God.¹²⁰

It is unsurprising then that Carson finds herself heavily influenced by both Weil and the medieval mystics. One collection in particular entitled Decreation (2006) incorporates these influences in Carson's essay: 'Decreation: How Women like Sappho, Porete and Weil Tell God' (2006). As the title indicates, Carson's concern is with the practice of telling as 'a function of self'.¹²¹ This of course has interesting implications in the context of the discussion above of Father Perrin and Gustave Thibon as Weil's biographers/quasi hagiographers as indeed it is two men who articulate female subjectivity and ultimately 'tell' Weil. By contrast, women such as Sappho and Marguerite Porete 'tell' themselves in their respective texts. For Carson, the modes of telling or self-expression employed by Sappho, Porete and Weil are revealing about their attitudes to God, their love of God and ultimately, their self-love rooted in love of God. As Carson observes:

if we study the way these three writers talk about their own telling, we can see how each of them feels moved to create a sort of dream of distance in which the self is displaced from the centre of the work and the teller disappears into the telling.¹²²

The displacement of the self from the centre of the work is the exact kind of decentering called for by Sappho's ecstatic 'unseling' where 'we see her Being thrown outside its own centre'.¹²³ Similarly it resonates with Porete's 'self-noughting' and mystical annihilation in God whereby she 'feels her self pulled apart

¹²² Ibid.
from itself", and likewise with Weil's concept of *decreation* which expresses her need 'to render back to God what God has given to her, that is, the self'.

In all three cases, this relation is one borne of the self actively willing its own negation or effacement. However, by virtue of the fact that the self wills itself to be nothing, to be effaced, to be surrendered in, with and to the majesty of the divine Godhead, it will always be something, as the 'I' which wills its own destruction simultaneously negates its own nothingness. This is the hallmark of the *via negativa* which characterizes the apophatic tradition driving the medieval mysticism explored in this thesis. Carson observes that in fact 'withness is the problem' as both Porete and Weil face the same dilemma wherein 'they cannot go towards God in love without bringing [themselves] along'.

Although Porete and Weil are perhaps most suitably and easily compared in the essay, Carson's own identifications with Weil provide an interesting insight into her own inability to escape, leave behind or stand outside of her self in her interpretation of these women. For example, Weil references a letter written from Weil to Thibon in which she implores him to remember her and think of her from time to time after their separation 'as one thinks of a book read in childhood'. Carson then provides us with her 'telling' of her own childhood reminiscence of her affection and fondness for 'a little book of *The Lives of the Saints* that was given to [her] about age five'. She describes the book as follows:

---

126 'Ibid.
In this book the various flowers composing the crowns of the martyrs were so lusciously rendered in words and paint that I had to be restrained from eating the pages.\textsuperscript{128}

Just as Weil mirrored the medieval synaesthetic practice of seeing as tasting the Eucharist, so too Carson’s physical appetite is stimulated and engaged by her gaze. Carson probes this strange sensation and compulsion to eat further, concluding that:

...maybe the impulse to eat pages isn’t about taste...it’s about being placed at the crossing-point of a contradiction, which is a painful place to be and children in their natural wisdom will not consent to stay there, but mystics love it.\textsuperscript{129}

This emphasis on the idea of the ‘crossing-point of a contradiction’ is absolutely crucial to the shifting relation and oscillating dynamic between the positive and the negative, the cataphatic and the apophatic and ‘selfing’ and ‘unselfing’ which defines medieval mysticism. Carson manages to reduce one of the most complex relationships imaginable into a few short sentences here, reflecting the power of her idiosyncratic approach to considering these women and their mysticism creatively, using different formats. (For example, Carson also wrote a three-part opera entitled ‘Decreation’ which is included in the same collection).

Having examined Carson’s ideas on ‘the dream of distance’ which enables the ‘teller to disappear into the telling’, it is useful to conclude with her comment on Gustave Thibon’s editorial efforts as the ‘teller’ of Weil’s tale in \textit{Gravity and Grace}.\textsuperscript{130} Carson refers to the ‘dozen’\textsuperscript{131} or so personal notebooks left by Weil to Thibon on the understanding that if she did not return, he was to incorporate them

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{129} ‘Decreation: How Women Like Sappho, Porete and Weil Tell God’, p. 175.
into his own writing however he so wished. Weil thus authorized her own ‘unselfing’ or self-effacement here. She decentres herself by removing herself from the locus of her text in order to let her ideas stand alone and speak for themselves. In short, she attempts to disappear into her own telling. Carson informs us that in compiling the notebooks (which are significantly lengthy at two volumes) Thibon simply ‘extracted punchy passages’\textsuperscript{132} to be grouped under broad titles. In doing so, he in fact ‘made a serious effort to force [Weil] back into the centre of herself, and the degree to which she nonetheless eludes this reinstallation is very hard for readers...to judge from outside’ (‘Decreation’ 174).\textsuperscript{133} Indeed, his re-mediation of her thoughts and ideas somewhat obscures Weil’s voice despite best intentions or otherwise. As Carson astutely observes, despite the desire women like Weil may have had to ‘tell’ of themselves, it is a complicated and often self-negating endeavour which relies upon the ability of the teller to decentre or decreate themselves and to disappear ‘into the telling’.\textsuperscript{134} In the case of Simone Weil, who refused membership of all collectives (Communist Party, Roman Catholic Church), she was able to destroy the ‘I’ through her own controlled attempts at wilful self-effacement within God. However, she could not control the displacement of her ‘I’ voice as consciously or unconsciously perpetrated by her male biographers/‘hagiographers’, Perrin and Thibon.

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid.


Conclusion
The Apophatic ‘Re-turn’?

Having explored the various manifestations of the medieval mystical tradition over the course of this thesis, it is hoped that several specific preoccupations have emerged. As the untimely relation borne out in this thesis between the mystical tradition and the contemporary moment indicates, past belief systems are often far from surpassed or absent – instead they are variously assimilated into the current, fashionable modes of belief of the day, or in some cases, are returned to, as evidenced by the so-called ‘religious’ or ‘apophatic turn’ in the late-twentieth century. It is the contention of this thesis that female medieval mystical texts demonstrate a self-abnegating subjectivity, rooted within the apophatic tradition and an oscillating dynamic between the positive and the negative; the cataphatic and apophatic; ‘sayings’ and ‘unsayings’, which enable a particular and paradoxical form of female self-expression. Particular, in that it is characteristic of female ‘mystics’ and writers and a peculiarly affective and ‘female’ way of relating to the past; and paradoxical, in that it sees women engage in a form of self-expression which both empowers and negates the self at different moments. For example, this mode of expression is most often couched within the patriarchal languages, institutions and traditions which alternate between confining and assisting this particular mode of female self-expression in the first place. Chapters Two, Three, Four and Five have demonstrated the effects of male mediation of the female mystical voice and the implications for a receiving culture (whether modern or medieval). We have probed the reasons behind the personal connections and identifications made by the medieval mystics and also by the modern scholars who study them. A leitmotif of
this thesis has been Nicholas Watson’s assertion that affective engagement with and empathetic study of the past ‘thus becomes something like the mystic’s quest for union with God’.¹ For this reason, this final chapter aims to further explore the issue of these ‘passionate investments in [and identifications with] the past’² in order to better situate the modern desire to ‘touch’ the past. Framed in relation to the ‘religious’ or ‘apophatic’ turn within the contemporary humanities, this concluding chapter hopes to suggest the tendency inherent in religion itself as a concept to ‘undo’ and ‘unsay’ itself in contemporary society. Hence, this chapter is informed by a question posed by Hent de Vries:

Has religion as an overarching concept lost all its currency, or does it ineluctably return – sometimes in unexpected ways – the moment we attempt to do without it?³

In Religion: Beyond a Concept De Vries interrogates the notion of the ‘post-secular’ and challenges the very notion of religion itself as a concept. For example, De Vries wonders whether ‘the term religion ever merely named, then designated, and finally conceptualized something remotely specific’.⁴ The indeterminacy embodied by the term ‘religion’ as imagined by De Vries is mirrored by the term ‘post-secular’, which can only be briefly considered here. For example, a wealth of contemporary articles from various sectors of the social sciences would have us believe (and question) the notion that we are currently in the midst of a ‘post-secular present’. Sociologist James Beckford observes that ‘it has become increasingly common in recent years for conferences and conference sessions to contain references to the postsecular in

² Watson, p. 2.
⁴ De Vries, p. 2.
their titles. However, debate over what the term actually stands for is still ongoing, with various different theories proposed.

The ‘Post-Secular Moment’ and the Contemporary Place of Religion

Post-secularity has its roots, of course, in nineteenth-century sociological ideas of secularism and ‘the secularization thesis’, described by Charles Wright Mills as follows:

Once the world was filled with the sacred – in thought, practice, and institutional form. After the Reformation and the Renaissance, the forces of modernization swept across the globe and secularization, a corollary historical process, loosened the dominance of the sacred. In due course, the sacred shall disappear altogether except, possibly, in the private realm.

