

WOLVES IN LAMB'S CLOTHING: REDEEMING THE IMAGES OF
CATHERINE OF SIENA AND ANGELA OF FOLIGNO

By

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
in the Department of Religion
May 2009
Winston-Salem, North Carolina

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my parents. Not only have they provided me with this opportunity for a great education, but they have also taken interest in my work. They have patiently listened as I tried to explain the complexities of my topic, even as I resorted to sweetener packets for visuals.

I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Ulrike Wiethaus, Dr. Mary Foskett, and Dr. Craig Atwood. They have been supportive and encouraging through the whole process of the construction my thesis. They pointed out potential directions I could take and provided sources. Additionally, they read many pages and numerous footnotes, with a keen eye to detail and offered great insights. I would also like to thank the members of my department, for their encouragement. In particular, I would like to thank Dr. Jarrod Whitaker, who offered writing suggestions and potential sources, despite the fact that he was not on my committee.

Additionally, I would like to thank my friends, who have offered their support in this endeavor. Some have offered words of encouragement and some have helped me bat around ideas for sections. Many have listened as I voiced my struggles in the writing process.

Also, I would like to thank the medieval confessors who recorded and redacted what Catherine and Angela reported. The actions of these women would be lost to us without such efforts from the confessors. Finally, I would like to thank Catherine and Angela. Without their courage to voice their experiences to their confessors, we would not have the rich texts constructed about the lives of these incredible women.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

MOTIVATED NARRATIVES, SUBMISSIVE LAMBS, AND RESISTANT WOLVES.....	1
--	---

CHAPTER ONE

MAKING THE WOLF, MAKING THE LAMB: THE SOCIAL AND CHURCH CONTEXTS OF ANGELA AND CATHERINE.....	10
THE MEDIEVAL SOCIAL CONTEXT	11
THE MEDIEVAL CATHOLIC CHURCH.....	17

CHAPTER TWO

A CAVEAT ABOUT TEXTS AND CONFESSORS	31
---	----

CHAPTER THREE

DECRYING LAMBS, LOOKING FOR WOLVES: ANALYZING THE BEHAVIORS OF ANGELA AND CATHERINE.....	39
CONTEMPORARY BODY THEORY	40
FEMALE MYSTICISM	44

CHAPTER FOUR

LAMBS FOR GOD, OBEYING THE CHURCH.....	52
ANGELA OF FOLIGNO.....	53
CATHERINE OF SIENA.....	57

CHAPTER FIVE

WOLVES FOR GOD, RESISTING THE CHURCH.....	62
ANGELA OF FOLIGNO.....	63
CATHERINE OF SIENA.....	65

CONCLUSION

SEEING THE WOLF IN LAMB'S CLOTHING	72
--	----

BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	77
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INTRODUCTION

MOTIVATED NARRATIVES, SUBMISSIVE LAMBS, AND
RESISTANT WOLVES

“...what history is matters less than how history works”

Michel-Rolph Trouillot
Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History (28)

“My daughter [Ann] did not see them coming. Kneeling on the floor, she was intent on getting the boxes of Crest lined up evenly. The men stopped, peering down at her. One man nudged the other. He said, ‘Now that’s how I like to see a woman – on her knees.’ The other man laughed....

I walked toward them. ‘I have something to say to you, and I want you to hear it,’ I said. They stopped laughing. Ann looked up. ‘This is my daughter,’ I said, pointing to her, my finger shaking with anger. ‘You may like to see her and other women on their knees, but we don’t belong there. *We don’t belong there!*’”

Sue Monk Kidd
The Dance of the Dissident Daughter: A Woman’s Journey from Christian Tradition to the Sacred Feminine (7,9)

Perhaps, the most persistent question for the graduate student, both in coursework and throughout the actual writing of thesis, is “Why did I choose this topic?” The following is my answer, as well as the discoveries I made in grappling with other scholars and theories in my thesis writing.

The interests that led me to choose the topic of female medieval penitents and their behavior are akin to several unrelated tributaries that contribute to one stream, which is my actual thesis topic. I have been intrigued by the Catholic Church since I first heard of it as a child. I must confess that Hollywood’s exotic portrayals, with exorcisms and Latin masses presented as the core of the Catholic faith, influenced me heavily. While training and research have disavowed me of such exotic illusions, I still maintain a keen interest in the Catholic Church, perhaps due to the fact that I was raised outside of any kind of religious tradition.

I am also intrigued by extreme ascetic behavior. This results in part from my exposure to Hindu and Buddhist ascetic traditions in religion courses from my undergraduate days. It also stems from my limited knowledge of the saints and their behaviors; these saints were spoken of by Catholic-raised friends, with either admiration or disdain, depending on the person's current religious identification. However, here too, Hollywood cinema had a hand, with the portrayal of the Opus Dei in "The Da Vinci Code" in particular.

In a somewhat different vein, I am interested in the study of self-harm behavior, specifically in the manifestation of cutting. I had previously researched cutters as part of a course in psychology of religion. In my research, I found studies that indicated how cutters, once their behavior is discovered, are often told directly and indirectly that their behavior is wrong and shameful. The studies explained that such labeling often creates a sense of guilt, which then prompts the cutter to seek relief through cutting once more; thus, we see how cutting can become a self-sustaining downward spiral. It was my hope to investigate a potential re-labeling of the behavior, in order to break the cycle.

My initial plan was to combine my interest in cutting behavior and the Catholic Church, by comparing teenage female cutters and female medieval penitents. The idea for this came from my aforementioned research, both due to the work of Ariel Glucklick and the similarities in demography I found; women are more prevalent than men, in both populations of teenage cutters¹ and medieval penitents². However, I was unable to gain access to female cutters, and could not conduct the interviews necessary for a

¹ Glucklick, "Self and Sacrifice", 481.

² Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 27.

comparative paper. Thus, I chose to leave out the cutter population and rely solely on the female medieval penitent population for my thesis.

In writing my thesis, I have come across many theorists, some of which I felt were applicable and some which were not. Each scholar's theory-heritage is an amalgamation of the classic theories, those theories contemporary to the scholar's professors, and those theories contemporary to the scholar's own time. I consulted theories of post-modernism, anthropology, and feminism for my work. However, as a master's student, I have limited training in theory and my training was mainly in the classics; thus, my theoretical lenses are perhaps a bit out-dated.

From the post-modernists, I consult Michel Foucault, whose monumental work I will discuss in a later section. Although some aspects of his work have been challenged, I found his work too influential to my own approach to neglect his writings. I had also wished to consider Pierre Bourdieu, another significant post-modern scholar, in my work. However, the complexity of his work would require far too many pages to elucidate the basic concepts and the relevance of his work to my topic.

Another avenue I briefly considered traversing was performance theory. I could have used this approach to address the issues of gender, ritual, and identity. I had considered using the theorist Catherine Bell as a mainstay of performance theory. However, I ultimately decided against this approach, as my knowledge of the theory is tenuous at best.

For feminist theory, I have relied mainly on what are considered the classical theorists. However, the theories used in this paper are not representative of the entire field, both due to the space limit and authorial discretion. I have avoided using any

psychoanalytical approaches, which are utilized by some feminist theorists, as I did not find them helpful or pertinent to my thesis. I also left out scholars who sought to find a redemptive message in the physical pain of these women, as I felt that it was a dangerous precedent to perpetuate.

Additionally, I recognize that there are flaws in this approach, as contemporary feminist scholarship is taking a new direction. While classical feminist theory was highly relevant to my work, given its emphasis on questions of the body, the classic theories also fail to address the diversity of women's experiences. Contemporary feminist theories are working towards capturing this diversity, through such routes as post-colonial and womanist studies.

Now that I have discussed why I chose my particular thesis topic and the reasoning behind my choice of theoretical approach, I will begin my paper in earnest. As Trouillot points out in the quote beginning this paper, the past has power in how we use it. We see in the quote from Kidd that feminists have a strong need for redemptive female figures, which inspire contemporary women to 'get off their knees', so to speak. Medieval holy women were revered for their power and efforts by both their communities and the Church. However, what are contemporary women to make of these female saints?

This paper will examine Blessed Angela of Foligno (1248 – 1309), a Franciscan tertiary, and Saint Catherine of Siena (1347 – 1380), a Dominican tertiary. They were Catholic holy women from medieval Italy. These two women experienced mystical visions and practiced extreme mortification. While such behaviors may seem strange and somewhat detrimental to the modern feminist scholar, we must examine them from the

context of the time period of Angela and Catherine. This paper will attempt to contextualize the actions and writings of both women, to show that though they appear on the surface to be the submissive ‘lambs’ of the Church which today’s feminists vilify, underneath the ‘lamb’s clothing’ of orthodoxy they are more akin to the ‘wolves’ contemporary feminists are seeking for inspiration.

Before we begin to examine the historical figures of Angela and Catherine, let us first explore further Trouillot’s understanding of history. As Trouillot states, “the past, or more accurately, past-ness is a position.”³ The past, as recaptured by history, is not an objective entity. Trouillot further explains that “the past does not exist independently from the present”, but is in some sense created by it through the writing of history.⁴ History consists of “the production of specific narratives”⁵. These “narratives” are not only created by the historical figures but also by the historians themselves, as they try to reconstruct ‘what really happened.’⁶

However, no narrative is constructed without a guiding motive. The very construction of narratives renders some events and details “silenced”, as not everything can be covered in a coherent story.⁷ These “silences” can be used for political reasons, as “silencing...is an erasure more effective than the absence or failure of memory, whether faked or genuine.”⁸ In fact, Trouillot asserts that it is “misleading if it is suggest[ed] that power exists outside the story...[since] power is constitutive of the

³ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 15.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁶ This is not to suggest that Trouillot or I take the extreme position that historical events did not occur. I side with Karen Scott, who says that “Postmodernist thinkers, however, go too far when they deny that anything can be known about a person from the past...” (“Mystical Death”, 141)

⁷ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 50.

⁸ Ibid., 60.

story”.⁹ Thus, history is a construction of the past, heavily colored by the motives of power. We will see in the second chapter how the agenda of confessors and the Church impact the depiction of these women in the historical texts concerning them.

In the past two decades, medieval female spirituality, the body, and the intersection of the two have been very popular topics of study in the humanities. As my paper lies in the intersection, it will be useful to point out a few key studies in these three areas.

With the advent of anthropology and post-modern thought, the body is being studied more frequently, in terms of not only a symbol used within culture but as a tool used by and expressing culture.¹⁰ Mary Douglas is renowned for theorizing that a culture’s treatment of the body (both in terms of how the body is discussed and actions performed with/on it) reflects the culture’s view of “social order”.¹¹ Different parts of the body and beliefs associated with them encode social meanings.¹² She explained that societies with a more stringent set of behavior rules, explicitly mandated in order to maintain the purity of the group’s members, were also usually more concerned with maintaining clear boundaries between in-group and out-group members.¹³

The postmodernist Michel Foucault is often praised for his work on the relationships between body and culture. Although he was studying the development of the concept of the soul in punishment systems, Foucault writes a great deal about the body in his watershed work *Discipline and Punish*.¹⁴ In this book, he suggests that the

⁹ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 28.

¹⁰ Her main works that discuss this theme are *Purity and Danger* and *Natural Symbols*.

¹¹ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 4.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 153.

¹⁴ Foucault, *Discipline*, 23.

bodies under regimes of power will bear the marks of that regime, not only in punishment but general enculturative practices.¹⁵

In ancient Christian studies, Peter Brown contributed the foundational work *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*.¹⁶ This book discusses the evolution of Christian thinking. It also explains that the bodies of Christians were made a site for manifesting Christian ideals. Its breadth in discussing the different Christian communities and thinkers was unprecedented. Brown emphasized that Christian thought was never monolithic, but varied between geographical locations and time periods.

Caroline Walker Bynum is another widely known name, whose work in the field of medieval female spirituality is seminal. Although she has authored numerous articles and several books on the subject, her most famous work is probably *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. This piece examines how medieval female spirituality was directly tied to food, in terms of the Eucharist and fasting.¹⁷ Medieval women were limited in the resources they could manipulate; however, food was within the control of women and was used, in both imagery and fasting, to express piety.¹⁸ Bynum examines the lives of several female saints, exploring the connections between food and sanctity understood by these women.¹⁹

¹⁵ Foucault, *Discipline*, 130.

