

MYSTICAL RELATIONS: A STUDY OF FEMININE RELATIONSHIPS
WITH CHRIST IN THE HIGH MIDDLE AGES AND BEYOND

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ABSTRACT

From a modern perspective, the notion of Christ as a feminized figure appears to stand contrary to long accepted Christian beliefs. However, Christ has been feminized in literature for centuries by women and men, nuns and monks, abbesses and abbots. This is not to say that Christ was not physically and anatomically male, rather that his nature and flesh are associated with femininity. The concept of Christ as a female figure is especially prevalent in the late Middle Ages, notably in the writings of figures such as St. Ambrose, Bernard of Clairvaux, Hildegard of Bingen, Hadewijch of Brabant, Julian of Norwich, and Catherine of Siena. Not only do these writers draw a picture of a feminized Christ, they often draw a motherly Christ.

The following pages explore the place of femininity in the Christianity of the High Middle Ages: how feminine relationships and allegories have encouraged greater understanding of Christ and influenced the ideas associated with Christ today— the feminine attributes of Christ's flesh and his nature and the feminine allegories people of both genders have used to heighten spiritual understanding. Also explored are the women who sought greater understanding of him and his humanity through unusual and, often, controversial relationships and methods. This paper will strive to highlight the vital role femininity plays in Christianity in regards to understanding Christ.

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| Introduction

Surprising as it may seem, I am not a Christian. In fact, I am the product of a marriage between a non-practicing Episcopalian and a non-practicing Jew. Brought up with exposure to both religions, I was fairly indifferent to both as well. I celebrated the various holidays but eventually grew to identify more closely with the Jewish religion. So I attended Hebrew school and had a Bat Mitzvah, until I grew unsettled with the organized form of Judaism as well. Influenced by the many intelligent and strong women in my life, I have felt a pull towards feminism and strong female figures since childhood. Even in Hebrew school, when we would read translations of prayers aloud, I was consistently the lone disgruntled (and, I'm sure, obnoxious) voice who would add, "or She!" to the translator's choice of the pronoun, "He," describing God. How did such a person end up writing her thesis on medieval Christian relationships with Christ?

My fascination began with my enrollment in my first class in the Honors Program of Texas State University, a class on the early Humanities which was team-taught by Professors Susan Morrison and Elizabeth Makowski. Having never been exposed to early Christian literature, I was both enthralled and disgusted to read texts such as *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* and the Catholic Penitentials. It became apparent to me that the teachings and beliefs of men, such as Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas had shaped the philosophies of Christianity and, thereby, the philosophies of most of the Western world as well, ingraining a

misogynistic tradition deep into the roots of Western thought. Included in our curriculum were a few texts by female authors, such as Hrosvit von Gandersheim, Heloïse, and Christine de Pizan, but the authors that shaped the Western world's early humanities were overwhelmingly male. This led me to believe that women were denied a voice through most of history. In one of my papers, I wrote something to the effect of, "there were few women writers in the Middle Ages," only to have Professor Morrison respond in the margin of my paper, "Not so! You should take my class on medieval women writers." Optimistic that taking this class would show my view on the repression of women to be erroneous, I enrolled in her class the following semester, eager to be disproved.

Dr. Morrison's class did not necessarily change my idea that women had been repressed through most of Western history. In fact, it more than reinforced it (thanks, Ovid and Tertullian!). However, it did show me the prevalence of women authors in the Middle Ages, even if they were mostly forgotten in the annals of common history textbooks. What was especially impressed upon me by this class was the inherent femininity in medieval Christianity despite the official outcry against all things female. Feminine allegories used to make Christ relatable the common worshiper often cropped up in readings. The descriptions of the nature of Christ seemed, to me, better aligned with attributes typically associated with femininity, rather than masculinity. I saw a special feminine quality in the ways that people related to the forgiving God of the New Testament, and more specifically, to Christ. I was fascinated by the contrast found in condemning women as a gender, yet extolling the feminine qualities found in Christ. It also impressed me, having

been of the opinion that organized religion repressed individuals rather than released, that Christ served as a source of freedom for women. Their relationships with Christ not only gave their lives special meaning, but empowered them, giving them authority, unique to their gender, that they might not have otherwise had. This realization made me yearn to more deeply understand the female voices and feminine religious relationships which have helped to shape the Christianity we know today and, through shaping Christianity, also helped to shape modern Western thought. Even a non-Christian person, raised in the Western hemisphere, has been unwittingly influenced by these Christian philosophies and ideals. While many, or most, of these philosophies and ideals seem patristic in nature, this thesis focuses on the *feminine* voices, influences, and relationships found in the literature of the High Middle Ages, ranging from ideas of Christ as a feminine figure to personal relationships with Christ.

Now, as it has no doubt become apparent, throughout this paper, the concept of “femininity” will appear often. Femininity has many meanings and can refer to the female qualities of many things, people, and ideas. However, for my purposes, “femininity” will refer to one of three definitions. First, is the more Classical notion of femininity (this will be more thoroughly explored later), which ascribes specific attributes and characteristics to either the male or female spectrum. Next, is corporeal femininity, alluding to the gender of a body, or, as Elizabeth Grosz says, the body as a situation. Finally, is allegorical femininity which includes female personifications (e.g. Justice depicted as a woman) and, also, metaphors using either women or a womanly state (e.g. motherhood).