If secularism entails a complete separation of Church and State affairs as religion becomes less important in modern, industrialized societies and is eventually suppressed to the private sphere, encouraging individuals to indulge in what Charles Taylor has described as Western secularity’s ‘drive toward personal religion’, then post-secularism defines the state of affairs after this separation has allegedly taken place. Beckford offers one definition of the post-secular as ‘both a crucial stage of historical development and a fruitful ground for the cultivation of new forms of religiosity’. Other possible definitions might view post-secularism as building on the achievements of secularism (John Caputo), while another proposed by Arthur

---


7 This term can only briefly be sketched here for reasons of space. For a book-length study of secularism and its implications see Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011 [2004]).


9 Beckford, p. 3.
Bradley et al might claim that religion never really went away in the first place and is instead ‘an irreducible category of thought, feeling, experience and imagination which can never be explained away and with which we will always have to reckon’.\(^\text{10}\)

As these various different interpretations of the place of religion in the contemporary demonstrate, the difficulties inherent in addressing issues of religion and belief (both individual and collective) are enormous. But we have already found ourselves in a similar epistemic quandary to our apophatic medieval forbears: linguistic terms cannot sufficiently encapsulate the diversity and pluralism which inheres within the catch-all term of ‘religion’. Crucially, the very idea of religion as posed by apophatic language challenges conceptions of a post-secular culture. As De Vries comments:

Religion in its very concept – and what may (still?) lie ‘beyond it’ – is clearly one of the most demanding and frustrating objects for research in the humanities and the social sciences...A semantic black hole whose ‘absence-presence’ lets no single light escape, whether from its inner regions or from its surface...‘religion’ has resisted all enlightenment.\(^\text{11}\)

Apart from its apt encapsulation of the difficulties of such an enterprise, De Vries is likewise locked into the grand narrative outlined above by Wright Mills, summarizing the secularization thesis and religion’s predicted decline within post-Enlightenment, industrialized modern societies. Thus, there is often a built in, self-referential rhetoric present in writings on the topic whereby religion is lambasted for its lack of enlightened reason and rationale. The disconnection here, between the system being judged and the criteria used to judge it, is apparent. As evidenced by


\(^{11}\) De Vries, p. 8.
philosopher Charles Taylor’s sentimentalizing portrayal of the supposedly naïve ‘dark’ Middle Ages and the ‘enchanted world of our medieval ancestors’,\textsuperscript{12} the impact of value judgements are of paramount importance when we attempt to write and understand religion subjectively and dispassionately (a level of critical distance we idealistically attempt to maintain in all areas of academic enquiry).

Indeed, De Vries’s claim that religion ‘has resisted all enlightenment’\textsuperscript{13} recalls one of the familiar narratives of modernity whereby, post- Reformation, Renaissance and Enlightenment, we believe ourselves to be on a teleological trajectory, disenchanted by the primitive offerings of religion and invested instead in the idea that human knowledge will steadily progress via the advances of rationalist scientific enquiry. While an answer to the complex question initially posed by De Vries is most likely the topic of another thesis, I take its challenge as a supplement to the analysis of the apophatic mode undertaken in the thesis. Resisting the traditional periodizing narratives of religion encourages a ‘thinking beyond’ which applies equally well to the discourses of ‘unsaying’ and ‘unknowing’ which drive the apophatic mode. Such resistance has manifested itself in the influence of the ‘apophatic’ upon some late twentieth-century Continental philosophy: in the apophatic’s ‘return’.

\textit{‘Afterlives’ of Apophaticism}

Negative theology is not simply a theological concept or tradition we can use or drop at will…it is a form of thought whose characteristic feature is to

---

\textsuperscript{12} Taylor, p. 182.
\textsuperscript{13} De Vries, p. 8.
move beyond itself, to transgress the limits of the thinkable and – however impossibly – to think the other as absolutely and unconditionally other.\textsuperscript{14}

So remarks Arthur Bradley in his 2004 study of the \textit{via negativa} and its relevance to modern French philosophy. As he points out, the ability of apophatic language to move beyond, to transcend and to contemplate the Other is as much a cornerstone of Continental philosophy as of the medieval \textit{via negativa}. Thus the uncertainties and ambiguities ushered in by the postmodernity of the late-twentieth century testify to a loss of confidence in language – hence, the ‘apophatic turn’. Stuart McWilliams has commented that ‘far from being the hallmark of a prior age, religion and the dubious domain of “belief” are unavoidable concerns of the contemporary’.\textsuperscript{15} It is for this reason that the poststructuralist thought of the late-twentieth century sees a return to those apophatic discourses which undergird and drive the medieval mystical tradition. Bruce Holsinger labels these Continental thinkers the critical ‘avant garde’\textsuperscript{16} and notes their fascination with the medieval:

\begin{quote}
In its variegated assault on the legacy of the Enlightenment, the critical generation of this era turned to the Middle Ages not in a fit of nostalgic retrospection, but in a spirit of both interpretative and ideological resistance to the relentless inevitability of modernity.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

Since the 1960s, Continental thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Jean Luc Marion, Emmanuel Levinas, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous have revisited the apophatic mode and incorporated it into their theoretical discourse in an attempt to seek refuge in its languages of uncertainty and ‘unsayability’. Annemie Halsema has observed

\begin{footnotes}
\item[17] Holsinger, p. 5.
\end{footnotes}
that ‘in the last few decades, many thinkers within Continental hermeneutical and phenomenological philosophy have shown an interest in religion’. By utilizing the unlimited, self-negating logic of apophatic discourse with its ability to construct and collapse boundaries at will, they were able to articulate their current moment in order to think the present in relation to the so-called ‘religious turn’ that had recently come to the fore. William Franke has summarized this phenomenon as follows:

Periodically in intellectual history, confidence in the Logos, in the ability of the word to grasp reality and disclose truth, flags dramatically. Discourses in many disciplines and fields suddenly become dubious and problematic as...the currency of the word goes bust. The cyclical collapse of verbal assurance fosters cultures that can be characterized as “apophatic”, that is, as veering into widespread worries about the reliability of words and even into wholesale refusal of rational discourse.

As a form of articulation which facilitates an interpretative space between what can be said and put into words about a certain thing or concept and what cannot, apophatic discourse provides a certain freedom of self-articulation and expression which lends itself particularly well to poststructuralist thought and to ‘French thinkers of “difference”’. As poststructuralism relies upon the challenging and collapsing of traditional binaries in order to enable the aporic junctures of deferred meaning to occur, a discourse such as apophasicism is particularly fitting. By defining a particular thing (in this case, God) by what it is not, the discourse directly engages in this deconstructive project.

---

20 Franke, p. 11.
Any discussion of poststructuralist thought would of course be incomplete without a consideration of the work and thought of Jacques Derrida (1930-2004). His interpretation and inclusion of the apophatic within his theoretical writings clearly indicate the ‘religious turn’ at work in Continental philosophy. Derrida’s 1967 work *Of Grammatology* sees him elaborate on the problem of language, and on the crisis of confidence outlined above by Franke, as follows:

However the topic is considered, the *problem of language* has never been simply one problem among others. But never as much as at present has it invaded...the global horizon of the most diverse researches and the most heterogeneous discourses, diverse and heterogeneous in their intention, method, and ideology.\(^{21}\)

The problem of language is thus considered a particularly timely and pertinent issue by Derrida, and there is a sense of urgency implied in the need to address it and its ‘invasion’ of current discourses. Emerging in the 1960s in the wake of structuralist linguistics which identified all words (signifiers) as the deferred presences of the things (signified) that they mean, Derridean *deconstruction* called for the decentraling and deconstruction of the traditional binaries which dominate and delineate Western culture. The Western privileging of speech over writing (and thus presence over absence) is of particular interest to Derrida. In a *logocentric* Western culture supposedly spoken into existence by a present and perfect Creator-God,\(^{22}\) the immediacy of the spoken word is deemed superior to the deferred semantic presences represented by the written word. Derrida describes the relation between the utterance and its meaning and its root in the ultimate speaker (God) as follows:


\(^{22}\) "Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’" (Genesis 1:26)
Even when the thing, the ‘referent’, is not immediately related to the logos of a creator God where it began by being the spoken/thought sense, the signified has at any rate an immediate relationship with the logos in general (finite or infinite), and a mediated one with the signifier, that is to say with the exteriority of writing.\textsuperscript{23}

According to Derrida, the interpretation of any literary text relies upon the playful, and most importantly, endless replication and dissemination of meaning which inheres within the written word – arguably the fundamental premise of apophatic discourse and the subversive language it sponsors is recalled here. Such an unravelling of the polyvalent nature of language in the hermeneutic quest for meaning results in the destabilization of the structuralist system and theory of semiotics. Furthermore, language itself functions as a similar ‘text’ comprised of exactly the patriarchal systems of power which constitute and communicate its existence. Interpretation of all language thus requires that language deconstructs itself. It must ‘undo’ or ‘unsay’ itself in order to reveal the various layers of deferred meaning (the trace) which each word signifies and gestures towards. In this respect, I would argue that Derridean deconstruction shares many parallels with the negative or apophatic theology which drives the mystical tradition. The opening lines of Derrida’s ‘Sauf le Nom (Post-Scriptum)’\textsuperscript{24} describe a voice which seems to allude to the very nature of apophatic language and the oscillating dynamic inherent therein between positive and negative sayings: ‘[…] it is always necessary to be more than one in order to speak, several voices are necessary for that […] this [apophatic] voice multiplies itself, dividing within itself: it says one thing and its contrary’. This essay on the name and particularly, the nameability of God, thinks through the implications

\textsuperscript{23} Of Grammatology, p. 15.
of saving the name; specifically, God’s name, which as evidenced by the ‘unsayings’ of the via negativa is ‘the name that names nothing that might hold, not even a divinity’.