¹⁶ See bibliography for publication information

¹⁷ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Terminology

Before we begin our analysis of Angela and Catherine, let me provide a clarification of some terms that will be used throughout this paper. In using the word “Church”, I am referring to the collective of the papacy, the clergy, the monks of religious orders; effectively, this means the term “Church” represents all the males who held positions of power within Catholicism as well as the political entity they created. To avoid confusion, I use the phrase “Catholic Church” to refer to the institution of liturgical practices and doctrine. Another word that is found in my paper is “tertiary”. This term refers to members of the third tier of a religious order; these tertiaries pursued a religious vocation through prayer, charitable works, and asceticism, while remaining in the world.²⁰

The terms “mortification” and “asceticism” will be used interchangeably in this paper. I use both terms to refer to practices of self-denial, such as fasting and sleep deprivation, as well as to refer to practices of self-harm, such as self-flagellation and physically assaulting oneself. Related to this is the word “penitent”, which refers to a Christian who sought to undertake mortification as a means of living a life of penance.

²⁰ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 18.

CHAPTER ONE

MAKING THE WOLF, MAKING THE LAMB:
THE SOCIAL AND CHURCH CONTEXTS
OF ANGELA AND CATHERINE

Before we can begin to examine the roles that Catherine of Siena and Angela of Foligno played in the medieval Church, we must examine the contexts of these women, both in terms of their society and the developments within the Church that impacted them.

The Medieval Social Context

Health Conditions, Disease

The bubonic plague hit Italy in 1348. Siena was one of the more impacted areas; the plague cost the city roughly half its population, with the death toll rising to 35,000.²¹ The plague returned to the city several times. Also, there were famines, wars, and marauders who created strife even in peace time.²² Children counted for a disproportionately large amount of the fatalities in the plague.²³ This high death rate, combined with a higher birth rate, created a high ‘turnover rate’ in the population and in the family in particular; consequently, familial bonds were weakened.²⁴ While more births were occurring than before the plague, the population was still declining on the whole.²⁵

Although death itself was devastating, the physical suffering which preceded it also deeply impacted the family members who watched the pain of their loved ones.²⁶ Many illnesses, both the non-serious and the life-threatening were treated at home, meaning that family members were often caretakers and witnesses to the suffering of their sick relatives.²⁷ The pain that came with illness was seen by all family members; as

²¹ Herlihy, *Women, Family*, 177.

²² *Ibid.*, 178.

²³ *Ibid.*, 180.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 179.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 180.

²⁶ Roncière, “Tuscan Notables”, 267.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Roncière explains, “no one could escape the ubiquitous presence of pain.”²⁸ As a result of the plague, death and its associated rituals were frequent visitors in the home.²⁹ However, these experiences were nothing new when the plague struck in 1348. Famines and disease claimed the youth and made victims suffer long before the appearance of the bubonic plague. However, the so-called Black Death added to the death toll.³⁰

Between the plague and political turmoil, many in Italian society were losing faith in the Catholic Church. Instead of relying upon the rituals of the Catholic Church, people turned to gambling and sorcery.³¹ Some actually benefited economically from the plague, as inheritances came much sooner to those who survived the plague.³² In such tumultuous times, the lives of the saints provided models of piety that countered the declining faith and a path for enduring the widespread suffering.³³

Status or “Class”

Italian society of the Middle Ages was highly stratified. The advent of economic growth in the cities in the 12th century resulted in an increase in social complexity, as it allowed more families to rise above the manual labor class.³⁴ The communes, which will be discussed in the next section, were controlled by elite families who competed for power. In contrast, unskilled workers were excluded from both guilds and positions in

²⁸ Roncière, “Tuscan Notables”, 269.

²⁹ Ibid., 271.

³⁰ Ibid., 272.

³¹ Ibid., 185.

³² Ibid., 184.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Coleman, “Cities and Communes”, 51.

the commune's government.³⁵ However, guilds began to increase their power, joining together in some areas to overthrow the noble families who controlled the commune.³⁶

Although ideally all girls were to be protected and kept within the house from the time they were of a marriageable age, girls of lower class were often forced to work outside the house to help keep the family from living in poverty.³⁷ Sumptuary laws not only tried to enforce modesty among women, but were also intended to benefit the wealthy; women of lower rank could not wear anything forbidden under the laws, from which the wealthy and powerful were exempt.³⁸ Thus, clothing was a means for women to communicate their status and that of their family.³⁹

Politics of Italy

On a large scale, the time period we are focused upon consisted of a great deal of political turmoil. Although centralized governments were increasing in some parts of Europe during the thirteenth century, the opposite was happening in Italy.⁴⁰ Power was being diverted into the hands of different groups, including princes and communes.⁴¹ Perhaps this is what made the communes of Italy so politically unstable.⁴² The political struggles that arose sometimes pitted brother against brother, with the result of much bloodshed.⁴³

³⁵ Coleman, "Cities and Communes", 53.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy*, 94.

³⁸ Ibid., 147.

³⁹ Ibid., 146.

⁴⁰ Morris, *Papal Monarchy*, 550.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Lomax, "Ghibelline", 414.

⁴³ Herlihy, *Women, Family*, 184.

Given the decentralizing of power in Italy, differing factions naturally arose to compete with one another for more power. In this context, the Church in the thirteenth century was trying to become more centralized by fighting the spread of heretical teachings. The Church worked with some political factions in its pursuit of heretics. The Third Lateran Council (1179) declared heretics to be enemies of the Church, and those who persecuted heretics in crusades would receive indulgences⁴⁴; strategically, the crusaders were portrayed as “defenders of the faith” rather than as the Church’s “instrument of coercion or punishment.”⁴⁵ Along these lines, the papacy enlisted the help of local authorities in locating and punishing heretics.⁴⁶ However, not all secular governments were completely comfortable with the Church and its doctrine; consequently, some governments were accused by the Church of supporting heretics. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) addressed this issue, declaring those governments guilty of protecting heretics as open to crusade and subsequent loss of property.⁴⁷

With the background of differing communes and the Church’s tenuous relationship with each, the influx of foreign political influence increased the tension significantly. When Frederick I Barborossa (1123 – 1190) came to the throne of the Holy Roman Empire, his expeditions brought to Italy the German war cries that were Italianized into “Guelf” and “Ghibelline”.⁴⁸ These terms varied in meaning over time, but were generally used to mean “anti-imperialist” and “pro-imperialist”, respectively. Those who supported Frederick’s reign and invasions of Italy were considered Ghibelline; those who were against Frederick, including Pope Alexander III

⁴⁴ An indulgence is “a remission of the temporal punishment due to sin” (Kent, “Indulgences”)

⁴⁵ Housley, “Politics and Heresy”, 194.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁴⁸ Lomax, “Ghibelline”, 414.

(1100 – 1181), were Guelf.⁴⁹ Most of northern and central Italy was divided between these two sides by the year 1250.⁵⁰

Despite the peace Frederick I established, his grandson Frederick II (1194 – 1250) renewed the battle with the Church when he became emperor. He demanded that the Church undertake reforms, accusing the Church of being power hungry. The radical Franciscans agreed with this charge.⁵¹ Those who stood with the emperor in the Ghibelline party often did so for political gain, as well as out of general disgust with the Church.⁵² Additionally, those who suffered from the pressures of the inquisition also found it advantageous to join the Ghibelline cause.⁵³ However, Frederick himself and his successors were strongly against the Cathar teachings, deemed heretical by the Church.⁵⁴ We will discuss the Cathars further in the next section.

Both Pope Gregory IX (1145 – 1241) and Pope Innocent IV (birth date unknown; died in 1254) fought against Frederick II.⁵⁵ The pope would align himself with the Guelfs, taking a very political position in the struggle; as Lomax explains, the pope became another player in the game, “who fomented strife and constructed alliances to cope with imperial power.”⁵⁶ The Church levied taxes to support its wars against Frederick II, which did not help with its popularity.⁵⁷ Part of the war was to declare Frederick II and his supporters as subject to crusades, which meant that their property

⁴⁹ Housley, “Politics and Heresy”, 194.

⁵⁰ Lomax, “Ghibelline”, 414.

⁵¹ Morris, *Papal Monarchy*, 554.

⁵² Kleinherz, “Guelf”.

⁵³ Housley, “Politics and Heresy”, 197.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Lomax, “Ghibelline”, 414.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 415.

⁵⁷ Morris, *Papal Monarchy*, 558.

could be seized by crusaders with the approval of the Church.⁵⁸ Guelfs' support of the papal position was not entirely devoid of political motivation either; kings who stood with the pope could have their nominees for bishoprics and positions of power within the Church sanctioned by the pope.⁵⁹ However, the conflict between the Guelfs and the Ghibbellines declined severely in 1268, as the death of Conradin (1252 – 1268) “ended hopes of a Ghibelline resurgence”.⁶⁰

Conclusion

This survey of the social context of Angela and Catherine has allowed us a glimpse of what life was like for these two holy women. The health conditions were difficult during this time period, with a high prevalence of pain and suffering. Although Angela probably also experienced many deaths around her due to the reoccurring famines and violence of marauders, the death toll was probably higher in Catherine's time, due to the bubonic plague.⁶¹ Class was also a factor that impacted both women. We know that Catherine was born to a middle-class family⁶², but we are uncertain about Angela's status.⁶³

The actions of the Church, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section, impacted both Angela and Catherine as well. As we have seen, the Church's fight against heresy empowered crusaders, whose sackings of anti-papal cities were justified by the Church. Additionally, the power struggle between Frederick II and the

⁵⁸ Housley, “Politics and Heresy”, 197.

⁵⁹ Morris, *Papal Monarchy*, 558.

⁶⁰ Housley, “Politics and Heresy”, 205.

⁶¹ The plague returned to Siena and the surrounding area several times between 1348 and 1421. The deaths from the plague added to the body count, already high from famines (1368, 1370, and 1374) and mercenary activities. (Herlihy, *Women, Family*, 178)

⁶² Noffke, *Catherine*, 3.

⁶³ Arcangeli, “Re-Reading a Mis-Known”, 49.

papacy probably resulted in much fighting and strife. Although Angela was born soon after the death of Frederick II, it is likely that the cities were still recovering from the political turmoil of his reign. The impacts of this conflict upon the Church would continue through the time of Catherine as well.

The Medieval Catholic Church

Developments within the Church

In the late 13th and 14th centuries, the papacy was engaged in “a severe struggle for survival.”⁶⁴ International distrust of the clergy, an increase in heretical movements, and invasions into “Crusader states” by Muslim armies created a crisis for the Church.⁶⁵ In addition, there were struggles with international monarchies for allegiance to the papacy, including the Ghibelline-Guelf conflict we have previously examined.

A major heretical movement that threatened the Church was the Cathar heresy. The Cathars rejected the authority of the Church completely.⁶⁶ Unlike previous heretical movements, who were attached to a particularly charismatic speaker, the Cathar movement was decentralized.⁶⁷ It explicitly refused to accept the doctrine of the Incarnation, insisting that something as holy as God could not inhabit flesh, which was seen to be corrupt.⁶⁸ Later mystics who seemed to reject the necessity of the flesh were accused of being heretical, given their similarity to Catharism.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Goodich, “Politics of Canonization”, 294.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Lambert, *Medieval Heresy*, 60.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 55.

⁶⁸ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 252.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Another heretical movement that went against the doctrine of the Catholic Church was the Free Spirit heresy.⁷⁰ This movement emphasized the importance of mysticism to a degree that the Church was not comfortable with. In fact, members of the Free Spirit felt that mysticism superseded Church doctrine and were considered guilty of antinomianism.⁷¹ However, this movement was not very well organized.⁷²

Organization/Hierarchy

The thirteenth century saw a great deal of change within the Catholic community of Italy. There was a significant rise in women's penitential movements.⁷³ The increase of urbanization created a corresponding shift from women entering convents to women becoming tertiaries within the city.⁷⁴ Though the Church had previously forbid the founding of new orders, it allowed some of these new penitential movements to persist without submitting to the jurisdiction of the Church.⁷⁵ This may have been part of the general movement of the Church to expand its laity support-base.

Sainthood

Another method to gain support was the canonization of new saints from the lay community.⁷⁶ Canonization of saints allowed the Church to elevate local heroes and thus gain the allegiance of the home region of those heroes.⁷⁷ Particularly in the thirteenth

⁷⁰ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 17.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Sensi, "Anchoresses", 56.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁷⁶ Goodich, "Politics of Canonization", 294.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 295.

century, the choice of who was canonized was highly political.⁷⁸ Saints were chosen for adhering to the current Pope's policies and for the degree of need by the Church for their region's allegiance.⁷⁹ A major theme among the saints canonized during the thirteenth century was their work against heretics and heretical movements since these saints benefited the Church's agenda of fighting heresy.⁸⁰ Given the "new, more rigorous judicial standards" for sainthood "demanded at Rome", letters attributing miracles to saints were no longer enough; a bishop interested in promoting a certain person for canonization had to investigate the person and provide evidence of the person's worthiness.⁸¹ Despite the change in "standards" for canonization, the Church still lacked "a consistent and universally accepted system" of canonization.⁸²

In addition to the politics of the Pope, the religious Orders within the Church also had agendas when it came to getting saints canonized. The Dominicans pushed for Catherine of Siena to be canonized and her stigmata recognized; she was a Dominican tertiary and her stigmata made her extremely Christ-like.⁸³ In contrast, the Franciscans were direly opposed to the official recognition of Catherine's stigmata, as they held a position of authority over the Dominicans due to their founding saint's stigmata, which they claimed was unique.⁸⁴ Catherine was eventually canonized, but the papal bull that gave her the title of saint was silent on her stigmata.⁸⁵ The debate raged on between

⁷⁸ Goodich, "Politics of Canonization", 295.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 296.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 306.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 297.