From a modern perspective, the notion of Christ as a feminized figure appears to stand contrary to long accepted Christian beliefs. However, Christ has been feminized in literature for centuries by women *and* men, nuns *and* monks, abbesses *and* abbots. This is not to say that Christ was not physically and anatomically male, rather that his nature and flesh are *associated* with femininity. The concept of Christ as a female figure is especially prevalent in the late Middle Ages, notably in the writings of figures such as St. Ambrose, Bernard of Clairvaux, Hildegard of Bingen, Hadewijch of Brabant, Julian of Norwich, and Catherine of Siena. Not only do these writers draw a picture of a feminized Christ, they often draw a *motherly* Christ. The following pages explore the place of femininity in the Christianity of the High Middle Ages: how feminine relationships and allegories have encouraged greater understanding of Christ and influenced the ideas associated with Christ today— the feminine attributes of Christ’s flesh and his nature and the feminine allegories people of both genders have used to heighten spiritual understanding. We will also encounter the women who sought greater understanding of him and his humanity through unusual and, often, controversial relationships and methods. This paper will strive to highlight the vital role femininity plays in Christianity.

1 | The Feminine Nature

In medieval times, thoughts on the nature of women were both confused and confusing, to say the least. While some medieval literature presents the nature of women to be wicked and deceitful, full of sin and corruptibility, other literature characterizes women as meek, humble, gentle, simple, and fragile. The notion that women are, by nature, wicked is often justified by citing the story of Eve and the Fall; many of the Church Fathers¹ make such allusions. This opinion is contrasted by the concept, championed by some, that women's inherent traits of weakness and tendencies towards natural suffering especially endear them to God.

One of the early Church Fathers, Tertullian (d. 225), vehemently argues that women are by nature corrupt and evil:

The judgment of God upon this sex lives on in this age; therefore, necessarily the guilt should live on also. You are the gateway of the devil; you are the one who unseals the curse of that tree, and you are the first one to turn your back on the divine law; you are the one who persuaded him whom the devil was not capable of corrupting; you easily destroyed the image of God, Adam. Because of what you deserve, that is death, even the Son of God had to die. And do you still think of adorning yourself above and beyond your tunics of animal skin? (Blamiers 51)

Tertullian, a pagan before his conversion to Christianity, carries over the misogynistic notions on the nature of women from famous pagan writers such as

¹ The Church Fathers are highly influential theologians who wrote on the subject of the Bible during the earliest days of Christianity. They include men such as: Clement, Origen, John Chrysostom, Tertullian, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine.

Ovid and Juvenal, with whom he would have been familiar. As a modern reader, it is easy to fault Tertullian for his ideas concerning women. However, as pointed out by Professor Stephanie Cobb, in her lecture “Constructing a Masculine Christian Identity,” in Tertullian’s time, and earlier, these notions concerning women are *truth*, no more debatable than the nature of water as wet. In the Middle Ages, Ovid’s poetry (much of which centered on the wicked and lustful nature of women) was well-known and popular, especially in the twelfth century (Blamiers 17). Although Ovid and Juvenal were Roman pagans, the influence of their writings was far-reaching, evident in the writings of the Church Fathers who would have grown up reading such works. Despite Ovid’s pagan roots, both the Church Fathers and medieval Christian writers saw ancient wisdom in his words, which read as remarkably undated to this day. In *Amores*, Ovid imagines the advice of an old woman to a young woman. The old woman advises her in the ways of womanly deception saying:

Once you’ve caught him, anything goes.
Some show of love does no harm: let him fancy himself
your
 darling,
 But take good care you collect a *quid pro quo*.
Don’t say Yes every night. Pretend that you have a
headache,
 Or make Isis your excuse, then you can plead
Religious abstention. Enough’s enough, though— he
may get
 accustomed
 To going without, over-frequent rebuffs may cool
His passion off. Take gifts, but be deaf to entreaties—
 Let the lucky man hear his rival cursing outside.
You’ve hurt him? *He* started it. Throw a quick tantrum.
This
 kind of
Counter-attack will very soon choke him off. . . .

Another trick you must learn is control of the tear-ducts,
How to weep buckets at will—
[...]
Your sister and mother, your nurse, these can all help
fleece a
lover—
Many hands make quick loot. (Blamiers 21-22)

Roman tales such as this one do not paint the most flattering pictures of women and many of the writings of the Middle Ages echo such thoughts.

These sentiments, carried over though the ages by the writings of the Church Fathers and a resurgence of interest in Ovid's poetry in the Middle Ages, are displayed in the writings of many medieval writers, such as Jean de Meun in his famous continuation of the poem on courtly love *Roman de la Rose* [*Romance of the Rose*]. Meun's tale contains of echoes of Ovid. In his portion of the poem, Meun attacks women's virtue by associating them with vanity, deception, lasciviousness, idiocy, and fickleness. In one instance, Meun's character Le Jaloux claims, " 'All you women are, will be, and have been whores in fact or in desire, for, whoever could eliminate the deed, no man can constrain desire....For no amount of beating or upbraiding can one change your hearts....'" (Blamiers 157). Meun continues on in this manner painting a highly unflattering picture of women as a whole, claiming that their sex cannot help but to act on their innately and wicked desires.

Disgusted by Meun's depiction of women, Christine de Pizan, an Italian-born French writer and poet of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, asserts that his characterization cannot be accurate, for "From [a man's] birth, though life to death, women help and succor him, providing compassion, sweetness, and support" (279). This reminder serves to highlight the gentleness and goodwill of women on a

level to which most men can relate. Christine claims that women “are not predisposed to such [wicked] behavior nor to committing acts of cruelty. For women’s nature is noble, very compassionate, timid, and timorous. She is humble, gentle, self-effacing, and full of charity, loveable, devout, and quietly modest” (285). This statement proclaims benevolence as the natural state of a woman’s nature and that any woman who does not behave in this fashion is an exception, for she is acting contrary to her nature (285). Christine also refutes the belief that women are naturally deceptive in circumstances of courtship. Christine asks how women can be deceptive when the woman “isn’t the one who pursues [the man] or tracks him down, seeking his love or begging for his favours at his house. She does not constantly think about him or have him on her mind, whereas man comes round to deceive and seduce her” (282). This calls attention to the deception on the part of the male, rather than the female. She reproaches Ovid for his advice to his male readers on deceptively seducing women; for how can women be condemned for this vice while it is encouraged in men? In fact, questions Christine, “[I]f women are so flighty, fickle, changeable, susceptible, and inconstant...why is it that their suitors have to resort to such trickery to have their way with them?” (282). If woman were truly inconstant and susceptible, it would be no challenge to seduce her. Christine does not focus her attack solely on Ovid, saving special condemnation for Jean de Meun, commenting that in this tale “so many tricks [are] devised in order to seduce a mere slip of a girl...with deceit and guile” (282). Christine claims that, because such elaborate tactics were necessary, it proves that “women are by no means as fickle as some men claim, or as easily influenced in their behavior” (283). Contrary

to Meun's intention, the advice given to men in his poem once again calls attention to deceptive behavior on the part of men, rather than women. Christine calls attention to the hypocrisy of Meun's message saying:

I fail to see how it fits in with the role of Genius to encourage and urge men to go to bed with women without omitting to perform the act which he praises so highly. And Genius is the one who, more than any of the other characters, fulminates so vehemently against women, saying, in fact, 'Flee, flee, flee the venomous serpent.' Then he tells men to pursue them relentlessly. There is a terrible contradiction here in ordering men to flee what he wishes them to pursue, and to pursue what he wishes them to flee. (287)

Christine thinks that if Meun truly believes that women are "venomous serpent[s]," he should not advise men to pursue them nor encourage behavior in men which is condemnable in women. Christine also debates the claim of some men "that women have been and are useful in the world only for bearing children and sewing" (296) with examples of intelligent women as well as contemporary and historic personifications of virtues and knowledge in female form. In *The Book of the City of Ladies*, Christine personifies the virtues of Reason, Rectitude, and Justice as women and figuratively builds a city with a solid foundation based on strong and virtuous women throughout history (291).

Aligning women with the Classical virtues is not unique to Christine. Greek, Roman, and Christian literature often personifies Wisdom, Philosophy, Justice, and other allegorical attributes as females. In fact, Christine's *The Book of the City of Ladies*, is modeled after the famous book, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, written by the illustrious philosopher Boethius (d. after 524), whose philosophies greatly impacted Christian thought for centuries (and even millennia) to come. During the

early part of the sixth century, Boethius enjoyed the favor of the Roman court and attained the prestigious position of Master of Offices. However, Boethius soon fell out of favor. He was denounced, stripped of his title, and exiled. In *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius begins by lamenting his outcast state. In the beginning of the book, Boethius holds a dialogue with Lady Philosophy who comes to correct his dismal state of mind. It is only due to the intervention of Philosophy, personified as a woman, that Boethius is able to regain his reason and assurance of goodness of both God and the world.

The tenth-century playwright Hrosvit von Gandersheim names several of her female characters after virtues: Sapientia personifies wisdom; Agape, love; Fides, faith; and Spes, hope. All of her so-named female characters display remarkable faith and devotion to the Christian ideals and to God. These historical associations of women with virtues contradict the arguments of authors such as Ovid and Jean de Meun which claim that women are naturally wicked.

Even one of the most acclaimed and frequently cited Christian philosophers, Peter Abelard, rushes to the defense of feminine virtue and nature when it is called into question by his former wife, now sister-in-Christ, Heloïse. In a letter to Abelard, Heloïse laments her state as a woman, and, thereby, her susceptibility to wickedness. Abelard does not deny that women are the weaker sex. However, he states:

Just because the sex of women is weaker, their virtue is pleasing to God and more perfect, according to the testimony of the Lord Himself. When encouraging the Apostle to struggle despite his weakness for the crown of victory, He says, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for power is made perfect in infirmity." Also, speaking through the same Apostle about the "limbs" of His "body" (that is, the Church)— but as if He would particularly

commend the worth of such weak “limbs” — He added in the First Epistle to the Corinthians: “Much more those that seem to be the more feeble members of the body, are more necessary. And such as we think to be the less honourable members of the body, about these we put more abundant honour....” But where can we say that this was ever so thoroughly realized, through the dispensation of divine grace, as in the weakness of women’s sex, which both sin and nature had made contemptible? Analyse the various strata of this sex, not just virgins and widows or married women but even unspeakable whores, and you will see that Christ’s grace is more capacious among them, in accordance with the saying of the Lord, “The last shall be first, and the first last”, and “where sin abounded, grace did more abound.” (Blamiers 235)

Abelard concludes that women are not remarkable *in spite* of their natural weakness; rather, it is their natural weakness which makes them most remarkable. For women are asked to shoulder the same load as men despite their weakness. Abelard asserts that God shows his affinity for the weakness of women in his choice of one of the weaker sex, Mary, as the vessel used to bear Christ saying, “He transferred this unique grace of His humility as an honour to the weaker sex” (236).

Through their embodying these traits desirable to feminine nature— meekness and fragility— women form a special connection with Christ. In some cases, illness, in addition to the inherent weakness of the female sex, enhances the deficiency of women to such an extent that, coupled with extreme faith, many are privy to divine visions in their vulnerable states. Such is the case with Hildegard of Bingen, who suffered many debilitating illnesses throughout her life; it was in these states of particular weakness that Hildegard saw divine visions. Maud Burnett McInerney writes, Hildegard was “Abbess, virgin, prophet, poet, theologian, scientist,

musician, natural historian, exorcist, excommunicate and saint,” not to mention physician, all in one (*xviii*). All of these attributes contribute to the uniqueness of Hildegard, but what makes her truly remarkable is the fact that people paid attention to her, a woman. In the Middle Ages, most people (especially those of religious authority) favored the opinion put forth in the First Epistle of Saint Paul where it says, “Let the woman learn in silence....But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to use authority over the man: but to be in silence” (Tim. 2:11-12). Hildegard stands out in Christian history as a stark exception to this teaching. Regarding Hildegard, Dr. Susan Morrison’s t-shirt reads, “Before there was Renaissance man, there was medieval woman.”