God as ‘the name beyond the name’ and ‘the unnameable nameable’, represents for Derrida ‘the name of this bottomless collapse, of this endless desertification of language’ which results from apophatic discourse. For Derrida negative theology represents ‘not only a language and a testing of language, but above all […] a discourse on language’. Figuring negative theology as ‘a culture, with its [own] archives and its tradition’, negative theology is inescapable according to Derrida, who despite acknowledging the unlimited nature of negative theology in its ability and avowed aim to transcend or go beyond language, also notes the fact that the discourse it aims to transcend still remains, thus problematizing the mode of transcendence it promises. He comments, ‘[…] the discourse of negative theology “consists” in exceeding essence and language, by testifying it “remains”’. This ‘jealous anger of language within itself and against itself’ represents its intent to undo and unsay itself: ultimately the source of the enactment of this undoing and unsaying remains language. Essentially, the name remains. Thus, Derrida summarizes an issue which has also informed the research conclusions of this thesis – in the attempt to go beyond language, (whether to know God or to know the Other), our only mode of access (language) necessarily remains and frustrates the attempt by limiting the boundaries of what we can say and thus know. In considering the nature of negative theology as a discourse, Franke remarks:

25 ‘Sauf le Nom’, p. 55.
26 ‘Sauf le Nom’, p. 58.
27 ‘Sauf le Nom’, pp. 55-56.
28 ‘Sauf le Nom’, p. 54.
29 Ibid.
30 ‘Sauf le Nom’, p. 54.
31 ‘Sauf le Nom’, p. 59.
Negative theology is a discourse, nothing but a discourse, yet it is also the absolute denial of discourse. It refers beyond itself to what it cannot say, and is in fact nothing but this reference. As such it is a model for language in general.  

A certain infinite regress thus appears to dominate both in the case of Derrida’s elusive trace and the unknowable God of negative theology. Although fixed, single meanings are virtually impossible via Derrida’s deconstructionist model; referents and their meanings are a form of delayed presence as opposed to complete absence. In this sense, the Creator-God sought by the medieval and modern women analyzed in this thesis alike can be usefully thought of as the ultimate delayed presence — not yet present, but still to come through the endless deferrals of meaning or ‘unsayings’ of apophatic discourse. Shira Wolosky has suggested that ‘to be “beyond Being” is in fact the same as to be beyond language’. The suggestion of the proximity between an otherworldly God and ineffability is obvious. Several other essays shed interesting light on this interplay between Derridean thought and negative theology. For example, some of Derrida’s later essays such as ‘How to avoid speaking: Denials’ see him address issues which resonate with the apophatic even at the most fundamental level of their titles.

Another Continental thinker influenced by the ‘apophatic turn’ and often considered in conjunction with the medieval mystics is feminist Luce Irigaray (b.1930). Building on Derridean notions of logocentric Western culture, Irigaray aligns herself with Derrida’s nuanced version of the term phallocentrism, which

---

denotes the privileging of masculine language and thought in Western culture. In an attempt to shatter such patriarchal discourse Irigaray articulates the need for a *parler femme* or ‘a speaking as woman’ which would in effect be a feminine language - an alternative to patriarchally inflected Western language which would enable the female to speak on their own terms. Mulder-Bakker and McAvoy have noted Irigaray’s recognition of ‘the “work” undertaken by language as [a] traditionally […] male and masculinist enterprise’ which disrupts and excludes the female voice. Bradley describes the different projects of Derrida and Irigaray as follows:

Derrida […] relocate[s] the subject within a network of infinitely extending spatio-temporal textual differences […] whereas […] Irigaray criticize[s] the positioning of the female subject within phallogocentric hierarchies and insist[s] that “she” actually resists singular definition or nomination.

Two main texts encapsulate Irigaray’s project and her fascination with the mystical: *Speculum of the Other Woman* and *This Sex Which is Not One*. Irigaray hopes to achieve this feminine language through a process she calls ‘language work’ — a process which would result in the fact that language ‘could no longer, all by itself, define, circumvene [and] circumscribe, the properties of any thing and everything’.

A prime example of this sort of ‘language work’ is provided in one particular essay from *Speculum of the Other Woman* entitled, ‘*La Mystérieque*’. Irigaray’s English translator Gillian Gill has noted that in choosing this playful title Irigaray creates a neologism in which ‘four elements are fused […]: mysticism, hysteria, mystery, and

---

38 ‘The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine’ in *This Sex Which is Not One*, p. 80.
39 Ibid.
the femaleness [‘la mystérieque’] fundamental to the previous three’. By interlinking these three different qualities often considered to be traditionally feminine, Irigaray lets each quality work against itself as language ‘undoes’ itself and defers meaning to the point that a neologism is coined instead: ‘la mystérieque’. In coining a new term for ‘mystic language or discourse’, Irigaray ‘unsays’ traditional assumptions about the feminine enabling us to reassess each quality individually and also the relations between them, once they have been recombined as the new term. However, we still arguably find ourselves detached from a true definition of woman or femaleness, as the composite words which construct Irigaray’s new term are of course borrowed from the very patriarchal, phallocentric language she argues against and which cannot possibly define the feminine.

Nevertheless, for Irigaray, ‘mystic language or discourse’ (‘la mystérieque’) ‘is the only place in the history of the West in which woman speaks and acts so publicly’.

Mystical discourse then is that place ‘where consciousness is no longer master’, reason no longer prevails and women can instead ‘speak about the dazzling glare which comes from the source of light that has been logically repressed, about “subject” and “Other” flowing out into an embrace of fire that mingles one term into another’. Here Irigaray’s description of God and mystical union is striking in its similarity to the discourses of annihilation and ‘withness’ articulated by the medieval mystics explored in Chapter 2. There is no question of her appreciation for the opportunities afforded by this particular discourse to female writers as she continues: ‘the poorest in science and the most ignorant were the most eloquent, the richest in

---

40 ‘La Mystérieque’ in Speculum of the Other Woman, p. 191.
41 Ibid.
42 ‘La Mystérieque’, p. 191.
43 Ibid.
revelations. Historically, that is, women’.\textsuperscript{44} Ann-Marie Priest has observed that
Irigaray’s texts ‘construct “woman” as apophatic mystics construct God: as an
unspeakable other, irreducible to the terms of a language that would seek to remake
her in its image’.\textsuperscript{45} Indeed, Irigaray’s project can be usefully equated with an
exercise in negative theology. The ineffable nature of God is transposed onto the
ineffable nature of woman as unspeakable Other. Ultimately, abundantly and
excessively Other, woman, like God resides in the realm of the unsayable – the
mystical text. Priest suggests that both \textit{Speculum of the Other Woman} and \textit{This Sex
Which is Not One} propose and practice ‘a kind of writing that, like mystical writing,
works directly against logic, reason, stable reference, and the attribution of consistent
meaning’.\textsuperscript{46} As the theories of Derrida and Irigaray have suggested, the ‘religious
turn’ of the late twentieth-century had a significant influence on Continental
philosophy which brought the freedoms and possibilities offered by apophatic
discourse to the fore. Having briefly sketched the effects of this turn within the
Continental philosophy it is now possible to understand its influence on medieval
studies as a discipline.

‘Touching’ the Past

If the ‘religious turn’ of the twentieth century emphasizes a desire to return or retreat
to supposedly superseded belief systems and traditions, nowhere is this more evident
than in the field of medieval studies. Indeed the modern scholarly affective response
to the medieval mystical texts considered in this thesis has demonstrated a strong

\textsuperscript{44} ‘La Mystérieuse’, p. 192.
\textsuperscript{45} Ann-Marie Priest, ‘Woman as God, God as Woman: Mysticism, Negative Theology, and Luce
\textsuperscript{46} Priest, p. 15.
desire not only to connect with the past but to touch it, experience it and make direct contact with the lived experiences of past medieval subjects. As illustrated by the recent ongoing dialogue on the topic within medieval studies over the past decade (and particularly represented in this thesis by the writings of medievalists such as Nicholas Watson, James Simpson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton), the ‘religious turn’ has been of utmost concern. Several articles on the topic of medieval belief\(^47\) and of nostalgic desire for past historical moments\(^48\) have emerged in recent years, with varying degrees of intentional and unintentional response to this phenomenon of the ‘religious turn’ within the humanities. Following the lead of these particular studies, Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Jonathan Juiufs guest-edited and produced an essay collection for *Religion and Literature* in 2010 in direct and conscious response to this ‘turn’. Entitled “‘Something Fearful’: Medievalist Scholars on the Religious Turn”,\(^49\) Kerby Fulton and Juiufs’s choice of title instantly speaks to the controversial nature of the overall approach taken by this special volume. Steven Justice’s acknowledgement of the various “‘turns” taken by history these last decades’\(^50\) provides a space for the work Kerby-Fulton wants to initiate with her collection, while Watson’s essays document a mode of ‘affective historiography’ and a tendency within medieval scholarship towards an ‘affective turn’. Put more simply, ‘Desire for the Past’ sees Watson call for an empathetic engagement with historically distant past subjects (in this case, medieval mystics), which privileges emotion and feeling as the best form of scholarly interaction with the affective nature of mysticism and

\(^{47}\) Steven Justice, ‘Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles?’, *Representations* 103.1 (Summer, 2008), pp. 1-29.
\(^{49}\) Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Jonathan Juiufs, eds. “‘Something Fearful’: Medievalist Scholars on the Religious Turn: A Special Issue of *Religion & Literature* Religion & Literature 42.1-2 (Spring-Summer, 2010).
\(^{50}\) Justice, p. 1.
the apophatic tradition. His intention is thus ‘to think along a zigzag line about how and why we study the past…and especially about the role of feeling in our study’.