⁸² Kleinberg, *Prophets*, 5.

⁸³ Lemeneva, "Borders and Borderlines", 199.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 200.

Dominicans and Franciscans, until finally Pope Benedict XIII (1649 – 1730), a Dominican, officially acknowledged Catherine’s stigmata with a feast day.⁸⁶

Confessors

In addition to hearing confession, the confessor also served to determine the proper conformity of the woman to the standards of the Church; he assessed the “orthodoxy” of her visions and beliefs.⁸⁷ Holy women were not independent figures as they relied upon confessors both for confession and for recording their visions. Such women frequently confessed and looked to their confessors for spiritual guidance.⁸⁸ The confessor’s obligations to the Church were to take priority, and the Church may have had its own ideas of how to treat the visions and the holy women who had them.⁸⁹ Consequently, a confessor could either enrich or destroy the character of his subject.⁹⁰

The requirement of annual confession was stipulated by the Fourth Lateran Council, which was in part intended as a means of identifying potential heretics.⁹¹ The priests of the Dominican and Franciscan Orders carried out the disciplinary functions of the inquisition. The Dominican Order was designed to “detect heresy” and help the overburdened clergy by hearing confessions.⁹² The Franciscans also took on these functions. We will discuss the role and impact of the confessor in regards to holy women in more detail in the next chapter.

⁸⁶ Elliot, “Women and Confession”, 31.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Kleinberg, *Prophets*, 48.

⁹⁰ Elliot, “Women and Confession”, 31-2.

⁹¹ Ibid., 40.

⁹² Ibid., 33.

Theological history of imitatio Christi

A major focus in 13th and 14th century piety was *imitatio Christi*, the active imitation of Christ. All aspects of Christ's life were imitated⁹³, but the most relevant aspect for the focus of this paper is the imitation of Christ's suffering. Crusades were bringing back relics tied to the life and Passion of Christ; this led people to contemplate more fully Christ's humanity.⁹⁴ Additionally, people felt that experiencing something was a more valid way of understanding than merely contemplating it and felt that imitation was the best means of experience.⁹⁵ Imitating the humanity of Christ was a way for the imitator to also understand Christ's divinity.⁹⁶ Although pain was frequently sought in *imitatio Christi*, pain was not the end but the means; the ultimate goal was to identify with Christ's humanity.⁹⁷

Saint Francis of Assisi (1181 – 1226) was the first publicly recognized leader to combine the “*vita apostolica* and *imitatio Christi*” and make it a path for the laity.⁹⁸ The saint paralleled Christ so much in lifestyle that Francis received the stigmata and was portrayed as a second Christ.⁹⁹ Before this, the term “stigmata” was used to refer any of the following: a metaphorical “mark of being Christian”, the actual wounds of Christ, wounds from being martyred, and self-inflicted wounds of penitents.¹⁰⁰ The term acquired the new meaning of receiving the five wounds of Christ from a supernatural event after the experience of Saint Francis.

⁹³ Astell, “Introduction”, 23.

⁹⁴ Snoek, *Medieval Piety*, 26-7.

⁹⁵ Ross, “She Wept”, 47.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 47-8.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁹⁸ Goodich, *Vita Perfecta*, 8.

⁹⁹ Mooney, “*Imitatio Christi*”, 56.

¹⁰⁰ Lemeneva, “Borders and Borderlines”, 196.

However, Saint Francis only once mentioned imitation of Christ in relation to himself; Saint Clare (1194 – 1253), the protégé of Saint Francis, used the terminology far more frequently.¹⁰¹ This is perhaps related to the observed trend that women took *imitatio Christi* to greater lengths than did men.¹⁰² Women engaged in severe fasts and mortification of the flesh, in order “to train their souls for battle”.¹⁰³ Additionally, by wounding her body, a female penitent strengthened her identification with the humanity of Jesus.¹⁰⁴ In contrast to the modern Cartesian dualism, medieval women did not value the dichotomy of flesh and spirit very much.¹⁰⁵ Instead, holy women saw their bodies as fully capable of *imitatio Christi* “through the body as well as the soul.”¹⁰⁶ The assumption that women were more connected to the flesh actually benefited medieval women in the sense that Christ was understood as taking on “human suffering” in his redemption of the world.¹⁰⁷

However, women were supposed to concede to the will of their confessors concerning the extent to which they imitated Christ. Female penitents were not to go to extremes in mortification, unless allowed by their confessors.¹⁰⁸ Male clergy were suspicious and fearful of women who ignored their confessor’s advisements and practiced severe mortification.¹⁰⁹ Extreme self-inflicted injury was not considered an appropriate means of asceticism by the Church; only severe injuries inflicted by others,

¹⁰¹ Mooney, “*Imitatio Christi*”, 71.

¹⁰² Ziegler, “Reality as Imitation”, 126.

¹⁰³ McNamara, “Rhetoric”, 13.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 296.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Fox, “Boundaries of Sainthood”, 138.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

particularly if received as part of persecution for one's faith, were valid.¹¹⁰ Consequently, moderation in mortification was considered by the clergy and confessors to be a virtue that respectable holy women would model.¹¹¹ Moderate self-injury was permissible for female penitents and actually recommended by male writers as a means of "remind[ing] the subject of her fleshly nature and to identify with the humanity of Christ."¹¹²

The physical imitation of Christ was a powerful tool in the fight against Catharism. By endorsing the flesh as a means of reaching God, female penitents effectively rejected the teachings of the Cathar heresy.¹¹³ The thirteenth century was the time in which the humanity of Christ was embraced the most, in part as a response to the widespread heretical denial of Christ's humanity.¹¹⁴ The female mystics who emphasized Christ's body and blood were frequently elevated by the Church, as counterpoint to anti-body heretics.¹¹⁵

Church's focus/impact on women

Women of the late Middle Ages were limited in their life choices, as we will see in more detail shortly. Even as the opportunities in the world were expanding for men, the opposite was true for women. As Elliot explains, "Men, socially enabled, could search the world. Women, socially hobbled, could search their souls."¹¹⁶ The Church was facing a loss in numbers, and consequently allowed its female members a greater

¹¹⁰ Fox, "Boundaries of Sainthood", 139.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid., 138.

¹¹³ McNamara, "Rhetoric", 13.

¹¹⁴ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 252.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 253.

¹¹⁶ Elliot, "Women and Confession", 36.

voice than before.¹¹⁷ Mendicant preachers directed their sermons to women to condemn the female tendency to ‘sinful vanity’ and to praise female virtue.¹¹⁸

By the 14th century, Franciscans and Dominicans were creating “a pastoral of a private life” by making family visits.¹¹⁹ These close relationships between families and mendicant friars allowed families to make confessions and receive spiritual guidance on a more regular basis. However, a big part of the friars’ mission was to infiltrate the home to allow the Church to once more exert considerable influence over life in the home.¹²⁰ Consequently, the friars stressed the importance of the structure and mood of the home for Christian education and life.

The success of the Mendicant orders gave Italian women new options for religious expression.¹²¹ For medieval women, the Church ideals of virgin birth and martyrdom were not feasible options.¹²² Additionally, women could only have male-mediated religious experiences, since the clergy consisted solely of men.¹²³ This exclusion of women from the clergy possibly made the heretical movements more appealing to women.¹²⁴ The fear of losing droves of women to such movements may have caused the Church to create a new recognition of lay women, in the form of the tertiary.¹²⁵

Women in general were advised to be good wives and mothers but not to become too attached to their families, as families were of this world. An emphasis on inward

¹¹⁷ McNamara, “Rhetoric”, 10.

¹¹⁸ Herlihy, *Women, Family*, 18.

¹¹⁹ Roncière, “Tuscan Notables”, 304.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 305.

¹²¹ Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 84.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹²⁴ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 17.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

solitude was preached to and followed by women.¹²⁶ Within the home, a woman was to retreat to her bedroom for her devotion and make it her ‘monastic cell’. Wives thus became detached from the world through their devotional practices.¹²⁷

The women who took up newly created positions such as tertiaries, were still restricted by the Church, lest they gain too much power. For example, a female saint could achieve some status for her knowledge and abilities.¹²⁸ However, the idea of women preaching, even if it was to preach against heresy, was highly controversial.¹²⁹ Although women were recognized as being capable of receiving visions and instructions from God, the patriarchal structure of the Church encouraged silence among women. Some mystics could only be emboldened to obey the instructions they received in visions after having male clergy sanction the visions.¹³⁰

Women’s societal roles

Women in Italy during the 13th and 14th centuries were considered marriageable at an early age, though the specific age varied from region to region. In Siena, once a girl turned 12 years old, she was no longer allowed outside the house unsupervised since she was now eligible for suitors and marriage.¹³¹ Without supervision, a girl could meet boys who were not qualified to be suitors and get into different kinds of trouble.¹³² Sometimes this prohibition on leaving the house was taken to great lengths; some families stopped bringing their daughters to church once the girls turned 12, to avoid allowing the girls

¹²⁶ Roncière, “Tuscan Notables”, 307.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 308.

¹²⁸ Herlihy, *Women, Family*, 170.

¹²⁹ McNamara, “Rhetoric”, 10.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 11.

¹³¹ Herlihy, *Women, Family*, 182.

¹³² Ibid., 303.

outside the house.¹³³ Naturally, this infuriated the ministers.¹³⁴ A girl's mother was to protect the daughter, especially her "innocence and chastity".¹³⁵ A girl of 12 years or older could associate only with those of good social standing; she could not befriend anyone she chose. Little girls could "take refuge in prayer, mysticism, or the ultimate assertion of freedom: refusal of marriage."¹³⁶ However, families were often resistant if a daughter desired to take these devotional practices further by pursuing the life of a nun or tertiary.¹³⁷ This resistance was probably due, in part, to the fact that marriage brought an economic gain to the parents which was lost if the daughter refused to marry.¹³⁸

If a girl was able to either run away or acquire the approval of her parents to join a religious community, she could enter a convent¹³⁹ or become a tertiary. Women of Catherine's time and state¹⁴⁰ could choose the convent for a life of private spirituality.¹⁴¹ The regular routine and social interaction found within a convent "provided an important framework of emotional and physical stability".¹⁴² Additionally, the varied relationships between women, the celebrations of saints' days, and visits from different monks, bishops, and clergy created some variation in the day to day routine.¹⁴³

However, despite the option of entering a convent, many Italian women in the 13th century came to reject the moderate "Benedictine-style conventual life in favor of

¹³³ Roncière, "Tuscan Notables", 285.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy*, 97.

¹³⁶ Roncière, "Tuscan Notables", 227.

¹³⁷ Goodich, *Vita Perfecta*, 177.

¹³⁸ Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 148.

¹³⁹ Entrance into a convent was not always voluntary; Many women entered convents as children, having been given by their parents (Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 20).

¹⁴⁰ Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 54. Catherine was in a far better position than Angela to become a nun, as Catherine was an unmarried virgin.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

less sure and controlled, often highly individualistic holy careers.”¹⁴⁴ These women who did not enter the convent but still maintained a lifestyle distinct from the typical lay person often became tertiaries. Tertiary orders provided a way for a woman to renegotiate “her social condition”, as well as ““a positive road to recapturing her individual reality and self-sufficiency””.¹⁴⁵ Both Angela and Catherine chose this path. We will examine this development in more detail in a moment.

If a girl was unable to escape marriage by running away or gaining entrance into a convent or tertiary order, her parents would begin negotiations with the family of an approved suitor. Thus, a marriage was more than the relationship between two people, as it united two families.¹⁴⁶ Factors such as the political and social standings of the potential in-laws were considered extremely important. Typically, the bride was far younger than the groom and consequently often outlived him.¹⁴⁷ The ideal wife was to be “chaste and obedient”; the word ‘chaste’ implied fidelity in this usage and not necessarily abstinence from sexual activity within the marriage.¹⁴⁸

The patriarchy of medieval society extended into the home. The man had ultimate authority over his wife and children.¹⁴⁹ A husband could sell his wife’s property, even if she protested the sale; in some cases, even the property of a man’s daughter-in-law could be under his control.¹⁵⁰ Additionally, it was legal and in some cases encouraged that a man discipline his wife with corporal punishment.¹⁵¹ In terms of being confined to the house, a married woman was almost as limited as she had been as a girl in

¹⁴⁴ Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 121.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁴⁶ Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy*, 137.