In her work, *Scivias*², Hildegard discloses that, since the age of fifteen, she experienced “the power of the mysteries of secret and wonderful visions” (Petroff 151). These visions are concluded, by a committee of theologians, to be of divine origin; because of this, Hildegard is granted a rare and powerful position as a woman (Mershman New Advent). Not only is she of noble descent, but (despite her claims to the contrary) she is well educated, holds the important position of prioress³, and has the Church backing her authority. Hildegard uses her role as a woman to assert that her authority is derived from God to the astonishment of some of her audience such as Philip, Dean of the Cathedral of Hensberg who writes, “We

² In *Scivias*, Hildegard describes twenty-six of her divine visions. During the writing process, Hildegard corresponded with Bernard of Clairvaux from whom she sought writing advice. The work was also approved by Pope Eugene III.

³ A prioress is the nun who heads a priory, a house where religious women live together. Priors where a religious order of men live together would be headed by a prior, rather than a prioress. The position of prior or prioress is second to that of abbot or abbess.

were greatly astonished that God works through such a fragile vessel, such a fragile sex, to display the great marvels of his secrets” (McInerney *xviii*).

Hildegard’s visions earn her the support of the Church, verifying her authority in spite of her sex. However, Hildegard suggests in *Scivias* that God grants her these prophetic visions not despite her gender but *because* of it. When explaining why she was chosen by God, she explains that “she had manners different from those of other men” (Petroff 156) and goes on to describe those attributes of weakness associated with the female sex (meekness, fragility, simplicity, etc.), emphasizing that without these qualities, “the inspiration of the Holy Spirit would not have dwelt in her so powerfully” (156). In her article “A Theophany of the Feminine,” Ann Storey proposes that Hildegard makes use of a core concept within “Christianity—that God makes wise the foolish and exalts the meek” (16). Storey goes on to explain that this notion allows Hildegard to take full advantage of the misogynistic teachings in the religion, which paint women as “weak and foolish” (17). Storey concludes that because of this characterization, women can be “understood to be closer to God and spiritual attainment” (17). Hildegard makes sure to align herself with these traits, especially meekness, saying that in one of her visions, God told her that he chose her because she is “timid in speaking” (Petroff 151). In addition, Hildegard closely associates herself with the feminine trait of weakness through her poor health, which she claims allows her to attain higher levels of divine understanding, an allusion to the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians:

And he said to me: My grace is sufficient for you: for power is made perfect in infirmity. Gladly therefore will I glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may

dwelt in me. For which cause I please myself in my infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ. For when I am weak, then am I powerful. (2 Cor. 9-10)

She states that through her pain, “in the interior of her rational soul she saw spiritually certain mystical things of God” (156).

The allusion to *pain* or *suffering* affording unique and divine insight to the pious identifies a common theme throughout medieval Christian mystical writings: that it is through personal pain and suffering that one grows closer to and more deeply understands Christ. This belief arises from passages such as the following found in the First Epistle of Peter which reads, “Therefore for Christ suffered in flesh, be ye also armed by the same thinking; for he that suffered in flesh ceased from sins....” (1 Peter 4:1). Passages alluding to Christ’s fleshly sufferings inspired a surge of asceticism among medieval religious orders such as the Benedictines and Dominicans. In choosing this life of self-imposed suffering, people could live in *imitatio Christi*, or in imitation of Christ. Strict religious asceticism included practices such as extreme fasting, self-flagellation, self-imposed isolation, and self-deprivation of many basic human comforts.

Christ’s suffering is often compared to childbirth, especially in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In *Jesus as Mother*, Carolyn Walker Bynum points out that the famous Benedictine monk Saint Anselm compares Christ to a mother who gives birth, even dying to give her child life. This thinking is akin to that of Julian of Norwich who states:

He alone beareth us to joy and everlasting life— Blessed may He be! Thus he sustaineth us within love, wisdom, and understanding, and it is good! For though it be that our physical birth is but little, lovely, and simple compared with our spiritual birth, yet it is He who doeth it in the creatures by whom it is done. (Chambers 160)

Earthly mothers suffer to give life in the physical world, as Christ suffered to give eternal life in the spiritual world.

The Cistercian monk and abbot Adam of Perseigne also makes a connection with the suffering of Christ to the suffering of motherhood, comparing Christ's crucifixion to the pains of labor (*Jesus as Mother* 124). The comparison of Christ's suffering to that of a mother painfully giving birth also serves to purify the pain and labor of women in childbirth. In *Genesis*, God tells Eve, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children" (Gen. 3:16). Initially a curse on woman for her transgression of original sin, the suffering of child-bearing becomes an opportunity for women to better understand the sacrifice of Christ. In her article, "Where is the Body? Images of Eve and Mary in the *Scivias*," Rebecca L.R. Garber discusses Hildegard of Bingen's belief in the purification of women through Mary: "By offering Eve redemption through Mary, Hildegard offers a means to redeem the female body..." (Garber 104). On the significance of Mary, Lorenzo Candelaria states, "Mary reversed the fall of man precipitated by Eve (Genesis 3:1-24). This 'great reversal' was reflected by a poetic conceit of the Middle Ages in which AVE, Gabriel's salutation to Mary at the Annunciation (Luke 1:28) was read as the retrograde, the reverse, of EVA— Eve, in Latin" (6). This simple reversal, in a severely understated way, highlights the significance of the selection of Mary

(woman) as the vessel to bring the Word (Christ) to the world. This choice signifies absolution for women and purifies the act of childbirth, and the connotation of the pain inherent in the process is revisited. While mothers besides Mary still carry the burden of original sin (associated with the act of conception), the process of childbirth is transformed into a connection with Christ's suffering.