In this way, Watson aims to highlight how all ‘study of the past…has emotional designs on its object’. I would suggest that these ‘emotional designs’ are the inevitable result of the modern historian’s desire to better understand themselves in relation to their past subject. As noted throughout this thesis, twentieth-century medievalists such as Evelyn Underhill, Hope Emily Allen and Helen Waddell similarly engage in this project of identification and ‘affective historiography’, while contemporary poet Anne Carson has noted a similar tendency amongst the mystics who ‘cannot go towards God in love without bringing [themselves] along’. I would suggest modern scholars also find it difficult to avoid these identifications in the moment of scholarly interpretation. These examples demonstrate the ways in which the ‘religious turn’ is visited and revisited by the concerns and preoccupations of different cultural moments, perhaps justifying Watson’s non-linear ‘zigzag’ line of thought. His insistence on the need to make ‘real intimate contact’ with the mystical subjects of his study (in this case, Marguerite Porete) ties in with his understanding of ‘scholarly discover[ies]’ regarding the mystics as ‘truly an act of recovery, a recuperation’.

Such a model of recovering an absent medieval Other is arguably at the centre of the majority of scholarly encounters with their mystical subjects. Positioning and identifying ourselves in relation to the recovered subject is thus a crucial part of this scholarly recuperation. However, as James Simpson has

54 Watson, ‘Desire for the Past’, p. 149.
cautioned, it is of course necessary to ensure that in the moment of interpretation we do not confuse likeness for self-sameness. In ‘The Phantasmal Past’ (his second essay on the topic, written ten years after ‘Desire for the Past’), Watson contests the narratives of intellectual dullness often attributed to the medieval period, in which, as Bruce Holsinger has noted, ‘The Middle Ages […] persist imaginatively as the dark age preceding the Renaissance discovery of the individual’. According to Watson, ‘the past feels threatened, as though it were disappearing from the cultural imaginary of modernity’. Furthermore, he believes that ‘the medieval is also regularly vilified as obsolete’. The ‘religious turn’ has thus initiated an urgent push for a major reassessment of the ways in which the vibrancy of the medieval past must be recovered and promoted within and beyond medieval studies as a counter to these false narratives of darkness and backwardness. As the recent renewed interest in the religious across the humanities testifies, the medieval ‘is not only ‘Other’ but…also indissolubly tied to the present’.

John Arnold reminds us that ‘historians have written about religion and belief for a very long time, most frequently because of their own religious beliefs’. It is perhaps within this context that Kerby-Fulton and Julfs’s special issue of Religion and Literature on the ‘religious turn’ in medieval studies emerged. For the editors, there is a need to construct, understand and relate the contemporary scholarly self to an ‘unknowable’ past – a form of self-definition which can be transposed onto the self-negating reasoning of apophaticism. While Arnold admits that he writes from

---

60 Watson, p. 3.
the perspective of an ‘Atheist historian’, he is still acutely aware of the need for historical sensitivity. He warns that ‘historians who have faith need equally to be wary of assuming a personal or cultural connection to that which appears familiar, without questioning its nuances and historical context’. In this regard, Kerby-Fulton and Juilfs face a significant challenge with their project. Identifications with past subjects and traditions could arguably be considered a habit most characteristic of the medievalist, but this particular essay collection goes one step further by making these identifications a condition of participation. Kerby-Fulton is clear from the outset about her aims for the collection. She wants ‘to break down generic expectations and scholarly prejudices regarding religion and faith in the humanities’, thereby encouraging believers and non-believers alike to discuss how their religious positions have affected their scholarship. This may be a noble endeavour, but it seems to be bound by an apophatic circularity: for example, if ‘contributors have been asked to frame or develop their scholarship with explicit commentary about their own faith traditions or positions’, as Kerby-Fulton states, do we not run the risk of effacing if not displacing the religious positions and belief systems of our medieval subjects with our own? Do we not fall into the trap outlined by James Simpson of reductively (and falsely) self-identifying with our historical subjects in the moment of encounter instead of recognizing similarities, likenesses and differences? Ultimately, ‘what about… “I am like you” rather than “I am you”’? It would seem that this is precisely the danger. However, it is perhaps a necessary one. In light of the ‘religious turn’ it is increasingly difficult to ignore or avoid questions of religion. Kerby-Fulton and Juilfs conclude their Preface with

---

63 Arnold, p. 7.
64 Arnold, p. 8.
66 Kerby-Fulton, ‘Something Fearful’, p. 5.
heavy praise for those ‘courageous contributors’\textsuperscript{68} who have apparently encountered ‘varying degrees of risk in the very real contemporary culture wars surrounding religion and its practice, both within and outside of the academy’.\textsuperscript{69} Such a hyperbolic tone is further exaggerated by Kerby-Fulton’s choice of title, which alludes to the ‘fearful’ quality of the religious turn in medieval studies that she somehow cannot manage to articulate – the identity of this ‘something fearful’ is left conspicuously unqualified and unsaid. Such a failure of language to articulate and explain the religious of course applies as much to our own belief systems as to those of the medieval past.

The methodological approach of the essay collection is to examine approaches taken by various medievalist scholars to the contemporary question of religion and faith through the lens of their own individual prejudices as adherents of one particular religious tradition or another. Thus, we have scholars writing in and engaging with an affective mode which predicates their scholarly, and thus supposedly impartial and detached engagement with their subject, on a relationship of identification. Kerby-Fulton’s opening essay is tinged with a strangely personal tone as she recounts various examples of how her own religious position and ‘prejudices’\textsuperscript{70} have affected her experience of medieval literature. For example, she references her student Nicole Klan (also a contributor), detailing the ways in which Klan’s faith position as a Pentecostal enhanced both her own and Kerby-Fulton’s understanding of mystic Margery Kempe. Kerby-Fulton claims: ‘I felt like I understood Kempe as I had never understood her before – not just as a museum of medieval autobiography but as a living history’.\textsuperscript{71} Modern scholars such as Kerby-

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item\textsuperscript{68} Kerby-Fulton and Juiifs, ‘Something Fearful’, p. 3.
\item\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{70} Kerby-Fulton, ‘Something Fearful’, p. 7.
\item\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Fulton thus want to do more than just ‘touch [the past] across time’\textsuperscript{72}. A ‘partial connection’\textsuperscript{73} is not sufficient; instead they feel compelled to bring it to life and somehow make it present again. At a later point in a section entitled ‘A Different Kind of Editor’s Note: Apologia pro vita mea’, Kerby-Fulton launches into an almost confessional mode whereby she provides extensive personal examples and anecdotes regarding her own faith position as a Canadian Protestant of the United Church. On one level, the essay collection functions as a kind of ‘safe space’ for a coterie of medievalists (mostly known to each other) to engage in the discussion of supposedly controversial topics such as religion and its impact on their scholarship. At another level, this collection epitomizes the ‘affective historiography’ described above by Watson. Kerby-Fulton obviously feels that with her collection she can give voice to:

\begin{quote}
the religious perspectives that actually inform modern scholarship on medieval texts – that is, the beliefs scholars may (or may not) hold as they write or that may have shaped their thought during their formation as thinkers, even if sometimes only during childhood.\textsuperscript{74}
\end{quote}

There is undoubtedly a certain honesty to this approach, and specifically, an honesty which most scholarship would attempt to banish in the interests of impartiality. However, as Caroline Walker Bynum has pointed out, ‘no one of us will ever read more than partially, from more than a particular perspective’.\textsuperscript{75} Perhaps the ‘affective turn’ in medieval studies, ushered in by the ‘religious turn’ in the humanities more broadly has resulted in this need for a more personal contact with the medieval texts and subjects being studied.