¹⁴⁷ Herlihy, *Women, Family*, 182.

¹⁴⁸ Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy*, 142.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 206-7.

her father's house.¹⁵² For example, a woman's husband could demand that she never leave the house and she would have to obey.¹⁵³

However, women still retained some power in their homes. Writers contemporary to the time urged women to take control of their households, particularly in terms of maintaining and promoting appropriate values.¹⁵⁴ Mothers were the primary source of education for most Italian children, as fathers were often away from the home due to work and work-related travel.¹⁵⁵ Mothers often felt closer to their children than to their husbands, as a result of the large age gap between spouses.¹⁵⁶

The education of children was considered extremely important but was not without controversy. It was debated as to whether girls should be educated.¹⁵⁷ Girls who belonged to key political families, as well as those who entered convents, learned to read and write.¹⁵⁸ At the very least, girls received instruction concerning their expected future duties (wifedom, motherhood, etc.).¹⁵⁹ Some writers also advocated giving one's daughters a more thorough religious education, as the young women would one day be mothers educating their own children.

Outside of the home, laws restricted women's movements in society both in terms of jobs they could take and also in terms of actual public involvement. Most guilds denied membership to women, unless they were the wife or daughter of a former master of the craft.¹⁶⁰ Laws were also in place to discourage women from becoming active in

¹⁵² Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy*, 286.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 211.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 281.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Roncière, "Tuscan Notables", 281-2.

¹⁶⁰ Herlihy, *Women, Family*, 16.

the public sphere. In Italian cities, communes were replacing traditional forms of government at this time.¹⁶¹ The republican nature of communal government meant that even women of higher class could no longer wield the power they once did as regents for sons and absent husbands.¹⁶² The power of aristocratic families was declining, and the sources of power replacing the families were not open to women.¹⁶³ Women could not enter into a legal contract without written consent from a male relative.¹⁶⁴ So-called “sumptuary laws” also impacted women, as they forbid lavish dress; extravagances taken in one’s clothing was one minor way in which women could have a voice in the public sphere, in which they were otherwise silent or absent.¹⁶⁵

Even though Italian women were essentially barred from public life, in the area of devotional practices of the laity they were acknowledged as full participants. Like men, women were understood as possessing souls that required salvation.¹⁶⁶ Women who were otherwise restricted to their houses could escape temporarily to go to the church, where they could visit with other women.¹⁶⁷ This was probably especially appealing to women who had servants to run errands for them, and thus had no other valid excuse to leave the house.¹⁶⁸ Church holidays and Lent allowed women even more time than usual to linger outside their homes.¹⁶⁹ Pilgrimages also provided a chance to leave the house for a time, even for those women of lesser wealth.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶¹ Herlihy, *Women, Family*, 15.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁶³ McNamara, “Women and Power”, 22.

¹⁶⁴ Herlihy, *Women, Family*, 15.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 17

¹⁶⁷ Roncière, “Tuscan Notables”, 288.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Widows filled one of the three main roles a woman took in the later Middle Ages, the other two being virgin and wife.¹⁷¹ Widows, particularly those who were older, faced the possibility of living in poverty if their sons failed to care for them.¹⁷² However, widows also had a certain power as they were no longer in the confines of marriage.¹⁷³ Many widows took up lives as uncloistered tertiaries.¹⁷⁴ Uncloistered widows could form social networks with other widows, become patrons, and experience a freedom unknown to wives.

Conclusion

The Church was engaged in a fight against heresy at the time Angela was born. To some extent, the Church was losing its grip amongst the lay elites and sought to reassert this through the encouragement of tertiary orders. Canonization became more political, to shore up the Church's power through recognition of only those who most benefited the Church politically. At the same time, we have seen that options for women were limited. Patriarchy was prevalent in all realms of life. However, women such as Angela and Catherine responded to the religious call of focusing on Christ's humanity, undertaking *imitatio Christi*. We will see that Angela and Catherine, despite the Church's exhortations to moderation in asceticism, undertook severe mortification. They also offered critiques of the Church, as we will later discuss.

¹⁷¹ Carlson and Weisl, "Constructions of Widowhood", 3.

¹⁷² Roncière, "Tuscan Notables", 229.

¹⁷³ Carlson and Weisl, "Constructions of Widowhood", 4.

¹⁷⁴ Herlihy, *Women, Family*, 182.

CHAPTER TWO

A CAVEAT ABOUT TEXTS AND CONFESSORS

Now that we have discussed the social and Church contexts of Angela and Catherine, I must offer a brief clarification and caveat before we turn to examine the women themselves. The arguments of this paper rely heavily on the writings of Angela and Catherine, as well as hagiographies written about them. This in itself is not unusual, as “most medieval holy women...are known to us solely through texts written by men.”¹⁷⁵ However, working from texts and the specific kinds of texts I am using raise many questions.

Feminist scholars and feminist theologians have raised awareness of the reader’s responsibility to always be wary of accepting what a text relates as the factual and unbiased truth. Even when we can be fairly certain that the actual author and the authorial name upon the text are the same, the author writes with a certain agenda in mind. Every narrative is constructed with a guiding motive, as we have learned from Trouillot.

Let us turn to look at the institution behind the construction of Angela’s and Catherine’s narratives, the Church and its confessors. As we have seen, confessors became much more vital to the laity with the new requirement of annual confession. The confessors also aided the Church in its pursuit of heretics, giving the confessor a great deal of authority. They were, in some sense, the Church’s ground-level enforcers of orthodoxy; naturally, such a position of power often led to abuse of the confessor’s role.¹⁷⁶ Additionally, rules were instituted in the Franciscan order, limiting the frequency of a female penitent’s confession, out of a fear of familiarity between confessor and

¹⁷⁵ Mooney, “Voice, Gender”, 3.

¹⁷⁶ Some “[c]onfessors expressed the desire to watch their charges having sex, and demanded details about the sexual activities of their penitents... [Some] [c]lerics were found guilty of kissing and fondling [their penitents] in sexual ways. Some masturbated alone, some with their penitents, and some were genitally stimulated by their penitents.” (Crawford, *European Sexualities*, 89)

penitent.¹⁷⁷ Too much interaction with a female penitent was believed to create temptation for a male confessor.

Male confessors fulfilled the role of ‘Church-agent’ in their interactions with female mystics. If a male confessor deemed a female mystic’s visions to be of holy rather than demonic origin, he would potentially record the life and visions of the mystic. Such recording by the confessor, rather than the woman, was in part due to practical needs as many of the lay women who received visions were illiterate¹⁷⁸; sometimes the saints were merely illiterate in the widely used Latin, “the dominant idiom of religious truth”.¹⁷⁹ Male confessors also were relied upon for their knowledge of how to edit the revelations and confessions properly with an eye towards canonization.¹⁸⁰

In this vein, the confessor could redact the messages of the female mystic, in order that they better conformed to Church teachings.¹⁸¹ As Mooney explains, “Most women’s stories would never have been recorded, much less survived the centuries, had they not been sanctioned by the male clerical elite.”¹⁸² Not only the women’s writings, but their memories would have perished in some cases where the saint’s popularity was due more to the efforts of her male clerical supporters and less to her own writings.¹⁸³

Confessors who knew the saints personally, as seems to be the case with Angela, struggled between the desire for factual accuracy and for conformity to orthodoxy; these confessors wished to leave an eye-witness account of a holy woman, and yet recognized that editing would be required in order for these women to be canonized or prevented

¹⁷⁷ Elliot, “Women and Confession”, 42.

¹⁷⁸ McNamara, “Rhetoric”, 10.

¹⁷⁹ Mooney, “Voice, Gender”, 7.

¹⁸⁰ Goodich, “Contours”, 26.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Mooney, “Voice, Gender”, 7.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 9.

from being deemed heretical.¹⁸⁴ Thus, we can recognize as suspect any claims by confessors that they were merely recording the female saint's words and translating them into Latin, without any adulteration.¹⁸⁵ In cases where we have both the women's own vernacular writing and her hagiographer's translation, we find significant changes in the hagiographer's work.¹⁸⁶ Additionally, sometimes the text reads more like a conversation, where the confessor continually questions the saint; this interrupts the message of the saint, allowing the confessor a degree of "critical control over the very shape of [the saint's] story".¹⁸⁷ This interruptive questioning is present in Angela's text, but absent in Catherine's.

Given the mystical experiences of Angela and Catherine, one wonders how their confessors viewed these women. We have little evidence that shows what the specific confessors of Angela and Catherine thought, but we can sketch a general picture. The clergy who interacted with and recorded the words of mystics such as Angela and Catherine were awed by them.¹⁸⁸ These women had direct access to God, an access that the men observing them lacked.¹⁸⁹ The clergy capitalized on the connection holy women had to the Divine, using them as "oracles".¹⁹⁰

However, such reliance upon female mystics threatened to undermine the authority of the male clergy relying upon them and render the mystic more powerful than the confessor.¹⁹¹ This imbalance, to differing degrees, was an issue for both cloistered

¹⁸⁴ Kleinberg, *Prophets*, 42.

¹⁸⁵ Mooney, "Voice, Gender", 7-8.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ Coakley, "Gender and Authority", 449.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 450.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 455.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 457.

women and female tertiaries.¹⁹² These women had a direct connection to God that the friars acknowledged but lacked within themselves. They came to consult the holy women, using that connection for spiritual growth and gain.¹⁹³ The friars also served “as witness to...the embodiment of holiness” these women provided.¹⁹⁴ The confessors maintained their authority by giving spiritual direction, which sometimes included orders to cease unsanctioned behavior like extreme fasting, to the holy women in their care.¹⁹⁵ Additionally, the *vitae* (hagiographical biographies) of some female mystics would refer to the ‘sinful nature’ of their life before their conversion; in contrast, numerous medieval hagiographers sought to create a picture of a flawless individual in the *vita*.¹⁹⁶ The inclusion of sins allowed the clergy to make the mystic “a safer oracle”, as it tarnished her image just enough to keep her from superseding the Church.¹⁹⁷

While some women tried to resist this authority, the ultimate power remained with the clergy. Those women who claimed to receive visions but refused to make confession to a cleric or friar were treated with suspicion. Marguerite Porete was one such woman, who refused to make confession even at her inquisitional trial; she was found guilty of heresy and burned at the stake.¹⁹⁸ Even women who were compliant and made confessions could be at risk, as an unsupportive confessor may break the seal of confession to reveal visions or sentiments he considered heretical. This was in keeping with his role of inquisitor, but went against the theology that said the seal of confession still applied in cases of “unrepentant heretic[s]”; however, this revealing of the contents

¹⁹² Coakley, “Gender and Authority”, 458.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 455.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 451.

¹⁹⁵ Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 23.

¹⁹⁶ Coakley, “Gender and Authority”, 457.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 40-1.

of confession was common practice.¹⁹⁹ Revelations made in confession to a suspicious priest could result in the penitent facing an inquisitional trial and potentially the stake.

Due to the possibly redacted nature of the texts, one may be tempted to fathom the possibility that “Blessed Angela” and “Saint Catherine” did not actually exist but were mere ‘models’ constructed by the Church. This thought pattern is somewhat reinforced by the fact that these women were never labeled heretics and received official Church recognition after their deaths. However, we can dismiss this notion of Angela and Catherine as mere constructs of the Church by looking more closely at the recognition the women received from the Church and the texts themselves. Additionally, we can challenge the notion that the texts we are focusing on are merely conveying “men’s idealized notions of female sanctity and its embodiment in women’s lives”²⁰⁰, by examining the problematic nature of the official recognition and texts of Catherine and Angela.

While it is true that both Angela and Catherine did receive official recognition, we must note the time at which this occurred relative to other saints contemporary to ours. Most saints during the thirteenth century were canonized within 10-20 years of their deaths.²⁰¹ Saints who were of more political use to the Church, such as martyrs killed by heretics, were canonized much more quickly; Peter Martyr, a preacher from Verona who was murdered by heretics, was canonized the same year he was killed.²⁰² In contrast, Catherine was not canonized until nearly 100 years after her death.²⁰³ This is longer than the average waiting period of saints who were of no immediate use to the Church,

¹⁹⁹ Elliot, “Women and Confession”, 49.

²⁰⁰ Mooney, “Voice, Gender”, 3.