Hildegard's perception of Mary as mother parallels Julian of Norwich's perception of Christ as mother. Garber states that while "Eve is held responsible for the 'torment of souls,' [*tormenta animarum*]...Mary is the agent of life [*vivificum instrumentum*]....Eve 'gives birth to pain' [*plenum dolorum generi*], whereas Mary 'bore new light for humanity,' [*novum lumen humano generi*]" (Garber 105-6). This comparison correlates with that of Julian of Norwich when she compares the imperfection of earthly mothers to that of the perfection of the heavenly mother, Jesus: "We know that all our mothers bear us to pain and to dying; and what is this but our very Mother, Jesus? He alone beareth us to joy and everlasting life— Blessed may He be! Thus he sustaineth us within love, wisdom, and understanding, and it is good!" (Chambers 160). It is through the state of motherhood that women are able to relate (though imperfectly) to both Mary and Christ. Referring to Jesus as "mother" may seem strange to many modern Christians. However, the medieval (and Greek/Roman) notion of the connection between femininity and flesh, as will be discerned in the following chapter, makes it easier to understand how such an allegory could become popular and appropriate.

2|The Feminine Flesh

The most tangible feminine connection with Christ is material or bodily. Christ is God in form or matter. Just as God the Father is associated with the spirit (or form)/male, Christ is associated with the matter/feminine (*Fragmentation 223*). This dichotomy can be traced back to Greek notions of separation between male and female:

The early Greeks saw women's capacity to conceive as connecting them with the fertility of Nature. As Plato later expressed the thought, women 'imitate the earth' ... Reason, in asserting its claims and winning its status in human history, was thought to have to conquer the female forces of Unreason. Reason and clarity of thought were early associated with maleness, and as Lloyd notes, "what had to be shed in developing culturally prized rationality was, from the start, symbolically associated with femaleness.' In later Greek philosophical thought, the form/matter distinction was articulated, and with a similar hierarchical and gendered association. Maleness was aligned with active, determinative, and defining form; femaleness with mere passive, indeterminate, and inferior matter. Plato, in the *Timaeus*, compared the defining aspect of form with the father, and indefinite matter with the mother; Aristotle also compared the form/matter distinction with the male/female distinction. (Held 322)

In the Middle Ages, these Classical concepts still dominated philosophical and common thought. This is why, historically, Christ's flesh is seen as distinctly feminine not only because of his obviously material state, but also because of the matriarchal line from which his flesh derives. Not only does Christ not have a human father, according to the doctrine of Immaculate Conception, he also has no

grandfather. In her book, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, Bynum analyzes a scene, common to medieval paintings, of the Virgin Mary holding an infant Christ: “The sinless baby in the lap of his sinless mother who herself sits in the lap or on the arm of her own female forbearer, emphasizes the purity and the physicality of the flesh Christ takes from Mary and the flesh Mary takes from her own mother” (400-3). This displays the fact that Christ is descended from decidedly female flesh.

Bynum emphasizes that Christ is the result of, not one, but *two* immaculate conceptions. In addition to his own immaculate conception, his mother is also free from the taint of original sin. Mary had to be devoid of original sin in order to embody the perfection and purity necessary to be the vessel for Christ’s deliverance. As evident in medieval writing, Christianity teaches that all humans inherit the original sin passed down to them from Adam and Eve by means of the carnality of the act necessary for their creation. In order for Mary to be pure enough to bear Christ, it is reasoned that Mary’s mother, Anne, must also have conceived Mary immaculately (*Fragmentation* 400-3). This matriarchal line, ending with Christ, emphasizes the feminine nature of Christ’s flesh. Although anatomically male, Christ inherits his spirit from God the Father and his flesh from his mother and grandmother.

In her book, *Refiguring Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz explains, “Christ was a man whose soul, whose immortality, is derived from God but whose body and mortality is human” (5). Although Christ’s soul “is derived from God” (5), his body, or matter, is derived from a human woman (or, rather, *women*), reinforcing the connection women have to him through the body. Moreover, the body is the way Christians

have traditionally attempted to connect with Christ. With the understanding that it is the body and blood of Christ they are imbibing, the bond with Christ that followers feel when they accept the Eucharist⁴ becomes an inherently feminine one. As both a representation of the body and literally becoming it, in accordance with the notion of transubstantiation⁵, the Eucharist is a feminine symbol. Not only is the Eucharist, as the body of Christ, feminine in the sense of matter, one also consumes the body of Christ, just as one would eat through the body of one's mother in the form of breast milk. The most tangible connection humans can make with Christ is through the body, flesh, matter— through the physically feminine.

As a result of the Classical tradition of dualistically elevating male/form above female/body, Bynum writes:

Those who wrote about the body in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were in fact concerned to bridge the gap between material and spiritual and to give the body positive significance. Nor should we be surprised to find this so in a religion whose central tenet was the incarnation – the enfleshing – of its God. (*Fragmentation* 223)

The new attitudes towards understanding scripture and Christ in the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries led to a sort of anachronistic feminist movement. Certainly, this quasi feminist movement did not have women burning their undergarments (they were not popularly worn anyway), but it did have people re-thinking the intrinsically negative connotation of feminine relationships. What is

⁴ The Eucharist is the term used for the bread and wine distributed and blessed by a Catholic priest in the ritual of Holy Communion, a reenactment of the New Covenant formed by Christ at the Last Supper.

⁵ Transubstantiation is the process where the bread and wine are believed to become, literally, the body and blood of Christ through the blessing of a priest.

it about Christ's humanity, his flesh, which makes him good? Where does physicality, an enfleshed God, leave followers?