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{72} Carolyn Dinshaw, \textit{Getting Medieval}, p. 21.
\item \textsuperscript{73} Dinshaw, p. 35.
\item \textsuperscript{74} Kerby-Fulton, ‘Something Fearful’, p. 6.
\item \textsuperscript{75} Caroline Walker Bynum, \textit{Fragmentation and Redemption}, p. 23.
\end{itemize}
Kerby-Fulton is not alone in recognizing that her own faith position and nationality have been 'crucially formative'\textsuperscript{76} in her academic work. Historian Eamon Duffy faced much criticism\textsuperscript{77} in the early nineties from David Aers, who claimed that his interpretation of traditional religion in England 1400-1580 was significantly lacking and 'particularly baneful' in neglecting 'the religious orders'.\textsuperscript{78} Duffy addressed these issues in his Preface to the second edition of The Stripping of the Altars, written in 2005 and has elsewhere commented on how his own religious position as a Roman Catholic has permeated his scholarship.\textsuperscript{79} Duffy’s main retaliation against these accusations from Aers (which also echoes Bynum’s earlier observation) rests on his presumption that obviously ‘[…] there is, of course, no such thing as a presupposition-less observer’\textsuperscript{80} - a valid and important point. Duffy comments that:

[…] the book, as rigorously and exhaustively based as I was capable of making it on a mass of historical, literary and material evidence, was also shaped and informed by the imaginative and symbolic revolution through which I myself had lived in the 1960s and 1970s.\textsuperscript{81} He further redresses Aers’s complaints about his lack of sufficiently thorough treatment of the diverse traditions of religion in the medieval period by claiming that he only omitted issues of magic, witchcraft and Lollardy because he assumed his

\textsuperscript{76} Kerby-Fulton, ‘Something Fearful’, p. 14.
\textsuperscript{78} Aers, p. 91; p. 92.
\textsuperscript{79} Duffy’s 2004 memoir The Faith of Our Fathers (London: Continuum, 2004) acknowledges the fundamental dishonesty inherent in a Catholic of his ‘background and generation pretending to offer a detached, universally applicable account of the power or attraction of the Church’ (p. 11).
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
book 'would be read alongside, not instead of, the many works which did treat of these things'.

Duffy’s contention about the inevitability of bias in the moment of scholarly interpretation (despite best efforts to the contrary), brings us full circle to the notion of how we should make connections with past subjects. Kerby-Fulton’s suggestion is to call for the development of ‘a literary theory for religious experience’ which would help us understand how best ‘to work with one’s own religious belief in writing scholarship’. Whether this is possible or not is difficult to tell. I would suggest perhaps not, as in the attempt, modern scholars will always be necessarily and unavoidably bound by a significant degree of presentist bias. As Simpson warns: ‘religious identifications are... often demanding, exclusive and non-negotiable. They might produce identifications of one kind only to produce many varieties of correlative rejections’. Such bias can result in either the subsuming of past belief systems into our own or conversely, in an insensitivity and ignorance to the past beliefs and religious positions of our medieval subjects. Whereas a collection like Kerby-Fulton’s attempts to speak for the historically distant medieval Other, many of the modern writers treated in this thesis, such as Simone Weil and Anne Carson, instead seem to speak to that same Other, engaging them in an ‘untimely’ dialogue which resonates with Dinshaw’s desire for ‘partial, affective connection[s]’ with the past. This brief ‘touch’ of the past (much like that of mystical union for the mulieres religiosae) arguably seems much more productive, and less destructive ideologically, as complete identifications only displace the historical Other that scholars from Hope Emily Allen to Kerby-Fulton find

---

82 Duffy, p. 19.
84 Simpson, p. 123.
themselves so desperate to recapture. However, if the ‘religious turn’ is here to stay in medieval studies, in the form of an ‘affective turn’ which seems to structure and govern many of the interactions of modern scholarship with the medieval mystics, then perhaps there is an urgency incumbent upon medievalists to try to address the past in an interlocution of equals.

** * * *

This thesis has sought to tease out a trajectory across history of an emerging feminist poetics as a paradoxical movement from medieval articulation of self via the apophatic mode (exemplified by the medieval mulieres religiosae), to a modern project of recuperating the self through a reading and revisiting of this apophatic mode (demonstrated by the early twentieth-century medievalists), and finally, to the postmodern project of negating the self using the apophatic mode (as evidenced by the return of the apophatic within the contemporary humanities). These discourses of ‘selfing’ and ‘unselfing’ have been seen to be fundamentally rooted in the personal connections and ‘passionate identifications’ of mystic and scholar alike. Due to the chronological range of materials considered in this study it has been necessary to employ an ‘untimely’ relation between the medieval and the modern, which I feel is justified by the inevitable connections with and investments in the past evidenced by the writers and scholars considered. However, I also realise that the particularly idiosyncratic mode of female empowerment rooted in self-abnegation borne out by my research conducted may be, for some, self-contradictory, and in many ways, self-negating. It is a defining feature of the apophatic mode that it can be said to ‘unsay’ and ‘undo’ itself. It is precisely this paradoxical quality that is the locus of its
strength and flexibility as a mode of self-expression, as all ‘unsayings’ must be the result of initial ‘sayings’ or self-expressions.

I propose that it is within these moments of ‘unsaying’ and ‘unselfing’ that medieval women can achieve a kind of freedom – an opportunity to engage with their male counterparts and to share in a language of spiritual access which can be adapted to reflect (for example), a specifically female, beguine spirituality. This may not be quite the feminine language hoped for by Irigaray - a parler femme or ‘a speaking as woman’. Instead, as Watson notes, the writings and mysticism of the thirteenth-century mulieres religiosae certainly do represent a female ‘community bound together not by the networks of communication that might be said typically to cement masculine institutions but by common desires lived out in common ways’.86 In this respect, these women are undoubtedly empowered. The ability to adapt the traditionally male-dominated language of apophaticism and produce mystical texts and complex personal theologies speaks to an active attempt at empowerment as much as passive submission. In doing so these women engage in a dialogue with their male counterparts which promotes their place within a typically patriarchal culture of ecclesiastical anti-feminism, allowing them momentarily to transcend their traditional positions and roles. Such an engagement has been shown to be predicated upon male clerical regulation in the form of the traditional medieval female devotee/mystic and male confessor/amanuenses relationship. However, we have seen that moments of role reversal within this relationship are possible and they suggest the empowerment of the female, however brief. For example, female devotee becomes confessor as Marie and Jacques briefly swap roles, while Speyr’s desire for self-effacement witnesses the informed decision of an ‘enlightened’

---

modern physician to seek out a mode of subjectivity most characteristic of apophaticism.

Essentially, this thesis has tracked the tendency of the apophatic mode to endure and recur at different historical moments, thus providing certain opportunities and paradoxical freedoms for the females who interact with that mode and engage in practicing it. Perhaps, then, we are forced to conclude by revisiting the question posed by De Vries at the beginning of this chapter. It would seem that we must accept his portrayal of religion as ‘beyond a concept’, much like the divine object of affection so prized by the medieval and modern holy women analysed in this study.

The self-negating language which drives the apophatic mode can only take us so far in our interpretations and identifications – particularly considering the fact that the grounding figure of these identifications is God (as for the medieval mystics). Thus, the basis of our identifications is subject to the humility of our historical knowledge. However, it has not been my intention to forbid or dissuade scholarship from ‘touching’ the past. There appears to be a distinct inevitability about the personal connections, investments and passionate identifications modern scholars make with past subjects (myself included). Instead, my goal has been to problematize the execution of this touch, by means of the ‘untimely’ investigation represented by this thesis itself, albeit with its own ‘passionate investments in the past’. and an acute awareness of the ways in which this past has been mediated and re-mediated in modern scholarship and feminist historiography. It is hoped that the goal of speaking to rather than for the past has been achieved.

Appendix I: Male Mediation of the Female Mystical Voice: Marguerite Porete

Having considered the specific features and ideas which drive Marguerite Porete’s mystical programme in Chapter 2 (pp. 104-124), this appendix briefly considers the ways in which the Middle English Carthusian translator and compiler M.N. engages with the text. A significant body of scholarship has been undertaken in order to determine the identity of M.N.. Although many are in agreement with Robert Cottrell that ‘scholars are not certain who M.N. was’,¹ the general consensus remains that he was most likely a Carthusian monk. Marleen Cré concurs here that ‘all three manuscripts in which the Middle English translation occurs, Amherst included, belonged to Carthusian houses’.² Whereas the curiosity to determine the biographical details of the interruptive voice that shapes and guides our understanding and reading of the text is unsurprising and quite natural, this appendix will instead focus on the ways in which a fifteenth-century male monk interacts with, interprets and mediates a ‘dangerous’ thirteenth-century female mystical text for his audience(s), present and future.