²⁰¹ Vauchez, *Sainthood*, 64.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁰³ Gardner, “St. Catherine of Siena”.

suggesting that Catherine's life or writings were problematic for the papacy for many years. When we look at the case of Angela, the recognition is even less praise-worthy than that of Catherine. Angela was not given official recognition until more than three centuries after her death.²⁰⁴ Additionally, Angela was not fully canonized, but only beatified; she was thus denied the title of "saint" and instead is "blessed".²⁰⁵

Let us now examine next how their confessors may have impacted these women. In some cases, confessors tended to ignore the "male exemplars" that female saints sought to imitate, and tied the saints to "female exemplars" instead.²⁰⁶ Additionally, in the cases we have of a female saint's own writings and that of her confessor about her, male authors tended to emphasize the bodily aspects of the saint's life far more than she did herself, which is the case for Catherine.²⁰⁷ We will discuss a possible theory about this in the next chapter.

Another difference between a saint's own works and those of her confessor is the portrayal of the saint herself. Male hagiographers often depicted their female saints as more "mystical and mysterious", with less interest in this world than the world of the supernatural.²⁰⁸ Such was the case of Raymond of Capua's sketch of Catherine of Siena.²⁰⁹ These depictions were possibly contrived, in part, to downplay the "feminine assertiveness" of the female saints that would be rejected out of hand by a patriarchal Church and society.²¹⁰ However, the confessors' portrayals of their subjects were probably also colored by the male confessor's "assumptions about women and female

²⁰⁴ Robinson, "Bl. Angela of Foligno".

²⁰⁵ Beccari, "Beatification and Canonization".

²⁰⁶ Mooney, "Voice, Gender", 13-4.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 10-1.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

sanctity”.²¹¹ In conclusion, we see that the historical texts concerning female saints must be regarded with a degree of suspicion, as they were shaped by male confessors with particular agendas in mind.

²¹¹ Mooney, “Voice, Gender”, 11.

CHAPTER THREE

DECRYING LAMBS, LOOKING FOR WOLVES:
ANALYZING THE BEHAVIORS OF ANGELA AND CATHERINE

Now that we have examined the medieval social context of both Angela and Catherine, including the relevant developments within the Catholic Church, we will turn to the women themselves. Two major aspects of these women's lives that grip the contemporary imagination are their bodily mortification and their mystical experiences. As we have seen in our discussions of male confessors' portrayal of female mystics, the emphasis on the bodily manifestations of sanctity (stigmata, etc.) and bodily experiences in asceticism and mystical experiences may be due more to a confessor's editing than the woman's dictation. However, many feminists and scholars have seized upon the idea of female medieval spirituality as more body-centered. Additionally, the male-constructed images of these female saints are what the contemporary Catholic Church has inherited. For these reasons, we must address the subject of the body in regards to Angela and Catherine. I will begin with a brief overview of body theory, to examine classic academic and feminist trends of focusing upon the body

Contemporary Body Theory

Since the time of the Greeks, long before Descartes began writing, a division was thought to exist between the mind and the body.²¹² In this binary system, the mind was superior and consequently things associated with it were also thought to be superior.²¹³ Men were aligned with the mind, due to their assumed greater mental capacities. Women were understood to be tied to the flesh, due to their experience of menstrual cycles and pregnancy.²¹⁴ Even today the body, when it is discussed, is usually tied specifically to a

²¹² Allen, *Concept of Woman*, 81.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ortner, "Is Female to Male", 75.

particular gender.²¹⁵ This association was maintained in medieval Christianity, as women were identified with the body and men with the “spirit”.²¹⁶

As a result, men were taken to be superior to women, and the experiences of women were looked down upon if not denigrated. In fact, some scholars have described “the history of western thought” as containing “a deep hatred and fear of the body”, stemming from “gynophobia and misogyny.”²¹⁷ The fact that bodies are a pre-requisite for even mental knowledge was completely ignored.²¹⁸ According to Elizabeth Grosz, this tradition of under-valuing of bodily knowledge has created a “crisis of Reason”, which impacts both the humanities and the natural sciences.²¹⁹

Foucault postulated that while historians and doctors had previously studied the body in populations and epidemics, they had neglected the importance of the body in politics.²²⁰ It is the body that bears the scars and “signs” of “power relations”, which “invest [the body]” with meaning.²²¹ The power of modern times differs from that of the ages of monarchy, as it is “non-authoritarian, non-conspiratorial, and indeed non-orchestrated.”²²² However, it still controls bodies in order to maintain “the prevailing relations of dominance and subordination.”²²³ These bodies that are “produced” and disciplined by power are termed “docile bodies” by Foucault.²²⁴

While the interest of post-modern theorists in the body was not always political, politics was a significant issue for feminists who came to write about the body.

²¹⁵ Grosz, “Bodies and Knowledges”, 187.

²¹⁶ Finke, “Mystical Bodies”, 28.

²¹⁷ Gatens, “Power, Bodies”, 228.

²¹⁸ Grosz, “Bodies and Knowledges”, 187.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 25.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Bordo, “Feminism, Foucault”, 252.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 138.

According to Susan Bordo, it was feminists who first discovered the idea that power struggles were played out upon the body, and not Foucault.²²⁵ Additionally, writers point out how Foucault fails to acknowledge that the political body was created to “enhance and intensify the powers and capacities of specifically male bodies.”²²⁶ He also does not point out how men and women would experience their bodies differently due to the dualism of spirit/body within Christianity, within which women were tied to the body.²²⁷

Some feminists want to move away from the study of the body, out of a fear of backsliding into biological determinism.²²⁸ They accuse those seeking to emphasize the body in female experience as maintaining and perpetuating the “body/mind, nature/culture dualism.”²²⁹ Along these lines, Judith Butler warns that the bodies some feminists praise are not value-neutral, as they have often been pre-constructed (before the feminist’s use) to function in “keeping that body bounded and constituted by markers of sex”.²³⁰ Additionally, some scholars assert that a singular theory of the female body is ludicrous because it implies that “woman is some [one] thing” and that the variations of experiences of different women are overshadowed by their shared physiology.²³¹

However, Grosz explains that the body is more than biology, and feminists who are wary of pro-body arguments are failing to see the impact of “the sociocultural conceptions of the body”.²³² Addressing the concern that body-focused women’s studies will reinforce biological determinism, Gatens suggests that we can avoid this by focusing

²²⁵ Bordo, “Feminism, Foucault”, 248.

²²⁶ Gatens, “Power, Bodies”, 230.

²²⁷ Finke, “Mystical Bodies”, 28.

²²⁸ Grosz, “Bodies and Knowledges”, 195.

²²⁹ Gatens, “Power, Bodies”, 228.

²³⁰ Butler, “Bodily Inscriptions”, 103.

²³¹ Gatens, “Power, Bodies”, 232.

²³² Grosz, “Bodies and Knowledges”, 195.

on bodies that overcome such determinism.²³³ She gives the example of a female Olympic athlete, who has more in common with a male Olympic athlete than a working mom/wife. She argues that the “commonality” between the two athletes is based “at the level of the actual form and capacities of the body” rather than the value-loaded concept of gender.²³⁴

Furthermore, Gatens explains that it is not the anatomical differences between men and women which necessitated different social roles, but that anatomy was merely cited to justify the segregation of genders.²³⁵ As we have seen from her Olympic swimmer example, as well as the presence of women in the Marine Corps, female bodies are just as capable as male ones. She advises examining “the ways in which the typical spheres of movement of men and women and their respective activities construct and recreate particular kinds of body to perform particular kinds of task.”²³⁶

Several feminist scholars and writers seized upon the idea of focusing specifically upon the body as a means of redeeming it. In this vein, some scholars say physical experience is a prerequisite for understanding “human values and their relative importance”.²³⁷ Some feminists point to the fact that the body has been “the subordinated, negative or excluded term” in the body/mind dualism as reason for re-examining it.²³⁸ Additionally, several writers urge that the body offers another means of knowing or acquiring knowledge.²³⁹

²³³ Gatens, “Power, Bodies”, 228.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Milhaven, “Bodily Knowing”, 341.

²³⁸ Grosz, “Bodies and Knowledges”, 195.

²³⁹ For example J. Giles Milhaven, Helen Marshall, Elizabeth Grosz

The extreme nature of the bodily asceticism practiced by Catherine and Angela raises the question of how to see the body in regards to female experience. Some feminists would decry such mortification practices as an example of how women are depicted as inseparable from their bodies in patriarchal systems. These feminists may call upon Foucault, saying that the mortified bodies of female saints are ‘docile bodies’; in this manner, the female saints would be seen as co-opted to the point that they exercised the Church’s misogyny by attacking their own bodies.

However, I take my leave from those scholars who are working to redeem the body. In this view, the female saints utilized their bodies by imitating Christ to the degree that they were recognized by the Church as having power. These women also gained the status of saints in the minds of the laity, due to the severe nature of their asceticism²⁴⁰, as will be discussed later. Additionally, the ascetic lifestyles of Catherine and Angela may have predisposed their bodies to the mystical visions they received. These visions were another sign of sanctity for both the Church and the laity.²⁴¹ In a moment, we will discuss how the women combined these visions with public teaching. Consequently, the two holy women exercised some authority in their time, as a result of what they did with their bodies.

Female Mysticism

We have seen how feminists have taken different stances on the body, in terms of how much it should be focused upon in women’s studies. We shall observe some of these same tensions within the discussion of medieval female mysticism, as some women

²⁴⁰ Vauchez, *Sainthood*, 191.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 401.

find mysticism oppressive and others find it redemptive.²⁴² The term “mysticism” itself is deemed problematic by some feminists, who feel it is an example of a label invented to satisfy a male need to organize phenomena.²⁴³

In the medieval time period, more mystics were female than male.²⁴⁴ Different theories have been proposed by scholars to explain this gender imbalance. Some claim that the general population of Europe at the time had a higher percentage of women.²⁴⁵ Others see it as less a matter of chance or result of demographics. Given that women had limited social roles in the Middle Ages, they may have been more inclined to “radical forms of religious experience”.²⁴⁶ Women could more easily become known as “spiritual leaders based on their mystical experiences” in comparison to men.²⁴⁷ Additionally, Christ’s humanity was understood as coming from Mary, as medieval medical thought stipulated that the woman supplied the body of the fetus in conception.²⁴⁸ Thus Christ’s humanity and his Passion were understood to be feminine, which gave women a special access to it and its redemption.²⁴⁹

The main focus in the feminist study of female mystics’ works is bodies.²⁵⁰ Most scholars understand themselves to be taking their leave from mystics in concentrating on the body, as the mystics we know of often express their experiences in terms of bodily sensations.²⁵¹ However, such scholars fail to acknowledge their own constructions of

²⁴² Arcangeli, “Re-Reading a Mis-Known”, 42.

²⁴³ Ibid., 59.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 60.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Finke, “Mystical Bodies”, 29.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Lochrie, “Language of Transgression”, 117-8.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 118.

²⁵⁰ Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 204.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 213.

what mysticism is and the subcategories they artificially impose upon it.²⁵² Thus, before we can accurately say that female mysticism was essentially body-centered, we must examine how the female body was socially constructed in the Middle Ages and whether that is accurately represented in feminist theory.²⁵³

In both medieval medical and theological writings, a woman's body was designated by its penetrable boundaries.²⁵⁴ In medieval culture, women were seen as "the quintessence of all fleshly evil"²⁵⁵, as their anatomy made them more vulnerable to both internal and external disturbances (both natural, i.e. disease or seduction, and supernatural, divine or demonic possession).²⁵⁶ Women who wished to pursue a religious life were exhorted to adopt "boundaries and [maintain] an unbroken [or inviolate] body".²⁵⁷ Included in these boundaries were the senses, which were to be open only to God.²⁵⁸ Thus, silence was tied to chastity.²⁵⁹ This fit well with the concurrent prohibition against women preaching.²⁶⁰ We see this model of the inviolate body upheld in much of the hagiographies of female saints, primarily written by men; often, female saints who were grievously injured remained "miraculously untouched" and "miraculously impervious to wounding, invulnerable to penetration".²⁶¹ Additionally, women were removed from sight, in convents and homes, because they were seen as

²⁵² Lochrie, "Language of Transgression", 116.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 124.

²⁵⁵ Finke, "Mystical Bodies", 36.

²⁵⁶ Lochrie, "Language of Transgression", 125.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 126.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Passenier, "Suffering Body", 283.

²⁶¹ Finke, "Mystical Bodies", 38.