3|The Mother Christ and Fulfillment in Christ

Perhaps the better question would be: How can Christ be related to in a way that God the Father cannot? Upon examination, it is easy to see how one might begin to see Christ in a feminine and motherly light. One of the most common metaphors for the relationship between Christ and his followers is that of a shepherd lovingly watching over his flock, much as a mother does to her children. In “The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg,” Bynum notes that to the famous English anchorite⁶ and theologian Julian of Norwich, the use of the Jesus-as-mother motif is clearly more than simile. It expresses a theological truth which is, Julian holds, better said in female images than in male. For example, Julian comments explicitly that “The Holy Church is our mother because she cares for and nurtures us” (*Fragmentation* 417). In this instance, Julian uses an assumption, common in the Middle Ages, that the Church is synonymous with Christ. Bynum explains, “Medieval texts and medieval art saw the body of the church as the body of Christ.” Even the Latin word for “church,” *ecclesia*, is a feminine noun (*Fragmentation* 414).

Julian, it seems, is not the only person to feel that female imagery is well suited toward describing humans’ relationships with Christ. Bynum sites the mystical writings of the famous Cistercian monk Bernard of Clairvaux, who was known for his life of strict asceticism and isolation, saying, “Are you [Christ] not the

⁶ Anchorites lived lives of relative seclusion, with limited contact with the outside world. Julian, lived in a sparse cell attached to the church in Norwich.

Mother who, like a hen, gathers her chickens under her wing?” (*Jesus as Mother* 58). In this instance, Bernard expands on Christ’s message to his disciples in the Gospel of Matthew, “Jerusalem! Jerusalem!....How often I have wanted to gather your people together, as a mother hen gathers her little ones under her wings” (Matt. 23:37). In his own words, Christ displays his mother-like desire to care for his people; it is his nature and his purpose.

With Christ assuming the mother role, complementing that of God the Father, something new is accomplished. God becomes approachable in a way before unseen. Unlike the God displayed in the Old Testament who rained brimstone and fire down upon the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, mercilessly turned Lot’s wife into a pillar of salt for looking back, and tormented Job in order to test his faith, Christ displays the compassionate and nurturing side of God to which all people can relate. In her chapter, “Our Need for the Mother Heart,” Julian of Norwich explains the appeal of Christ’s motherly and compassionate nature:

Then our courteous Mother willeth not that we flee away, for Him nothing could be more undesirable. But He willeth then that we use the condition of a child; for when it is hurt or afraid it runneth hastily to the mother for help, with all its might. So it is His will that we do, as a meek child saying this— *“My kind Mother, my Gracious Mother, my dear worthy Mother, have mercy on me: I have made myself foul and unpleasant to Thee, and I neither may nor can amend it but with thy help and grace.* And if we feel ourselves not then eased forthwith, let us be sure that He useth the condition of a wise mother. For if He sees that it is more profitable to mourn and to weep, He allows it, with ruth and pity, until the best time, for love. And He willeth then that we use the nature of a child who always naturally trusteth to the love of the mother in weal and in woe. (Chambers 159-60)

Unlike the ineffable God the Father, Christ is humanly identifiable with the comfort drawn from one's own mother. Humans run toward the mercy and compassion of the Mother Christ like a child running to the safety of his mother's skirts, for a mother's love is unconditional, as is that of the Mother Christ. This humanity found in Christ makes him relatable, approachable, desirable, and *feminine*.

Not only does one draw emotional and psychological comfort from one's mother, but one also draws physical comfort by meeting the needs of the body through the body of one's mother. From the moment of conception, humans are physically dependent on the bodies of their mothers for life. Throughout the gestation period, the child draws on warmth, food, and blood from the mother. After birth, the child remains dependent on the mother for sustenance, drawing nutrients from her body in the form of breast milk, thus intrinsically tying together the idea of mothers (women) and food (sustenance). To medieval theologians, this is an especially significant note as physicians of the Middle Ages held the belief that, during gestation, the fetus actually fed on the blood of the mother. This need for blood continued after birth, with the idea that breast milk was a purified form of blood. In her book, *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England*, Susan Morrison explains:

In making sense of female physiology, medieval medical theories, drawn on ancient ones, directly connected milk, which provided food to the infant, with menstrual blood, which provided food and matter to the fetus. Aristotle believed '[if women] do conceive, the milk dries up, because the nature of the milk is the same of that as the menstrual blood...' (32)

To medieval doctors, this also explains the reason women cease menstruation during pregnancy. As children are physically dependent upon their mothers, so too, as children of God, are humans physically dependent upon God for life and this sustenance is received in different ways. The first is literally. In accordance with Christian belief, it is God who grants us life and provides us with the means to sustain our physical bodies with the fruits of the earth:

And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which [is] upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which [is] the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat. And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, wherein [there is] life, [I have given] every green herb for meat: and it was so. (*Genesis 1:29-30*)

In this way, God the Father provides for his children, much as a husband provides for his family; he provides sustenance but is not innately sustenance, itself. Christ stands as a complementary and matronly figure to that of God the Father. Through his fleshly embodiment, God, as Christ, literally becomes food, instructing his disciples, “Take [this bread], eat; this is my body,” and giving them wine saying, “Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament....” (*Matt. 26:26-8*). This tradition of physically eating and drinking Christ has been carried on in the practice of communion, where worshippers receive the Eucharist which is literally transformed, through transubstantiation, into the body and blood of Christ. In this way, Christ and his body literally become food, much as earthly mothers and their bodies are food for their children. Through this rite, Christians are able to derive not only spiritual nourishment, but physical nourishment as well, linking the two together.

