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Megan E. Marzec

Ohio University - Main Campus, memarzec@gmail.com

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Megan Marzec

Female Flesh and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages

The importance of the female body in the Later Middle Ages is indisputable with abundant appearances in both text and art of that time. While the reasoning behind female imagery and imagery of the nude is disputed, the prevalence of mandorla-like images, images of the female nude, and images displaying the femininity of Christ suggest the meaningfulness to the medieval viewer. Seeing these images offers a different opportunity of perception than obtaining imagery from texts, however both move simultaneously towards confirming a large importance of the body.

In her essay *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva suggests that “the various means of purifying the abject make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art” (Kristeva 17). The woman as abject and the artistic experience, which is also rooted in the abject, “appears as the essential component of religiosity.” She also suggests this is the very reason the artistic experience survives the collapse of religion (17). Kristeva writes on the perception of women in religious experience.

When approaching any visual subject from the medieval perspective it is important to understand that medieval writers and artists seem to overstep boundaries understood by the modern point of view. In *Fragmentation and Redemption*, Caroline Walker Bynum writes “there is something profoundly alien to modern sensibilities about the role of body in medieval piety” (Bynum 183), and she is certainly right. The strangeness of Medieval religious practice is undeniable, accepting this is imperative while exploring Bynum’s argument that “Medieval images of the body have less to do with sexuality than with fertility and decay” (Bynum 183). In the cult of relics, this is

clearly evident as the body is emphasized as “the locus of the sacred” (Bynum 184). In the work *Legenda Maior* (1597), Saint Catherine of Siena is depicted drinking pus from the infected breasts of a dying woman and then also seen sucking from the wound of Christ. The personal bodily processes of “would be saints” were honored. In addition to this desire for what is of the pious body, an obsession with bodily manipulation was present as well. Accounts of male and female saints engaging in what the modern view would consider self-mutilation and torture are prevalent (Bynum 184).

Along with the theory that women hold a stronger importance of body in religious practice over men is the difference in torture of the two genders. Bridgette Cazelles explains in *The Lady as Saint* “while men and women were beaten and burned, women saints were also sexually humiliated and assaulted, stripped naked, taken to brothels, and subjected to tortures such as the mauling of their breasts” (Cazelles 173). Again, women find a connection in the body and practices are used to emphasize gender, “Gender distinction entails a treatment of the heroine’s body that has no equivalent in the case of the holy hero” (Cazelles 81).

Further separating the sexes is ritualization of defilement, where rights are given to men over women. Defilement takes a role of extreme evil, and therefore woman in her defeat by the masculine “becomes synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed” (Kristeva 70). The words defilement and also impurity that have been strongly associated with food are also assigned to women and above all the mother. Kristeva writes, “Dietary abomination has thus a parallel-unless it be a foundation- in the abomination provoked but the fertilizable or fertile feminine body,” leading into childbirth (100).

The “evocation of defiled maternity” seen in Leviticus 12, employs the same reasoning behind dietary abominations also creating a “border between the sexes, a separation between feminine and masculine as a foundation for the organization that it is ‘clean and proper’” (Kristeva 100). Depictions of the maternal body and childbirth are strongly detailed to portray birth as a “violent act of expulsion through which the nascent body tears away from the matter of maternal insides” (101). There is no equivalent masculine act causing a man to acquire such impure status, for “according to the days of the separation for her infirmity” (Leviticus 12:2) a woman’s parturition will rend her “impure” and “unclean.” A given reason is the presence of blood, however it may be so that Leviticus 12 stems from the “identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference” (Kristeva 101). Menstrual blood contrasts other excrement in that excrement is shared between sexes and can be seen as a conflict with identity of “society threatened by its outside” (101). The role of a woman’s menstrual blood is acknowledged as effecting the relationship between sexes in a way masculine excretions, such as sperm, are not, although it is said, “any secretion of discharge, anything that leaks out of the feminine or masculine body defiles” (102).

The procedures as described in Leviticus 12:13 further suggest a clear separation between woman and man. If she gives birth to a woman, “to purify herself the mother must provide a burnt offering and a sin offering.” However if a boy is born, a circumcision replaces need for a sacrifice. The circumcision is an act to separate the born male from the feminine impurity brought by the maternal as well as defilement. Kristeva suggests a replacement of the associated defilement with “a sign of the alliance with God” (99).

The most direct accounts suggesting bodiliness as a path to the sacred also suggest a separation, occurring more among women than men, and cases of “psychosomatic manipulation are almost exclusively female” (Bynum 186). Afflictions including “Trances, levitations, catatonic seizures, miraculous elongation...and ecstatic nosebleeds are seldom if at all reported of male saints, but are quite common in the vitae of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century women” (Bynum 186). Also solely reported of women is a condition termed “holy anorexia,” where only the Eucharistic host is eaten. Self-starvation, with its obvious inclinations towards holy control over a female’s body, becomes a charge of sanctity in the thirteenth-century. Women claiming this “holy anorexia” also often claimed “miraculous bodily closure,” where women not eating also abstained from excreting and menstruation, freeing themselves from the associated impurities (Bynum 186).