Edmund College and Romana Guarnieri have argued that M.N.’s glosses ‘reclaim a heretical text for orthodoxy’.³ An incredibly popular text, The Mirror ‘was translated into Latin, Italian and Middle English and widely disseminated’.⁴ Also read ‘eagerly in orthodox environments’,⁵ it is important to locate Porete’s text and ideas within the historical and cultural context of the moment within which she

⁵ Cré, p. 179.
was writing and also, within which the text was later received. According to Marilyn Doiron, the text was ‘intended for private reading as well as for public reading, probably to a religious community’\(^6\) and perhaps some of Porete’s fellow beguines. This intention to spread and disseminate suspect ideas and teachings thus conflicted with orthodox practice and resulted in the Middle English editor and compiler’s interventions in the form of fifteen explanatory glosses. Interestingly, this commitment to the policing of female spirituality is far from a thing of the past. Bernard McGinn has highlighted the protests and disapprovals of a Paulist Press subscriber who on publication of the first full translation of the French version of the text by Babinsky in 1993, wrote an ‘irate letter’ to the Press and ‘proceeded to cancel his subscription to a series that he said was in danger of becoming the “Classics of Feminist Spirituality”.’\(^7\) Again, we are unfortunately reminded of the perceived threat posed by female religious writers in both medieval and modern contexts.

**M.N. as ‘Meene’ and Mediator**

Appearing at the beginning of Chapter I, M.N.’s first explanatory gloss ensures that his presence and status as ‘meene’\(^8\) and ‘instrument’ or spiritual guide are immediately established. He is thus instrumental in mediating Porete’s words and personal theology but as he explains in his prologue, he believes the text ‘schulde profite þoo deuout soules þat schulden rede it’.\(^9\) Nevertheless, this approval must be tempered with M.N.’s strict adherence to the regulation of female spirituality enforced by the doctrine of *discretio spirituum* and by the ecclesiastical authorities in general at the time, as his fear that the text might be misconstrued or misread even

---


\(^9\) *Pe Mirroure*, 15, p. 247.
after his first translation suggests an obligation on his part as trusted male source and mediator to ‘putte yn more’\(^\text{10}\) than he finds written. Ultimately, his glossing of the text is so extensive that it could be said to amount to an entire rewrite, regardless of his well-intentioned desire to ‘declare þo / wordis more openli’\(^\text{11}\) and to eradicate misunderstanding of Porete’s text. I suggest that he also has an authorial reputation to protect. He acknowledges the fact that this is a text which is spoken ‘kernyngli and ful mystili’\(^\text{12}\) but I would suggest that his constant abrupt and interruptive glosses are also testament to his own pedantic agenda as self-appointed translator and mediator. Indeed, this is a period when one’s own position of orthodoxy could be precarious and could be questioned if one became involved with an unsavoury or suspect text. From this perspective, it becomes apparent that while M.N. may very well be set on defending Porete’s text and mystical theology, he is also ultimately concerned with defending and protecting his own orthodoxy.

As it is clear from the first prologue appended to the Middle English translation of the text that M.N.’s initial translation was misinterpreted, it is natural to presume that these ‘misinterpretations’ were interpretations of the text which posit elements of Porete’s theology as heretical – most notably, Porete’s claims for spiritual union in the form of the annihilated or noughted soul, whereby through a kind of theosis, one can become God.\(^\text{13}\) Certainly, M.N.’s glosses do seem to occur at the precise sections of the text which contain issues relating to ‘the list of propositions condemned in the Paris process’\(^\text{14}\) and so his awareness of the heretical accusations against the text is seemingly implied. M.N.’s recurring defence pervades the glosses and constantly reminds his audience that despite the superficially radical

---
\(^{10}\) *De Mirrour*, 28, p. 247.
\(^{11}\) *De Mirrour*, 8-9, p. 247.
\(^{12}\) *De Mirrour*, 15, p. 247.
\(^{13}\) See Chapter 2, p. 115 for my earlier discussion of this theosis.
\(^{14}\) Colledge and Guarnieri, in *The Medieval Translator*, p. 372.
nature of spiritual union articulated by Porete’s text, the duration of this perfect union with God is ‘ful litel tyme’ and is thus not a constant state – a claim which would certainly have much more serious implications. Overall, the explanatory glosses are very much concerned with diluting those aspects of Porete’s personal theology which could be described as heretical. As I am curtailed by limits of space and also because a significant body of research (including my own Masters dissertation) has been undertaken (and is still ongoing) regarding M.N.’s glosses, this appendix will consider certain instances from the glosses which usefully highlight a male translator/compiler’s engagement with and reception of a female mystical text. While each case study considered within this thesis takes into account the effects of the male mediation of the female mystical voice, M.N.’s glosses present us with an example of direct male intervention.

M.N. as ‘Pseudo-author’

Due to the extensive interventions made throughout his Middle English translation of Porete’s text, I understand M.N. as possessing the status of a kind of ‘pseudo-author’ as his glosses appear to pedantically commentate on and regulate those elements of Marguerite’s text which could be considered heretical or be ‘dangerously’ understood. Much like Perrin and Thibon examined in Chapter Five, M.N.’s efforts to ensure that his audience are able to ‘come to be swete kernel’ or meaning of the text are well-intentioned but his extensive glossing does constitute significant intervention and disruption. Whilst M.N.’s constant presence can be felt when reading the text, he is particularly vocal on certain issues and these will be our focus. At the beginning of the text M.N.’s position as reliable spiritual guide is witnessed by his calm tone and his knowledge of Scripture and ‘hooli writ’ which he willingly shares with his ‘auditoures’ in his first gloss. M.N. directly addresses the ‘auditoures of his boke’ imploring that they take heed of what is to follow - an explication of one of the most important, recurring tenets of Pe Mirrour. This gloss deals with issues of fatalism and free will but ultimately, it is concerned with establishing what appears to be a predominant theme in M.N.’s thought i.e. the theme of the ephemeral nature of union with God. While a soul or creature may be ‘enhabitd bi grace in freedom’ they do not ‘stonde contynuelli in freedom wipout synne’ as this state is ‘alwei flittinge’. However at later points M.N.’s exasperation with the difficulty of Porete’s text and also with his reader or hearer’s lack of

---

17 Pe Mirrour, 24, p. 255.
18 Pe Mirrour, 29, p. 251.
19 Pe Mirrour, 22, p. 251.
20 Pe Mirrour, 31, p. 251; 32, p. 251; 1, p. 252.
understanding is palpable. For example, the eighth and tenth\textsuperscript{21} gloss see him repeating the points already made by Porete within the text. No clarification is really required at these points yet he still feels the need to contribute despite the fact that in this instance, ‘for once he has nothing useful to say’\textsuperscript{22}. Perhaps as Colledge and Guarnieri suggest this is because ‘M.N. is constrained to reply to adverse criticism[s]\textsuperscript{23}’ and is thus obliged to comment, gloss and clarify whether he feels the need to correct/direct his audience or not.

Whereas this first gloss ends quite abruptly and didactically setting the tone for relationship between pedantic editor and naïve reader, the power and precedence of M.N.’s voice begins to take precedence over Porete’s. The second gloss sees M.N. grapple with Soul’s concept of abandoning the ‘uertues’ in pursuit of ‘pe liif of perfeccion’\textsuperscript{24}. Always aware of the danger of misinterpretation, M.N. attempts to navigate the seemingly immoral suggestion of excising the Cardinal Virtues from the running of daily life by noting that the soul will ‘gete uertues bi counsel of resoun, and stryueb wip vices at euery pous[g].’\textsuperscript{25} The imagery deployed by Porete here implies that each different Cardinal Virtue is a kind of mistress, and so they all compete against one another for sovereignty, subsequently inflicting ‘scharpe peynes and bitternesse’\textsuperscript{26} on Soul’s conscience. This gloss then demonstrates M.N.’s awareness that all of the Virtues are conflicting and cannot be brought into concord with one another, as they each require different commitments, acts and pledges from the soul in its quest for a life of perfection. Thus, according to M.N.’s interpretation of Porete’s text, it is the task of trying to adhere to the Virtues that enables Soul to

\textsuperscript{21}Pe Mirour, 11-17, p. 264; 10-22, p. 279.
\textsuperscript{23}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24}Pe Mirour, 27, p. 254; 7, p. 257.
\textsuperscript{25}Pe Mirour, 11, p. 255.
\textsuperscript{26}Pe Mirour, 14, p. 255.
finally 'come to be swete kernel'\textsuperscript{27} which is the love of God. At this point, 'his soule is lady ouer / uertues'\textsuperscript{28} as she has considered the Virtues, followed their often conflicting requests and has gained mastery over them. The complex nature of Porete's personal theology as articulated in her \textit{Mirror} is certainly appreciated by M.N. as instances such as gloss three witness M.N. reassuring the unsettled reader regarding Porete's description of the annihilated soul. This 'soule pat is bicom nou3t'\textsuperscript{29} having fully understood and taken leave of the virtues is now described as being 'lost bi plente of knowynge'\textsuperscript{30}. M.N. attempts to simplify Porete's complex apophatic discourse here for the unsettle reader by advocating that the text is re-read 'twies or pries',\textsuperscript{31} and if afterwards the reader still feels confused and uncertain, he assures them that they 'vndirstonde it wel ynow3'.\textsuperscript{32} However, he also closes his explanatory gloss with one of his trademark warnings informing the reader that his reassurance and guidance is only reserved for those who do not merely 'takeþ þe nakid wordis of / scriptures and leveþ þe sentence',\textsuperscript{33} again reinforcing his position as 'meene'\textsuperscript{34} and interpreter of the text.