Along this line, some medieval worshippers practiced extreme fasting as a form of asceticism, some reportedly surviving on a diet of the Eucharist alone, holding to the belief that, through the power of God, spirituality could stand in for physical sustenance. Bynum studies figures such as Ida of Louvain, Marie d'Oignies, and Catherine of Siena who denied themselves food in order to obtain states of spiritual rapture. As Bynum points out, in the cases of such women, it is from their asceticism that mysticism arises (*Fragmentation* 71-2); by denying their bodies in *imitatio Christi*, they are afforded mystical visions. In his book, *The Life of Marie d'Oignies*, the early thirteenth-century author Jacques de Vitry writes that during Marie d'Oignies' days of fasting,

she had the feeling that her spirit was separated, as it were, from her body or as if it were lying in a vessel of clay or, again, as if her body were enveloped in garments of clay and her spirit clothed in them, so abstracted was she from sensible things and rapt above herself in some kind of ecstasy. (57)

Ascetics of the time believed that this spiritual ecstasy came from their sacrifices and emulation of Christ and that the needs of their physical bodies could be satiated with their spiritual faith in Christ. In other words, the only sustenance (both physical and spiritual) that they desired was that which could be found in faith and love of Christ. Receiving the Host, coupled with extreme faith, was enough on which some could survive for long periods of time. Marie d'Oignies practiced such extreme fasting that it is said, upon her death, her body "was found to be so small and shrivelled by her illness and fasting that her spine touched her belly and the bones of her back seemed to lie under the skin of her stomach as if under a thin linen cloth"

(Vitry 131). In the early stages of the Beguine movement, Marie was greatly admired, especially within the Franciscan and Cistercian communities, for her spiritual dedication and ascetic lifestyle. She ate no more than needed to survive (with the exception of feast days when she ate, as commanded by God) and could not abide the richness of meat and wine. Of Marie's strict dietary practices, Vitry writes, "As long as her soul was so full and copiously overflowing with spiritual food, it did not allow her to accept any refreshment from corporeal food" (56). Vitry also comments that, during Marie's times of extreme fasting, "she felt absolutely no pain in her head nor did she set aside manual labour because of [her fasting]. She was no less effective in work on the last day of a fast than she had been on the first" (56). Although she denied herself physical nourishment, she thrived as she made "her spirit fat by prayers" (57).

The practice of asceticism was not strictly used as an opportunity to allow Christ to fulfill the body's needs. At times, its purpose was the exact opposite: to endure suffering through lack of bodily sustenance or through physical pain. The idea of suffering was appealing to some as a means to achieve greater understanding of the suffering endured by Christ. This is reflected not only through the asceticism practiced by those in certain monastic orders, but also in the lives of everyday worshipers and, especially, pilgrims. Like physical asceticism, pilgrimage is an opportunity for one to follow Christ's example, especially as Christ is often presented as the original pilgrim. Julia Bolton Holloway explains how the origin of this notion lies in the Gospel of Luke and the tale which takes place in the village of Emmaus, three days after the crucifixion. In this Gospel, Christ appears, newly

resurrected and disguised, rendering him unrecognizable: “The Emmaus tale was linked to pilgrimage because Luke’s Gospel text had Cleophas term Christ, “*peregrinus*,” “stranger,” or, as it was understood in the Middle Ages, “pilgrim” (Holloway 28).

The most important part of the medieval pilgrimage was not the final destination of the journey but the journey itself. The value of performing a pilgrimage lies not so much in where one goes but how one gets there; the journey itself is a form of prayer and worship. Although suffering and hardship is inherent in the idea of a pilgrimage (as one must leave his or her livelihood long enough to complete the pilgrimage and endure what may befall on the trip), some pilgrims made a point to incorporate as much personal suffering as possible into their pilgrimage, walking barefoot or even on their knees for hundreds of miles. The plight of the female pilgrim was even greater than that of the male. Women had to endure menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and the general vulnerability of being a woman on the road. In her book, *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England*, Morrison states, “Women had special risks as pilgrims, especially the danger of rape by fellow companions or those she might meet along the way” (57). Through the sacrifice of risking a pilgrimage, women could strive to emulate Christ in both action and suffering. While there are certain forms of suffering unique to women, both men and women could explore this relationship of suffering through pilgrimage. There are, however, some relationships with Christ uniquely afforded to women.

4| The Brides of Christ and Christ the Lover

When a woman enters into monastic life, she takes certain vows, a vow of poverty, a vow of chastity, and a vow of obedience. With the exception of the vow of chastity, these vows are reminiscent of other vows taken by some who chose not to enter into a monastic lifestyle— wedding vows, in which women traditionally promise to “love, honor, and obey” their husbands. In the case of nuns, they too gain a husband with the declaration of their vows; they are given a wedding ring and wed to Christ, entering into an intimately private relationship with him. While women are declared “brides of Christ,” the same allusion is not often made of the men who take similar vows. Although the lives monastic men choose can also be alluded to as a “marriage” of sorts, with Christ, monks are not commonly referred to as “husbands of Christ.” This contrast can be attributed to the medieval views on the ideas of *public* and *private*.

Much as the dichotomies of male/female to form/matter are prevalent in medieval thought, so too are male/female to public/private. Men are associated with public space and women with private. While men are able and expected to have a highly public relationship with God and Christ, women are expected to keep their own relationships private. This can be related to the idea that women should not teach (or preach) in public (Tim. 2:11-12). When these views are applied to monastic lifestyles, the differences in male and female everyday monastic life become apparent. While monastic men often went out into the community to preach, travel, collect alms, and do good works, women led a much more cloistered

life with their human contact usually limited to other women and perhaps children and the sick. In other words, while men had a much more public relationship with Christ, women's relationships were, by necessity, much more private relationships— similar to a marriage. With such a private relationship, more intimate relationships with Christ were commonly formed by monastic women.