“bodies” and “bodies were dangerous – dangerous to men and, therefore, to society as a whole.”²⁶²

Such distrust of and disdain for women and their bodies carried over into religious thought. While cloistered in convents, nuns were expected to engage in “mantric prayer, flagellation, fasting, and vigils”.²⁶³ Mystics adopted most of these same practices, engaging in mortification. These behaviors served to reinforce “society’s need to control and purify the female body”.²⁶⁴ However, we must recognize that the church recommended only moderate mortification and “moderation in all penance.”²⁶⁵ Although *imitatio Christi* was recommended by the Church, male clergy were often suspicious of women who practiced extreme mortification.²⁶⁶

Many feminists view medieval female mysticism as less than uplifting. Some feminist scholars say *imitatio Christi* was developed to keep women in mysticism, where they feel ““female masochism is spectacularly redeployed in the pose of crucifixion””.²⁶⁷ If this is the case, *imitatio Christi* “turns out to be little more than transported self-loathing”.²⁶⁸ Although Finke herself has a positive view of mysticism, she has suggested the possibility of creating a case to show “that female mystics merely ventriloquized the voice of patriarchal religion”.²⁶⁹ Similarly, Passenier also deems mysticism a redemptive experience. She points out a contemporary trend, in which some scholars have maligned mystics as suffering mental imbalances (i.e. the visions mystics received were nothing more than schizophrenic hallucinations). While such pathologizing may offer a

²⁶² Petroff, *Soul and Body*, 205.

²⁶³ Finke, “Mystical Bodies”, 36.

²⁶⁴ Petroff, *Soul and Body*, 205.

²⁶⁵ Finke, “Mystical Bodies”, 42.

²⁶⁶ Fox, “Boundaries of Sainthood”, 139.

²⁶⁷ Lochrie, “Language of Transgression”, 119.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Finke, “Mystical Bodies”, 32.

scientifically viable explanation for the mystical experiences of these women, such explanations are guilty of anachronistic judgment. We cannot judge these women based on modern contexts, but must examine them from within the criteria of their own time. Passenier explains that, when contemporary scholars reduce the female mystics to women suffering delusions, “The female body no longer signifies the humanity of God, but [signifies only] physical and mental imperfection”.²⁷⁰

Now let us consider another possibility, that female mystics were actually empowered and resistant to patriarchal authority. To some extent, the behaviors recommended by the Church, with the intention of keeping women suppressed, became a tool for women’s self-expression. Practices such as constant prayer and flagellation, when used excessively, “produce[d] an emotional state conducive to mystical experience.”²⁷¹ Although women were forced into passive roles by the Church, they engaged “the language of passivity to create a new discourse”.²⁷² These female mystics entered into a “process” that “was both empowering and dangerous.”²⁷³ A woman’s body became a battleground for the “contested discourses about the body – and about culture” when she engaged in mysticism.²⁷⁴

Some scholars see mysticism as a linguistic attempt of female and male mystics to fight “the authoritative, monologic language of a powerful social institution” embodied by the Catholic Church.²⁷⁵ Women mystics in particular were wrestling to “redefine the meaning of female silence and powerlessness”, using both their bodies and their words in

²⁷⁰ Passenier, “Suffering Body”, 286.

²⁷¹ Finke, “Mystical Bodies”, 36.

²⁷² Petroff, *Soul and Body*, 205-6.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 206.

²⁷⁴ Finke, “Mystical Bodies”, 38.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

the struggle.²⁷⁶ Female visionaries “attempt[ed] to represent the unrepresentable”, and in doing so, “claimed the power to shape the meaning and form of their experiences”.²⁷⁷ Capitalizing on her similarities to Christ in her “ambiguous, heterogeneous flesh”, a woman mystic operated “from and through a place of disruption” that was her body in order to achieve “spiritual perfection.”²⁷⁸ Within their writings, female mystics employ “bodily imagery” to “subvert” typical “gender stereotypes” and “to show what is human in bodies and divine in souls.”²⁷⁹ For female mystics, “visions were a source of their power” as they allowed women a means of ‘speaking’ in the public, male world.²⁸⁰

Some scholars who consider mysticism to be empowering for medieval women redefine what is meant by ‘mystical experience’. For Finke, mystical experiences are not internal and subjective experiences as they are typically considered. Rather, mysticism and mystical experiences are “but a set of cultural and ideological constructs that both share in and subvert orthodox religious institutions.”²⁸¹ Passenier takes a similar stance, arguing that “the somatic experiences [female mystics] describe should not be taken at face value because they point to spiritual truths and experiences.”²⁸²

She expands on this point, explaining that women were forced to express theological teachings in the language of mystical experiences, since speaking about theology in a straight-forward fashion could earn a woman a charge of heresy.²⁸³ Mystical language was safe, however, since it was heavily invested in the body and body imagery; it was “a way deemed suitable for women”, as women were tied to their bodies

²⁷⁶ Finke, “Mystical Bodies”, 44.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Lochrie, “Language of Transgression”, 124.

²⁷⁹ Petroff, *Soul and Body*, 217.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 205-6.

²⁸¹ Finke, “Mystical Bodies”, 29.

²⁸² Passenier, “Suffering Body”, 284.

²⁸³ Ibid., 283.

in medieval medicine and theology.²⁸⁴ Thus, a woman used her body as a “sign” or “symbol” to convey her theological teachings.”²⁸⁵ According to Passenier, one can distinguish this in cases where a saint’s hagiography and her own writing are not parallel in terms of their physicality; the hagiography is often far more physical than the saint’s own writings. These works tend to be more theological, as a result of the male author’s attempts to tie the woman more to the physical.²⁸⁶ Thus, the question remains as to how much women shaped their writing to be more bodily in order to receive male sanction.²⁸⁷

The argument presented by Passenier is intriguing, as she claims that modern scholars have inherited this medieval tendency to see a connection between the body and all female mystical experience. We tend to overlook the fact that often those women whose writings were deemed heretical have been lost to history. As a result, many scholars are biased since they focus only on those women who have been Church-approved, as the writings of those women are still existent.²⁸⁸ This lack of texts representative of the whole population of female mystics skews our view towards the notion of female mysticism as being primarily bodily.²⁸⁹ In fact, the association between female mystical experience and the body is maintained by most scholars, even in the face of discovering texts that attest to more non-bodily trends in female mysticism. As Passenier explains, “Women are more than ever before equated with physicality and emotionality”, for better or worse.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁴ Passenier, “Suffering Body”, 284.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 285.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 286-7.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 268.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 287.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 285.

While it may be that female medieval sanctity was not always as bodily as hagiography and contemporary scholarship would have us believe, we have seen how the bodily nature of mysticism may have been empowering to holy women. In an age where options for women were few, female saints utilized their bodily connection to the femininely-derived humanity of Christ. Embracing the Church-supported feminine ideal of bodily sanctity, they molded it to their purposes, to convey their theological messages through mystical experiences without censure and to take *imitatio Christi* to the extreme.

Intriguingly, some women undertook *imitatio Christi* to such a degree that their visions showed themselves to have become essentially Christ-like.²⁹¹ Such women chose a piety focused on Christ rather than Mary²⁹²; they chose to imitate Christ, although Marian devotion could possibly been more easily pursued by these women. It may be that these women did not desire to settle for being yet another intercessor for God, but instead chose to pursue a path that would help them become God. We will see that this is the case with both Catherine and Angela.

²⁹¹ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 245.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 26. One example of a woman practiced Marian devotion was Mechthild of Magdeburg (1212-1282).

CHAPTER FOUR

LAMBS FOR GOD,
OBEYING THE CHURCH

We have discussed the role of the female body in the social and Church contexts of Angela's and Catherine's time, as well as contemporary views of the female body and the medieval female mystic's body. Now we shall examine how Angela and Catherine manipulated their bodies to gain a status in the Church beyond the status they held in the lay elite community, which allowed them the space to (in)directly critique the Church.

Angela of Foligno

Life and Mortification

Although we have several different copies of the recorded visions and teachings of Angela of Foligno, the biographical details in these manuscripts are few.²⁹³ This lack of background is not surprising, given that many female saints whose teachings and visions were recorded had little concern for their personal lives to be remembered; the focus was on preserving and passing on the spiritual truths these women received, not who they were as individuals.²⁹⁴ This lack of biography has led many scholars to invent details of Angela's life.²⁹⁵ Some go as far as describing Angela's personality,²⁹⁶ even though we have no documents attesting to what her personality was actually like.

Let us examine those details of Angela's life about which we are fairly certain. Angela was born in 1248.²⁹⁷ Later in her life, after being married and having children, she experienced a religious crisis. It has been determined, based on other references in

²⁹³ Arcangeli, "Re-Reading a Mis-Known", 49.

²⁹⁴ Greenspan, "Autohagiographical", 159.

²⁹⁵ Arcangeli, "Re-Reading a Mis-Known", 49.

²⁹⁶ Lachance, *Angela*, 16; the author describes her as "Rich, proud, and beautiful"

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

her writings, that this conversion happened during the papacy of Pope Celestine V (1215 – 1296).²⁹⁸ Finally, we are fairly sure that Angela’s death date was January 4, 1309.²⁹⁹

Whether Angela was able to read and write Latin remains unclear.³⁰⁰ It is likely that the versions of Angela’s text that we now possess contain multiple changes over the years from the original manuscript.³⁰¹ Despite her lack of canonization, Angela’s text was widely read; her works have been found in several vernacular languages aside from her own.³⁰²

Now we move to the portrayal of Angela the text gives us. From her discussions of her past sins, we gather that Angela lived a materially-oriented life that was very indulgent.³⁰³ Later in life, she was plagued by guilt over her sins, which led her to strive to live more devoutly.³⁰⁴ However, she felt she could not pursue life as a part of a Church order and have her family too; her writings indicate that her husband verbally abused her over the new devout life she was living.³⁰⁵ The reader learns later, when Angela was recounting her faith journey, that she understood the death of her mother, her husband, and her sons as God’s mercy in granting her prayers for their deaths.³⁰⁶ Then a widow, she journeyed to the church of San Francesco in Assisi. It was here that Angela had her first mystical experience, after she had already been pursuing a penitential path focused on imitating the sufferings of Jesus.³⁰⁷

²⁹⁸ Arcangeli, “Re-Reading a Mis-Known”, 50.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 56.

³⁰¹ Ibid., 47.

³⁰² Ibid., 46.

³⁰³ Lachance, *Angela*, 17.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 126.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 139.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 142.

Most of Angela's penitential acts were in common with other female saints. Although we do not know what her early acts of penance were, we do know that Angela claimed to have performed penance for a time before her first mystical experience.³⁰⁸ Angela and her companion went to the hospital to care for lepers; Angela drank the water she had used to bathe a leper patient who was "festering and in an advanced stage of decomposition."³⁰⁹ Furthermore, a piece of one of "the leper's sores was stuck in [her] throat" after drinking the bath water, but she felt she could not spit it out, due to her conscience.³¹⁰

We have noted one mortification Angela performed. There were several others, which were more extreme and will be described in the next chapter. Let us now derive from the text what may have been her motivations for these acts. Her text begins, after caveats and clarifications in the voice of her confessor, by detailing steps on the path of penance she undertook.³¹¹ After describing the second step, she mentioned that guilt over unconfessed sins prompted her to pray to St. Francis for "a confessor who knew sins well, someone she could fully confess herself to".³¹² Although the confessor prefaced the work by saying it was intended to "increase the devotion of [God's] people", Angela herself never seemed to make this claim.³¹³ It is possibly an element of guilt that motivated Angela to take her path of penance.

Angela saw penance as a vital part of being a servant of God. She explained that just as God gave Christ "the cross and penance", so too those who wish to be sons of God

³⁰⁸ Lachance, *Angela*, 127.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 163.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

³¹² *Ibid.*

³¹³ *Ibid.*

must “assume this heritage and adhere to its implications”.³¹⁴ In one mystical experience, Angela believed God to have told her that she would be made “useful to all who will see [her]; and not only to them;...[but also she would] be of service and help...to all those who will think of [her] or hear [her] name mentioned.”³¹⁵

Writings

Angela had to give the appearance of conformity, by living an ascetic life and maintaining a “veneer” of orthodoxy in her messages, in order not to be condemned outright. Thus, she submitted herself to the authority of the Church and often expressed this submission in terms of great humility. When her confessor Arnaldo would challenge Angela to clarify statements that went against Church doctrine, Angela would sometimes recant her previous words, saying “her response...[was] incomplete.”³¹⁶ Even when she did assert that her words were somewhat accurate, she still sought to impress upon Arnaldo that they did not contradict the teachings of the Church. The friar saw some of Angela’s vision as being out of line with the “Holy Scriptures, but [Angela] responded that what the Holy Scriptures affirmed was true and not contrary to what she had said.”³¹⁷

Angela also maintained the importance of the Eucharist, despite her having a direct connection to God. She asked God why it was that she had to receive communion if “the All Good [or God] [was] already in [her]”³¹⁸; she was answered that “One does

³¹⁴ Lachance, *Angela*, 224.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 168.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 207.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 186.

not exclude the other.”³¹⁹ Thus, Angela did not see her ability to access God as enabling her to overcome the authority of the Church completely.

Angela also spoke out against heresy, specifically attacking the heresy of the Free Spirit. She accused the members of this heretical group of desiring to do evil things while deceptively claiming that they had no desire to do such things.³²⁰ Angela exhorted that they instead should desire what is pleasing to God.³²¹ These attacks fit in well with the Church’s persecution of heresies. This may have endeared Angela to the Church to some extent, making her a ‘lamb’ in some regards.