However, despite this confident and at times, arrogant approach, M.N. does also appear to struggle with some of the more difficult and controversial aspects of Porete's personal theology – namely her idea of union (a relation of mutual indwelling and interpenetration which she encapsulates in her concept of Farnearnness or the "fer ny3")\textsuperscript{35}. Due to the extremely difficult nature of the text at this point, M.N.'s fourth gloss is particularly extensive. Whether or not this particular gloss is

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Pe Mirour}, 24, p. 255.
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Pe Mirour}, 5-6, p. 256.
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Pe Mirour}, 24, p. 256.
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Pe Mirour}, 13, p. 256.
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Pe Mirour}, 20, p. 256.
\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Pe Mirour}, 21, p. 256.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Pe Mirour}, 22-23, p. 256.
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Pe Mirour}, 26, p. 253.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Pe Mirour}, 6-10, p. 251. Also see Chapter Two, pp. 117-119 for my discussion of this concept.
so extensive in anticipation of Reason’s supposed and frustrating ignorance, M.N. does often repeat his clarifications thus strengthening the argument for M.N. as pedant. Certainly this is the first occasion on which M.N. finds it necessary to provide two readings of the point he is glossing. M.N.’s first response to Porete’s antinomian claim that souls can become free of the ‘vertues’ is to establish the transformative power of union with God and make clear that while a soul is ‘vnyed’ with God in this way, they have no ‘wille ne werk ne no desire’ and can think of nothing but God and their union within him. He then develops his explanation by providing ‘anobir vndirstandinge’ of Porete’s words. He explains that in the initial stages of a soul’s desire for ‘perfeccion’ or annihilation and self-noughting through the transformative epower of union and love of God, ‘pe desire for Goddis sake’ to indulge in such ‘diuine usages’ as attending masses and sermons, fasting and praying in the way they feel God desires. However, M.N. points out that it is only after these souls ‘haue tasted of pe swete drawtes of heuenli fluences’ that they realise the error of their ways in desiring or willing at all, and abandon not ‘pe werk’ itself but the ‘maner of labour in doynge […] it’ – i.e. the wilful and selfish doing of works. Here we have an explanation of the idea that lies at the heart of Porete’s personal theology and which raised such suspicion. M.N. ultimately understands and explains Porete’s description of union between God and Soul as follows:

Whanne / loue werketh in pe soule & heeldip in hir pe sparkles of his briȝte beemes, sche / vndirstandip well þanne bi cleerte of þat lijt et bi swetnesse

---

36 Pe Mirrour, 16, p. 257.
37 Pe Mirrour, 16, p. 258.
38 Pe Mirrour, 17, p. 258.
39 Pe Mirrour, 18, p. 258.
40 Pe Mirrour, 19; 21; 24, p. 258.
41 Pe Mirrour, 25; 27; 28, p. 258.
of þe licour þat sche / hap drunken, þat þe werk of loue is more worp and
drawip more to þe vnyon / in God þan doip hir owen werk 42

This particular instance sees M.N. pick out the relation of ‘withness’ and
‘withinness’ which we have observed as characteristic of the apophatic mode as he
grapgles with the difficulty of the subject matter at hand in order to present Porete’s
idea of union in a way which would be less contentious for male ecclesiastical
readers and authorities.

As the text progresses, M.N. often finds himself in concurrence with the
points made by Porete’s Soul character, yet he cannot resist an opportunity to gloss,
reaffirm, and ultimately, include himself within the text. For example, the eighth
gloss sees him interrupting a discussion between Soul and Love to tackle the issue of
speaking about an unsayable God. His tone is characteristically austere and direct in
what Colledge and Guarnieri have described as his anxious bid ‘to interpret her
[Porete] benevolently’. 43 To avoid the danger of the text falling into the trap of
heresy by claiming that everything that men say of God is lies, M.N. is keen to
establish that the ‘multitude of greetnesse’ 44 which is God cannot be easily or
flippantly slotted into our system of language. However, he simply repeats the
assertions already made by Porete’s Soul character: ‘He oonli is / my God þat noon
e kan o word of seie’. 45 Whether this is representative of M.N.’s own pedantic
rhetoric and authorial voice or to ensure clarity for a ‘lewed’ lay audience or even to
protect and assert his own orthodox status is unclear. Nevertheless, repeated
instances such as this do seem to suggest that the latter is a likely answer.

The twelfth gloss sees M.N. adopt a new tactic in his bid to censor and police
Marguerite, as he now selects specific words for careful analysis and censorship,

---

42 Pe Mirrour, 28-32, p. 258, my emphasis.
43 Colledge and Guarnieri, p. 366.
44 Pe Mirrour, 14, p. 264.
45 Pe Mirrour, 27-28, p. 264.
ensuring that Marguerite is not ‘misread’ or ‘misheard’. M.N.’s target is the word ‘perischid’ which is used in conjunction with those leading the active life. This kind of faith by works promotes a kind of meritocracy, whereby salvation and thus, grace are earned by doing good works. It seems likely that this sort of faith would be met with Porete’s disapproval, as she appears to believe in a much more direct faith and relation with God. However, M.N.’s eagerness to avoid any misunderstandings is as strong as ever and results in his assurance that ‘pis word perischid may not be taken as for perischinge of perdiacion of soule, / bat þei schulde not be saued’.

If this particular section of the text were to be perceived in this way against M.N.’s advice, then it would be in stark contrast to Christian teaching that God loves us all equally, regardless of works, and ‘so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life’ (John 3:16). Strongly condemnatory in tone, Colledge and Guarnieri’s describe M.N.’s twelfth gloss as one which ‘again seems to show a total failure of comprehension and his refuge in a slavishly literal translation’ of an innately difficult passage. Again, I would suggest that the possible motivations and reasons for this ‘slavishly literal translation’ are myriad, but probably coincide with M.N.’s own anxieties and concerns for the preservation and maintenance of his own orthodox status.

As with gloss twelve, the fourteenth gloss sees M.N. again select specific words for analysis. M.N. singles out the notion of Soul’s ‘inwardnesse’ and begins his typical, fruitless interrogation of whether this soul’s ‘inwardnesse’ can feel anything or be moved during the time of union. M.N. further develops St Paul’s *Qui

---

46 *Pe Mirrour*, 16, p. 297.
47 *Pe Mirrour*, 16-17, p. 297.
48 Colledge and Guarnieri, p. 368.
49 *Pe Mirrour*, 27, p. 313.
adhaeret Domino unus spiritus est⁵⁰ in this gloss, enabling him to firmly stick to the most orthodox line of thought possible. As in previous instances, M.N. fails to really state an answer, and so another supposedly explanatory gloss becomes a breeding ground for problems and questions rather than answers. The closest M.N. comes to an answer about the question of union is his arguably half-hearted lament: ‘A bis blessed / oonnesse lastep but litel while in ony creature bat is here in bis deedli liif, for / be sensualite of mankynde may not suffre it’.⁵¹ Also interesting is the fact that this gloss is included at all, as the thirteenth gloss has an air of finality about it with M.N.’s declaration: ‘And now I schal stynte of my wordis but if it be be more needede’.⁵² M.N. eventually explains that the ‘fewe wordis mo’ represented by this fourteenth gloss are an effort to bring the reader ‘in be weie’ and perhaps, to encourage them on their spiritual journey.⁵³ At one point he even suggests that if his readers/hearers still cannot ‘glose suche derke wordis’ for and within themselves by the end of the text, then they should ask for some kind of divine intervention by which ‘be sentence’ will be miraculously revealed to them.⁵⁴

Despite having essentially ‘signed off’ now twice and having claimed that he will gloss no more and will leave the difficult task of interpretation up to the reader/hearer, M.N. cannot resist one more small yet significant gloss. This time M.N. very much leaves the gloss and the reader/hearer in medias res, as his gloss revisits and opens up the difficult question of free will. This fifteenth gloss merely records M.N.’s interjection that, ‘be summe of his soule is be knowinge bat sche hap of be goodnesse of / God, and his goodnesse of God bat is be Hooli Goost werkip in

⁵⁰ 1 Corinthians 6:17: ‘But he that is joined unto the Lord is one Spirit.’
⁵¹ Pe Mirroun, 35-37, p. 313.
⁵² Pe Mirroun, 25, p. 305.
⁵³ Pe Mirroun, 4; 5, p. 314.
⁵⁴ Pe Mirroun, 2, p. 314; 23, p. 256.
hir ȝave hir / fre wille'. The result of this last seemingly innocuous interruption is the facilitation of M.N.'s quiet judgement about our propensity for free will and our concomitant misuse of it. From this perspective it could be argued that M.N. functions in the text as the embodiment of Christian conscience or as a kind of moral arbiter who sets and polices the boundaries for spiritual exploration, ensuring that he remains instrumental in the interpretation of this 'dangerous' female mystical text and also that the devotee stays where he believes they firmly belong – in the middle. Essentially this brief look at a selection of the glosses from the Middle English translation of Porete's Mirror serves to demonstrate some of the ways in which fifteenth-century male clerics became committed to policing female spirituality and ensuring that it conformed to accepted and orthodox modes of female piety. As 'meene' and mediator, M.N.'s interruptions exemplify the effects and impacts of direct interventions by male editors and compilers on female religious writings – a trend which this thesis has traced from the medieval to the present day.