Paramystical phenomena deeply highlight the connection women felt to the sacred through the body. Although sickness and disease was certainly always to be avoided during the Middle Ages, the medieval perspective seems to be along the lines of “endure” rather than “cure.” In relation to the pious woman, the condition of illness could be related to a condition of weakness and reliance on God, as well as suffering as Christ had endured himself. A poem of a Toss nun reads from the voice of Christ: “The sicker you are, the dearer you are to me” (Bynum 189). The somatizing of religious experience carries on into the female mystical writings where the woman is able to directly speak about her own experience, creating an intensely personal experience, more appropriate in the accounts that exist. “Women regularly speak of tasting God, of kissing him deeply, of going into his heart or entrails, of being covered by his blood” (Bynum 190). These

descriptions “hopelessly blur the lines between spiritual or psychological, on one hand, and bodily or even sexual on the other” (Bynum 190). However, what is really important while analyzing these descriptions of sexual vs. spiritual tendencies is to understand that perhaps this separation was not necessary in the medieval mind. “The visionary women themselves often did not bother to make clear where the events happened- whether in body, heart or soul, whether in the eye of the mind or before the eyes of the body” (Bynum 191). The female experience in religious practice was fluid through the body and mind as one, in line with the theological and natural philosophical vision of persons as “body as well as soul,” or psychosomatic unity (Bynum 183).

The female personification of Christ’s body is another common occurrence throughout medieval literature and art. This is believed to have been “partly because the tender, nurturing aspect of God’s care for souls was regularly described as motherly” (Bynum 205). Numerous writings aligned Jesus with female characteristic and actions alluding to the iconic scar on his chest as “feeding Christians with liquid exuded from his breast and in his bleeding on the cross which gave birth to our hope of eternal life” and Jesus as “a loving mother, reviving dead souls at his breast” (Bynum 205). Accounts describe nursing from Jesus. Iconography of this idea includes illustrations of a French moralized bible, depicting this “Christ as mother” inversion as he “gives birth to Church.” Quirizio of Murano’s *The Savior* (figure 1) is a clear example of “Jesus as mother” themes in fifteenth century art. The serene, kind faced Christ offers “the wound in his side with the lifting gesture so often used by the Virgin in offering her breast” (Bynum 205) as in Robert Campin’s *Madonna and Child before a Firescreen* (figure 2) where she offers both the son of God in her hands and a view of her breast to the

audience (Bynum 105). The blurring of gender is abundantly common in Late Medieval iconography, as images such as Jan Gossaert's *Virgin and Child* (figure 3) depicts the infant Christ with peculiarly enlarged breasts.

The side wound of Christ and the iconic depictions are of particular interest when exploring the female body in worship, a topic addressed by Martha Easton in *Was it Good For You, Too? Medieval Erotic Art and Its Audiences*. The shape of his wound, emphasized in many works (notably Jacob Cornelisz's *The Man of Sorrows* figure 4), is "mandorla-like, but it is also visually identical to the way the vagina was depicted in places such as medical manuals" (Easton 5). Considering the wound of Christ as a vaginal image further instills the notion of a bodily connection both between the woman and Christ directly and also female bodiliness in female devotion. Again seen is the idea of the nurturing behavior of Christ represented through "the source of Eucharistic blood, and the inspiration for mystical conflations of wound and breast, informed by medical beliefs about the interconnectedness of blood and milk" (Easton 4).

The female depiction in medieval work art is also suggestive of this underlying symbolism connected to the breast and milk. In the Middle Ages, imagery distinguished the sentiments associated with nakedness though Adam and Eve. After the last fall, "their nakedness becomes shameful" and "explicitly contrast the blessed, fully robed and resplendent in heaven, with the damned, writhing in hell in their nakedness" (Easton). On the contrary, virgin martyrs Agatha and Barbara are seen nude in the later Middle Ages where they are "depicted as the visual embodiments of the ideal women described in love poetry and romances, with their long blonde hair, fair complexions, swelling bellies, and high, apple-like breasts (Figure 5)" (Easton).

Breasts appear as symbols of motherhood, femininity, and erotic longing, creating a sort of paradox, being part of works intended for religious contemplation. This is a possible contradiction or strong evidence to Bynum's argument of a Medieval perception very different than the modern perspective, inclined to accept images as sexually charged. An interesting and maybe challenging aspect to the subject of nudity is the presence of contradiction. Definition of sin in nudity and classification of impurity brought by bodily excrement is sometimes met with a simultaneous glorification and possibly encouragement in hagiographies and imagery. The gap in defilement often seems to be what sex the body is from where the excrement originates. Breast milk could be another example of the gap, however for economic and justifiably vital necessities.

The presence and importance of female flesh in the art and writings of the Middle Ages is undeniable. What is disputed is not only the reason for this presence but more importantly the understanding of how these images were perceived by a medieval viewer. What makes this dialog interesting is the occurrence of woman as abject, as suggested by Kristeva. The obvious inequality between men and women and the differing application of religious texts is a factor of perception. The woman has a significant role in religious practice, keeping "body as well as soul" wholly unified.

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