Catherine of Siena

Life and Mortification

Caterina di Giacomo di Benincasa³²², widely known as Catherine of Siena, was supposedly the most influential of late medieval Italian female saints.³²³ She was born in 1347, a year before the bubonic plague hit.³²⁴ The saint was the twenty-fourth child out of twenty five born to a middle-class wool dyer and his wife.³²⁵ From an early age, Catherine undertook mortification practices. Bell believes this is explainable by her frequenting of churches, due to the greater interest they held than domestic activities.³²⁶ As we have seen from our study of Italian medieval society, this is a feasible explanation, given that young Sienese girls were allowed out of the house until the age of 12.

³¹⁹ Lachance, *Angela*, 186.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 225.

³²¹ *Ibid.*

³²² Noffke, *Catherine*, 2.

³²³ Herlihy, *Women, Family*, 19.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*

³²⁵ Noffke, *Catherine*, 3.

³²⁶ Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 35.

At the age of 16, Catherine became more devoutly religious. This intensification of spiritual practices and beliefs may have been a response to the death of Catherine's younger sister, the second of Catherine's sisters she lost.³²⁷ When her younger sister died, Catherine made a spiritual bargain – Catherine offered to suffer in order to secure the salvation of her family.³²⁸ At the age of eighteen, Catherine was allowed to become a Dominican tertiary.³²⁹ She wrote to Pope Gregory XI (1331 – 1378) to influence him to return the papacy to Rome from Avignon³³⁰; Catherine was only nineteen years old at the time. She later founded a monastery, and was ordered by Gregory XI to aid in peace-making efforts between Florence and the papacy.³³¹ With the election of Urban VI (1318 – 1389) in 1378, schism was threatening to surface as many were opposed to the new pope.³³² Catherine wrote letters, trying to muster support for Urban VI and was called to Rome to have an audience with the Pope himself.³³³ She died soon after this, in 1380, having lived only 33 years.³³⁴

During her life, even before her adoption of the Dominican habit, Catherine practiced mortification.³³⁵ She wore a tight chain about her hips, since the dirtiness of her hair shirt offended her.³³⁶ Additionally, she beat herself with iron chains 3 times a day, 1 ½ hours each time, until the “blood ran from her shoulders to her feet”.³³⁷ Aside from actually inflicting harm upon her body, Catherine also deprived herself of comfort

³²⁷ Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 38.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

³²⁹ Noffke, *Catherine*, 4.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

³³¹ *Ibid.*

³³² *Ibid.*, 7.

³³³ *Ibid.*

³³⁴ *Ibid.*

³³⁵ Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 43.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*

³³⁷ *Ibid.*

in sleep, by sleeping on a board.³³⁸ Her mother tried to stop this, by having her daughter sleep in the same bed as her.³³⁹ However, Catherine circumvented her mother's plans by putting a sharp stick under the bed sheet so that Catherine would still be performing penance when in bed with her mother.

In contrast to Angela, Catherine specifically asked to be allowed to suffer for the sake of others.³⁴⁰ Catherine prayed for her father's soul after he died, but was told that he would be sent to purgatory for his worldliness.³⁴¹ Thus, she offered to take on his suffering in purgatory, so that he would be spared; she received a vision of her father in heaven and concomitantly a pain in her hip, which remained with her until her death. She interpreted these as signs that her offer had been accepted.³⁴² She frequently asked to suffer on behalf of all those in purgatory, that they might be released or at least have reduced 'sentences'.³⁴³ Extending this, she went so far as to ask God to release the souls held captive in hell and allow her to take their place.³⁴⁴ For Catherine, the suffering of God's servants served to "placate" God's anger against the wickedness of the world.³⁴⁵

However, her theology was entwined within this; she understood God explaining that she had inadvertently requested "love and light and knowledge of truth" by asking to suffer.³⁴⁶ This may be a reflection of Catherine's understanding of penance as less important than the contrition that motivated one to undertake penance.³⁴⁷ For Catherine,

³³⁸ Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 43.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁴⁰ Noffke, *Catherine*, 27.

³⁴¹ Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 47. Whether this response is understood by Catherine as coming from God or a priest is unclear in Bell's text.

³⁴² *Ibid.*

³⁴³ Herlihy, *Women, Family*, 176.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 175.

³⁴⁵ Noffke, *Catherine*, 46.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

the “interior virtues” were more important than “external actions or various bodily penances”.³⁴⁸ Penance without a higher focus was more harmful than helpful, because one failed to gain true knowledge of oneself and God without a greater focus than bodily retribution for sin.³⁴⁹ Additionally, in Catherine’s view, penance as the final goal was wrong, given that it was a finite act; penance instead was to be seen as a means to reach the more infinite goal of knowing God.³⁵⁰ Along these lines, Catherine discouraged the behavior of ranking penitents based on the amount of asceticism they performed.³⁵¹ To justify this position, she referred to Paul’s discussion of mortifying the body and killing the selfish will.³⁵²

Writings

Similar to Angela, Catherine of Siena had to conform to the Church’s authority over her.³⁵³ She asserted that sacramental authority lay with the priests, even corrupt ones. While Catherine acknowledged that there were corrupt priests within the Church, she was told in a vision that the laity were to “respect...these ministers of [God’s], regardless of how good or evil they may be...”³⁵⁴ In a similar vein, the laity who sought to punish corrupt priests were understood by Catherine as committing a sin which “would weigh more in [God’s] sight than all the others” they had committed.³⁵⁵ These two commands were justified in Catherine’s visions by the explanation that since the priests

³⁴⁸ Noffke, *Catherine*, 39.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*

³⁵² *Ibid.*

³⁵³ Although Catherine’s life was also full of public works as we have seen, this paper is focused on her writings and her mortifications.

³⁵⁴ Noffke, *Catherine*, 215.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 218.

had the authority to administer the sacraments, to disrespect them was to disrespect the sacraments. Consequently, Christians who disobeyed and pursued bad priests would “end in eternal damnation.”³⁵⁶ Therefore, Catherine was conforming to the Church hierarchy by reaffirming the position of the priests to the point of even accepting the authority of those who were considered corrupt.

Additionally, Catherine exhorted her readers to hold obedience as a virtue. In one of Catherine’s visions, she was told that “[her] faith [was] founded on obedience.”³⁵⁷ She extrapolated from this to see obedience as vital to all Christians, including others in religious orders. Those in orders were to “have no wish to question or judge their superior’s will”, but instead were to understand God as working through their superiors.³⁵⁸ This obedience applied even to corrupt superiors. Catherine learned that “the imperfection of a bad superior [did] not harm the truly obedient. Sometimes, in fact, it benefit[ed] them...” as the novice learned patience in this situation.³⁵⁹ Furthermore, obedience was cast as the key to heaven, as Jesus was able to open the door to heaven through his obedience in Catherine’s visions.³⁶⁰ This exhortation to obedience, even to abusive superiors, showed how Catherine exhibited ‘lamb’ qualities by not questioning the authority of the Church.

³⁵⁶ Noffke, *Catherine*, 217.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 329.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 343.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 355.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER FIVE

WOLVES FOR GOD,
RESISTING THE CHURCH

We have examined how Angela and Catherine submitted to the Church, through asceticism and orthodoxy in their messages. However, we will now observe how these women resisted the Church, by taking their asceticism to extremes and expressing heterodox teachings in their mystical visions.

Angela of Foligno

Excessive Mortification

We have briefly touched upon Angela's mortification. Now we will look at the extreme nature of her mortification regimen. Angela is intriguing in that she asserted that she desired a martyr's death greater than that of previous saints.³⁶¹ She also claimed to desire a death viler and slower than that of Christ himself.³⁶² These claims fly in the face of the Church's reasoning, as it commanded that female saints undertake only moderate asceticism.³⁶³ She explained her view of extreme penance in her Dialogue, saying, "How long does penance last, and how much of it is there? As long as one lives. And as much as one can bear".³⁶⁴

Perhaps the most intriguing of Angela's mortifications are the ones undertaken during her experience of God's withdrawal from her. In addition to the pain to which her body was subjected by what she understood to be demonic attacks, Angela also lashed out against her body. As Angela understood her soul to be held by demons, she became "so overwhelmed with rage" that "[she] [could not] refrain from horribly beating [herself]

³⁶¹ Lachance, *Angela*, 150.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 128.

³⁶³ Finke, "Mystical Bodies", 42.

³⁶⁴ Lachance, *Angela*, 224.

and [she] raise[d] welts on [her] head and various parts of [her] body.”³⁶⁵ However, soon after this, when she remembered how Christ suffered, she “desired that all her ills and afflictions be doubled.”³⁶⁶

The other unique experience during this time of God’s withdrawal from Angela involves a particular demon, lust. When Angela was beset by demons, she felt arising again the vices that she had left behind in her life as a tertiary. She felt her body “experienc[ing] such burning in three places – the shameful parts – that [she] used to apply material fire to quench the other fire, until [her confessor] forbade [her] to do so.”³⁶⁷ Unlike Catherine, Angela had been married and knew the pleasures of the flesh. Some scholars feel that the major sin which prompted her to change her life from a worldly to a more ascetic one was sexual in nature³⁶⁸, though others argue the focus on sex is reading modern body conceptions into the text.³⁶⁹

Critiques of the Church

Angela was critical of the Church’s officials. Sometimes Angela struggled with what her scribe wrote. When Arnaldo read his transcription of what she had said, she would sometimes say that “what [Arnaldo] had written was dry and condensed.”³⁷⁰ However, Angela drew upon a higher authority in her critiques of the friar’s works. In one vision, Angela was told that “the scribe’s version of [her experience]...[was] weak and defective.”³⁷¹ She also overturned the authority of other friars, when they refused to

³⁶⁵ Lachance, *Angela*, 197.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 198.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁶⁹ Lochrie, “Language of Transgression”, 120.

³⁷⁰ Lachance, *Angela*, 156.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 154.

anoint her during an illness. The friars accused her of “resort[ing] too frequently to anointing”, which troubled her until she heard Jesus say “I with all my priests will anoint you; you will indeed be anointed.”³⁷²

Part of Angela’s critique of the Church was to subvert their authority. She drew confidence from her mystical experiences to do this. During one such vision, Angela was “given the assurance that there was no intermediary between God and [herself].”³⁷³ This statement could be seen as flirting with heresy, as the Church understood itself to have exclusive access to the only way to God – the intermediary of Christ. However, Angela had become Christ-like and no longer needed an intermediary to reach him. Thus, we see how Angela was a ‘wolf’ in her resistance against the Church.

Catherine of Siena

Excessive Mortification

According to Bell, Catherine fasted more severely than most of her contemporaries.³⁷⁴ Although she had fasted as a child, her fasts were not severe until her religious ‘conversion’ at the age of 16.³⁷⁵ By the time she turned 25, Catherine barely ate.³⁷⁶ One of her earlier confessors, Tommaso, ordered her to eat since he suspected that her urge to fast so severely came from the devil.³⁷⁷ Catherine tried to obey for a time, but eating made her physically ill.³⁷⁸ Thus, she soon refused to comply.³⁷⁹ She told

³⁷² Lachance, *Angela*, 276.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 205.

³⁷⁴ Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 23.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁷⁸ Although Catherine claims that eating made her physically ill, this may have been a lie used to cover the extreme nature of fasting, either developed by Catherine or Raymond to make her behavior seem more orthodox. Hence, I count Catherine’s lack of eating as part of her mortification.