---


---

55 *De Mirroure*, 11-13, p. 329.
Bibliography

Primary Material

Allen, Hope Emily, ‘Ancient Grief’, *The Atlantic Monthly*, 131 (1923), 177-87


----, ‘A Glut of Fruit’, *The Atlantic Monthly*, 132 (September, 1923), 343-352

----, ‘The Origin of the Ancren Riwle’, *PMLA*, 33.3 (1918), 474-546


----, ‘The Three Daughters of Deorman’, *PMLA*, 50.3 (1935), 899-902

----, *Writings Ascribed to Richard Rolle, Hermit of Hampole, and Materials for His Biography* (New York: Modern Languages Association of America, 1927)


----, *Nox* (New York: New Directions, 2010)


----, *The Orchard of Syon*, ed. by Phyllis Hodgson and Gabriel Liegey (Oxford: EETS 258, 1966)


*Holy Bible. Authorised King James Version* (Belfast: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1949)


Margery Kempe, The Book of Margery Kempe, ed. by Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen (Oxford: EETS 212, 1940)


---, The Mirror of Simple Souls, trans. by Ellen Babinsky (New York: Paulist Press, 1993)


Plato, Plato’s Parmenides: A Translation, ed. by Arnold Hermann (Las Vegas: Parmenides, 2010)


Von Eckartshausen, Karl, *The Cloud Upon the Sanctuary* (London: George Redway, 1896 [1895])


---, *My Early Years* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995)

A. A. L., ['Untitled Review'], *Mth Church Quarterly* 6:2 (July, 1933), 279-284

Waddell, Helen, ‘A Medieval Sojourn’, *Wings* 7.10 (October, 1933), 7-9; 25

Aron, David, ‘Altars of Power: Reflections on Eamon Doherty’s The Scripture of the Heavens’


Secondary Material

A. A. L., ['Untitled Review'], *Irish Church Quarterly* 6.23 (July, 1913), 252-54


Aungier, George James, *History and Antiquities of Syon Monastery* (London: J.B. Nichols and Son, 1840)


Beach, Alison, ‘Listening for the Voices of Admont’s Twelfth-Century Nuns’ in *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Linda Olson and


Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Renate, Duncan Robertson and Nancy Bradley Warren, eds. 


----, Jo Carruthers and Andrew Tate, ‘Introduction: Writing Post-Secularity’ in *Spiritual Identities: Literature and the Post-secular Imagination*, ed. by Jo Carruthers and Andrew Tate (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010) pp. 1-8


-----, ‘Women’s Textual Authority’ in *Middle Ages Women in the Christian Tradition 6100-1500*, ed. by Alan D. Miller and Rosalyn White (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), pp. 83-104
----, ‘Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother: Some Themes in Twelfth-Century Cistercian Writing’, *Harvard Theological Review* 70.3/4 (July-October, 1977), 257-284

----, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982)


Cohn, Norman, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (London: Pimlico 2004 [1957])


Crump, C.G. and E.F. Jacob, eds., *The Legacy of the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1926)


Deanesly, Margaret, *The Incendium Amoris of Richard Rolle* (Manchester: University of Manchester Publications, 1915)


Dubois, Danielle, ‘From Contemplative Penitent to Annihilated Soul: The Recasting of Mary Magdalene in Marguerite Porete’s Mirror of Simple Souls’ Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures 39.2 (2013), 149-172


----, ‘Seeing Double: John Gerson, the Discernment of Spirits, and Joan of Arc’, *The American Historical Review* 107.1 (February, 2002), 26-54


----, ‘The Inquisitor Ralph of Ligny, Two German Templars, and Marguerite Porete’, *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 39.1 (2013), 1-22

----, ‘The Master and Marguerite: Godfrey of Fontaines’ Praise of the Mirror of Simple Souls’, *Journal of Medieval History* 35 (2009), 139-149


Franke, William, ‘Apophasis and the Turn of Philosophy to Religion: From Neoplatonic Negative Theology to Postmodern Negation of Theology’, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 60.1/3 (December, 2006), 61-76


Galloway, Penelope, ""Discreet and Devout Maidens": Women's Involvement in Beguine Communities in Northern France, 1200-1500", in *Medieval Women in Their Communities*, ed. by Diane Watt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), pp. 92-115
Guarnieri, Romana, ‘Il movimento del Libero Spirito’, Archivio Italiano per la storia della pietà 4 (1965), 661-663


Graef, Hilda, The Story of Mysticism (London: Peter Davies, 1965)


Grundmann, Herbert, Religious Movements in the Middle Ages: The Historical Links Between Heresy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Women’s Religious Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century with the Historical Foundations of German Mysticism, trans. by Steven Rowan (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995 [1935])


----, ‘Hope Emily Allen and the Limitations of Academic Discourse’, Mystics Quarterly 18.3 (September, 1992), 94-102

----, ‘Hope Emily Allen, the Second Volume of the Book of Margery Kempe, and an Adversary’, Medieval Feminist Forum 31 (2001), 11-17


----, The Soul as Virgin Wife (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995)


Horstmann, Carl, ed., Yorkshire Writers: Richard Hampole, an English Father of the Church, and His Followers, Volumes 1 and 2 (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1895-1896)


----, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1985 [1977])


Jedin, Hubert, *Ecumenical Councils of the Catholic Church: An Historical Outline* (Freiburg: Herder, 1960)

Justice, Steven, ‘Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles?’, *Representations* 103.1 (Summer, 2008), 1-29


----, The Inquisition of the Middle Ages: Its Organization and Operation (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1963)

Lerner, Robert, The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972)

----, ‘The Image of Mixed Liquids in Late Medieval Mystical Thought’, Church History 40.4 (December, 1971), 397-411


Marin, Juan, ‘Annihilation and Deification in Beguine Theology and Marguerite Porete’s *Mirror of Simple Souls*’, *Harvard Theological Review* 103.1 (January, 2010), 89-109


-----, ‘Julian of Norwich and a Trinity of the Feminine’, *Mystics Quarterly* 28.2 (June, 2002), 68-77

-----, ""The Moders Service": Motherhood as Matrix in Julian of Norwich’, *Mystics Quarterly* 24.4 (December, 1998), 181-97


----, ““Evil-Sounding, Rash, and Suspect of Heresy”: Tensions Between Mysticism and Magisterium in the History of the Church”, *Catholic Historical Review* 90.2 (April, 2004), 193-212


Meltzer, Françoise, ‘The Hands of Simone Weil’ Critical Inquiry 27.4 (Summer, 2001), 611-28


Mitchell, Marea, ‘“The Ever-Growing Army of Serious Girl Students”: The Legacy of Hope Emily Allen’, Medieval Feminist Forum 31 (Spring, 2001), 17-28


----, ‘What Did it Mean to Say “I Saw”? The Clash Between Theory and Practice in Medieval Visionary Culture’, *Speculum* 80 (2005), 1-43


Roccasalvo, Joan, ‘Hans Urs Von Balthasar – Theologian of Beauty’, *The Way* 44.4 (October 2005), 49-63

Rozenski, Steven, ‘The Promise of Eternity: Love and Poetic Form in Hadewijch’s Lieder or Stanzaic Poems’, *Exemplaria* 22.4 (Winter, 2010), 305-25

Sargent, Michael G., *James Grenehalgh as Textual Critic* (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1984)


----, ‘Mystical Writings and Dramatic Texts in Late Medieval England’, *Religion & Literature* 37.2 (Summer, 2005), 77-98

Schuberth, Jennifer, "‘Holy Church is Not Able to Recognize Her’: The Virtues and Interpretation in Marguerite Porete’s Mirror’, History of Religions 52.3 (February, 2013), 197-213


Sells, Michael, Mystical Languages of Unsaying (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994)


Simpson, James, ‘Confessing Literature’, English Language Notes 44.1 (Spring 2006), 121-26


Watson, Nicholas, ‘Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate and Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409’, *Speculum* 70.4 (October, 1995), 822-64


Williams, Deanne, ‘Hope Emily Allen Speaks with the Dead’, *Leeds Studies in English* 35 (2004), 137-60


Electronic Material

Web pages
Australian Research Council Centre, ‘Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions Homepage’

Mystic-Awakening, ‘Mystic-Awakening Shopping Spiritual Supply Store’

Articles

Drescher, Elizabeth, ‘None means None (Not Atheist, Agnostic, Unbeliever...)’.
Religion Dispatches, 8 January 2013,

----, ‘New Research links Spiritual-Not-Religious to Mental Disorder’. Religion Dispatches, 12 January 2013,

Hughes, Kathryn, ‘The Death of Life Writing’. The Guardian, 28 June 2008,
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/jun/28/saturdayreviewsfeatres.guardianreview> [accessed: 1 September 2012]

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/jun/08/antigonick-anne-carson-review>
[accessed: 4 September 2012]

Texts

Pope Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*,
<http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_x/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_19070908_pascendi-dominici-gregis_en.html> [accessed: 1 August 2011]

Trismegistus, Hermes, *The Emerald Tablet*,