Tommaso that she would rather die from fasting than die from eating; he thus relented, and stopped trying to prevent her fasts.³⁸⁰ Raymond of Capua was sent to be her new confessor, since he was more skeptical of her condition.³⁸¹ Like Catherine's previous confessor, Raymond ordered Catherine to eat.³⁸²

While it is possible that Raymond doubted Catherine's motivations, there is also the issue of rumors that surrounded Catherine's behaviors.³⁸³ Some accused her of only pretending to fast, and actually eating quite well in secret.³⁸⁴ Others said that fasting severely as she did was disobeying the Bible, since Jesus and his disciples didn't fast severely but ate and drank; furthermore, they said, Jesus even ordered his disciples to drink and eat what was placed before them.³⁸⁵ Some suspected her of witchcraft or demon possession, claiming that she was sustained by the devil in lieu of food.³⁸⁶ Whatever Raymond's motivations, he too had to rescind his prohibition on extreme fasting when Catherine became ill from trying to eat.³⁸⁷ Bell also suggests that Catherine's ability to persuade her confessors to accept her extreme fasting may have been due in part to her great "charisma".³⁸⁸

This same extreme fasting behavior intensified when Catherine's attempts to garner support for the new pope Urban VI failed. Catherine wrote to her supporters,

³⁷⁹ Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 23.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 28.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 21. Bell explains that some girls who fasted severely were tried for witchcraft or heresy. All girls who fasted to extremes faced a highly skeptical male clergy, whether or not they were actually put on trial. Those who could convince their families and confessors that their actions were actually holy were probably few in number and possessed a great deal of "charisma".

calling on them to support Urban VI, and while some did, others did not.³⁸⁹ She had been successful in urging Gregory XI to return to Rome, but could not get the church to unite behind the new pope.³⁹⁰ It was around this time that Catherine stopped drinking water.³⁹¹ She did not make a bargain with God, but instead pleaded with God to save the Church and offered up her body as “an anvil” for God’s wrath, in order to “atone for [the clergy’s] sins”.³⁹² Eventually, the toil of fasting and abstaining from drinking resulted in Catherine’s death. Whether intentional or unintentional, Catherine effectively “starved herself to death.”^{393, 394}

By undertaking severe mortifications in her life, Catherine became Christ-like. Her endurance of severe suffering for the sake of others, including offering to take their place in purgatory, likens Catherine to Christ. Additionally, in her visions Catherine was exhorted by God to “never cease offering [God] the incense of fragrant prayers for the salvation of souls, for [God] wants to be merciful to the world”.³⁹⁵ She became like Christ, who prayed for the world when he was suffering on the cross.³⁹⁶ Also, as we have seen, the Dominicans described Catherine as having the stigmata just as Christ did. The Franciscans had used these same bodily wounds to ascertain the status of ‘another Christ’ for St. Francis, and fought against the claim that Catherine also possessed

³⁸⁹ Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 50.

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

³⁹¹ Ibid.

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 53.

³⁹⁴ Intriguingly, the Catholic Encyclopedia does not mention this act of suicide, instead saying “After a prolonged and mysterious agony of three months, endured by her with supreme exultation and delight, from Sexagesima Sunday until the Sunday before the Ascension, she died.” It is also implied that her death resulted from the exhaustion of bearing the sins of the world, which she had requested to do. (Gardner, “St. Catherine of Siena”)

³⁹⁵ Noffke, *Catherine*, 159.

³⁹⁶ Soards, Luke, 22:34.

them.³⁹⁷ Like St. Francis, Catherine's possession of stigmata rendered her another Christ as well.

Critiques of the Church

Despite Catherine's submission to Church hegemony, she asserted via her mystical experiences that the Church needed to be reformed.³⁹⁸ Along these lines, Catherine offered several biting critiques of the corruption she saw in the clergy. She was told in a vision that "it [was] [Christ's] task to correct [sinful priests] for their faults, and it [was] [God's] will that he do so."³⁹⁹ Even though the laity could not punish the corrupt clergy, Catherine was assured that they would be punished by Christ. In fact, Catherine was told that the "wicked" priests earned "greater rebuke and more intolerable punishment"⁴⁰⁰ because they had neglected their duties, which were greater than that of the laity.⁴⁰¹

In her visions, the clergy who took money from the Church to feed their own illegitimate children were "devils who [had] taken up the devils' work!"⁴⁰² The lack of celibacy among those who had taken a vow of celibacy was seen as a deep sin by Catherine.⁴⁰³ Wicked ministers, according to Catherine, also "[did] not correct people for fear of losing their rank and position and their material possessions."⁴⁰⁴ Although Catherine may have acknowledged that these priests technically had authority, her words against them were quite harsh.

³⁹⁷ Lemeneva, "Borders and Borderlines", 199.

³⁹⁸ Noffke, *Catherine*, 47.

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 231.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 232.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 233.

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 239-240.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 224.

Additionally, Catherine asserted that even her confessor, Raymond of Capua, could not fully be a servant of God without suffering. In one of her visions, Catherine was told that God desired Raymond to be a servant, but that “neither he nor anyone else can achieve [pleasing God] without accepting sufferings [God] grant[s]”.⁴⁰⁵ Thus, we see how Catherine, in her excessive mortification and critique of the Church exemplified a ‘wolf’ resisting the Church.

Conclusion

If the Church preached moderation in asceticism, one is left to wonder why Angela and Catherine took their asceticism to such extremes. We can extend the previous reasoning of why these women undertook mortification to begin with; they wished to imitate Christ completely and perhaps their understanding of Christ as having suffered tremendously inspired them to go to further extremes in their asceticism.

It is possible that the actions of Angela and Catherine were simply an extension of their deep religious devotion, shaped by the teachings of the Church. However, a particular instance in Angela’s writing casts doubt on piety being the only motivation. After being struck with a profound awareness of her sinfulness, Angela admits that,

[she] observed Lent enclosed in [her] cell to impress people and win esteem. Whenever anyone invited [her and her companion], [Angela] made sure they were told: ‘[Angela did] not eat flesh or fish.’ But in reality, [she] fancied fine foods and was full of gluttony; [she] was a great eater and a guzzler. [She] pretended [she] wanted only what was necessary for [her], but [she] had things put away for another day. [She] affected outward poverty and feigned to sleep on hard surfaces, but what [she] really wanted was to stay in bed and sleep all day; and what [she] did in fact was sleep under many blankets which were removed in the morning so that no one could see them.⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰⁵ Noffke, *Catherine*, 58.

⁴⁰⁶ Lachance, *Angela*, 219.

From this, we see that Angela may have gone to great lengths to pretend to behave like a saint, while she secretly indulged in very un-saintly behavior. She explained, that “during all [her] life, [she] studied how [she] could be admired and honored and enjoy a reputation for sanctity.”⁴⁰⁷ Thus, we see that the desire for gaining saint-status among the laity was a possible motive for the behaviors of Catherine and Angela.

We can see the connection between our women’s actions and local sainthood when we examine what the laity characterized as saintly behavior. Asceticism was a key aspect of being a ‘popular saint’.⁴⁰⁸ It included denying oneself worldly pleasures as well as “voluntarily inflicting suffering on oneself”.⁴⁰⁹ Both laity and some clergy believed that “the more a life was ascetic, that is, unlike that of ordinary mortals, the more pleasing it was to God”.⁴¹⁰ Mortification, in the lay mind, was the means by which the saint “erased the marks of sin and conferred on his [or her] body the power to perform miracles, in his [or her] lifetime as well as after death”.⁴¹¹ As Vauchez explains, asceticism was so important for the laity, that “it was usually on the basis of such acts that a saintly reputation was built”.⁴¹² Thus we see the importance of what is done to the saint’s body in the eyes of the laity. The extreme mortification of Angela and Catherine consequently probably sanctified their lives in minds of the laity.

Aside from mortification, saints also showed an “indifference to worldly goods, renunciation of the pleasures of the senses, [and] relinquishment of all personal will in a

⁴⁰⁷ Lachance, *Angela*, 220.

⁴⁰⁸ I am borrowing this terminology from Vauchez, who uses it to signify those who were venerated by the laity without necessarily having achieved recognition from the Church.

⁴⁰⁹ Vauchez, *Sainthood*, 192.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, 193.

profound desire for humility”.⁴¹³ Such attributes were simultaneously “signs and the conditions of perfection”.⁴¹⁴ Even if the saint was not cloistered, he or she was expected by the laity to act like “a ‘spiritual’ man [or woman], whose actions were a perpetual source of wonder and soon awe to those around him [or her]”.⁴¹⁵ If these signs of sanctity were lacking or were not verified by witnesses, “public opinion remained passive and indifferent, even if it was assured by the ecclesiastical hierarchy that a particular person was an authentic saint”.⁴¹⁶ In contrast, those who demonstrated signs of sanctity were venerated by the laity, even if they lacked official recognition.⁴¹⁷

⁴¹³ Vauchez, *Sainthood*, 190.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*

CONCLUSION

SEEING THE WOLF IN LAMB'S CLOTHING

We have examined the ways in which Catherine and Angela conformed to and, at the same time, resisted the Church. As we have seen in medieval times, a woman who sought to follow a religious vocation that went beyond the normal cloistered life faced the risk of ending her career along with her life at the stake, with the label of 'heretic'. However, we have also discovered the social benefits for such women who risked their lives in the pursuit of sanctity. Let us now flesh out how these women were 'wolves' for their day, hiding within 'the clothing of the lamb'.

First, let us contextualize the actions Angela and Catherine took to submit to the Church. These women lived in a time when the advent of anti-body heretical movements, such as that of the Cathars, pushed the Church to emphasize the humanity of Christ. Part of this emphasis was to encourage the practice of *imitatio Christi*, which both Catherine and Angela practiced. Both women became part of official orders, though as tertiaries, revealing their actions and visions to confessors. Even in their dictated writings, our women endorsed the ideals of the Church.

This conformity allowed Angela and Catherine to carve out a space for themselves within the Catholic Church. The sanction of the Church provided a 'safe haven'. As a result, they did not have to face the stake or charges of heresy, despite their critiques of the church. After their deaths, their memories persisted to the present day, to the point of receiving official recognition from the Church; this was probably due to the conformity of both women in life and given to them by their hagiographers after their deaths. Both Angela and Catherine walked the fine line between sanctity and heresy.

However, both women threatened to cross that line into heterodoxy with the extreme degree to which they took their asceticism and their critiques of the Church. As

we have previously seen, the extremes of their asceticism earned Catherine and Angela the status of sainthood in the eyes of the laity. Not only did they have a close circle of followers, but also a strong following amongst the laity. They were recognized as holy, even before they died.

In addition to their sanctity amongst the laity, both women were able to usurp some of the Church's spiritual power through their actions and writings. The imitation of Christ allowed both women to become more Christ-like in terms of their abilities. With this power, both women no longer "needed" the Church or its clerical intermediaries. However, they never explicitly stated their superiority, which kept them from being charged with heresy. Catherine and Angela could, as a result of their extreme mortifications, free souls from purgatory⁴¹⁸; such ability was akin to indulgences, which could only be legitimately granted by the Church.⁴¹⁹

Catherine and Angela also criticized, both directly and indirectly, what they saw to be problems in the Church. Rather than turn a blind eye to the corruption, our women pointed out in their writings the corrupt figures they saw within the Church. However, they couched their criticism in terms of mystical visions to lessen the confrontational tone. This practice also gave credence to their concerns, as both women could say that it was not they who criticized the Church's corruption but God. Also, the "veneer" of mysticism legitimized the women's messages further because bodily mysticism fit perfectly with the clerical ideal of bodily female sanctity.

⁴¹⁸ The Church eventually came to recognize the ability of a Church member to free souls from purgatory, by offering "all the satisfactory works which he will perform during his lifetime, and also all the suffrages which may accrue to him after his death". However, this decree of "The Heroic Act of Charity" was not made until 1885 under Pope Leo XIII. (Wilhelm, "Heroic Act of Charity")

⁴¹⁹ Kent, "Indulgences".

The understanding of sainthood on the local level often differed from that within clerical circles. One of the main indicators of a saint, as believed by the laity, was “the ordeals the servants of God voluntarily inflicted on themselves throughout their earthly existence.”⁴²⁰ Such lay penitents as these were able to exercise influence not only the laity but the clergy as well.⁴²¹ This power wielded by the lay saints was a development that implicitly challenged “the traditional hierarchy of the statues of perfection within the Church”.⁴²² As Vauchez explains, “To recognize in lay saints a sort of moral and spiritual authority, based on their merits alone, was, in a sense, to put them on a par with the clergy.”⁴²³

Thus, we have examined how Angela of Foligno and Catherine of Siena were products of their time periods. From a modern feminist perspective, the severe mortifications seem incongruous with empowering women to fight patriarchy. Instead, they seem to be an internalization of the Church’s misogyny. Similarly, the mystical experiences of these two women seem to be a manifestation of an inwardly-focused spirituality that lacked concern for the present world.

However, we have seen that such modern assumptions are flawed due to their lack of contextualization. This paper has attempted to explore the highly complex social, political, and theological contexts of Angela and Catherine, in order to better visualize the redemptive power of the actions of these women for their day. Both women utilized religious lifestyles and the teachings of the Catholic Church to achieve recognition and a measure of authority in a world that gave it only begrudgingly to women. Therefore, we

⁴²⁰ Vauchez, *Sainthood*, 190.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁴²² *Ibid.*

⁴²³ *Ibid.*

can characterize Angela of Foligno and Catherine of Siena as ‘wolves’ who wore ‘lamb’s clothing’ in order to be able to convey heterodox teachings in an orthodox manner.

Future research should examine what type of impact penitent women such as Angela and Catherine have on contemporary understandings of female Catholic religious identity, particularly in the relation to concept of suffering for the sake of others.⁴²⁴

⁴²⁴ See “‘She offered herself up’: The Victim Soul and Victim Spirituality in Catholicism” by Paula M. Kane in *Church History* 71 no.1 (2002): 80-119.

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