Of all the medieval women's writings modern day readers are introduced to, the ecstatic visions of religious women usually come as the most surprising. The ecstatic visionaries were women mystics, usually nuns, who often related to Christ as a wife might relate to her husband— through the body. One such famous mystic was Mechthild of Magdeburg, of whom the German historian, Herbert Grundmann writes:

[T]he Latin editors of her memoirs found it necessary to weaken her erotic, immediate experiences into mere spiritual encounters. For she speaks of God, who grasps her soul "with full force on the bed of desire, who demands to go into the lusting soul on the bridal bed... on which he wants to kiss her and grasp her in his naked arms." And when the soul, mounted by her lover in the "bed of love" sings: "I am a full-fledged bride, I desire to go to my fulfillment," Mechthild's mouth expresses not only allegory and metaphor but erotic-religious experience. (175)

When modern day readers read of the ecstatic mystics, their highly personal and often sensual relationships with Christ seem to be allusions to orgasms and overt sexuality (something which most modern Christians would not associate with Christ). In fact, until recently, this was the view of most historians as well. However, historians now try to see these ecstatic and seemingly sexual visions through a medieval lens. They conclude that, to a medieval Christian, women having these

close relationships with Christ would have been mostly viewed as acceptable (if perhaps in need of bit of editing on behalf of some translators). In fact, these relationships which the modern reader might find controversial would appear much less surprising and offensive to a medieval audience, although some dissenting voices were certainly heard at the time.

Some of the most controversial ecstatic mystics belonged to the Beguines⁷, a group receiving much attention and question throughout the High Middle Ages. While the virtues and contributions of certain Beguines were extolled by the church (such as Marie d'Oingies), the practices of some were too radical for the church to condone and were declared heretical, some Beguines even burning at the stake. While the view of the church on ecstatic mysticism was divided, many viewed such relationships as an acceptable way for a medieval woman to have a relationship with Christ, as hers could not be one of instruction or anything else in the public sphere. However, this does not necessarily eliminate the view of these visions as fully sensual, bodily, or even orgasmic, for if spiritual fulfillment turns to bodily fulfillment in satisfying the body's needs (in terms of food or protection), perhaps the body's sexual needs may also be fulfilled. The concept of the fulfillment of the body's sexual yearnings through Christ parallels stories of anorexic saints such as Marie d'Oignies and Catherine of Siena who, although denying themselves food, could live off the Eucharist and little else. The concept also supports the notion that

⁷ Beguines were a controversial order of women who lived together in religious communities throughout Europe with especial popularity thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. They lived lives similar to nuns but were did not take the same monastic vows. Many famous female mystics were Beguines and their unorthodox practices often brought condemnation from the Vatican; many were declared heretics and some burned at the stake.

spiritual needs surpass the earthly needs of the body, and piety and devotion in God will lead to fulfillment both spiritually and bodily.

The contrast in medieval reception and modern reception of ecstatic relationships can be attributed to the changing views on the ideas of public and private from medieval to modern times. The fact that there exists published documentation of women's religious experiences may seem more public than private. However, these experiences, in order to be recorded and recognized at all, had to garner male support. Most of the women visionaries had visions for most of their lives, only to record them in the latter part of their lives at the behest of a male sponsor— turning their private, female religious experiences into more public religious experiences at the request and under the supervision of a male. This blurring of the line between public and private is one way that women were able to derive empowerment and control from their personal religious experiences with God and Christ. Jill Dubisch describes activities such as "Visiting the cemetery, attending a liturgy at a country church, [and] going on a pilgrimage" as "legitimate ways for women to move through public space and to socialize with other women..."(*Women Pilgrims* 132). In addition to allowing women to enter the public realm, women's recordings of their visions and religious experiences also served another purpose, similar to that of the pilgrimage; it allowed a new form of meditation, or prayer, in the sense of remembrance:

Karma Lochrie in her book, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*, discusses the role of memory for meditation. Through the imaginary reconstruction of Biblical events and the locations where they occur, either through actual pilgrimage or reading or hearing about holy places, the Christian's affections are moved

to imitate Christ mystically. Lochrie clearly shows how remembering Christ's life through one's imitation of Him relies on the incorporation of images into one's memory. (*Women Pilgrims* 133)

In much the same way, religious women are privy to a unique form of religious meditation through their inability to write without the sponsorship of a man or, at least write and have their works accepted. Instead of writing immediately of their religious visions, they go through their lives keeping their visions and experiences within themselves (primary form of religious experience) until given authority by a man to record their visions (secondary form of religious experience). One such case is the German Dominican, Margaretha von Ebner (d. 1351), who wrote of her religious experiences at the request of her friend and confessor, Heinrich von Nördlingen: "The writing became a spiritual experience when God put visions in her head and words in her mouth" (Rublack 40). In this way, the acts of remembrance and recording become a new form of prayer and meditation, much as pilgrimage or religious asceticism serves as a form of prayer and meditation, manifesting in the acts of participation and remembrance and exemplifying another feminine connection with Christ. While spiritual and bodily fulfillment was sometimes attained through this type of private relationship, other (and similarly controversial) relationships were also explored, as will be explained in the following chapter.

5|The Mothers of Christ

Along with the interest in the humanity of Christ in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries emerged a profound interest in the life of the Infant or Child Christ and the vulnerability displayed by his fully human state. Some interest in Christ's enfleshed humanity manifested itself as it did with the ecstatic (and sometimes heretical) mystics in their sensual, mature relationships with Christ as a lover or husband. Yet another phenomenon occurred with mystics and worshippers, whose devotion to the physical aspect of a human and corporeal God focused on the infancy or childhood of Christ. Some forms of their reverence even included the use of Christ dolls as an aid in meditation and devotion. On the return of her pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the "creature" Margery Kempe encounters a female traveler in possession of such a doll:

The woman who had the image in the chest, when they came into fine cities, took the image out of her chest and set it in the laps of respectable wives. And they would dress it up in shirts and kiss it as though it had been God himself. And when the creature saw the worship and the reverence that they accorded the image, she was seized with sweet devotion and sweet meditations, so that she wept with great sobbing and loud crying. And she was so much the more moved because, while she was in England, she had high meditations on the birth and the childhood of Christ, and she thanked God because she saw each of these creatures have as great faith in what she saw with her bodily eye as *she* had before with her inward eye. (Windeatt 113)

The practice of using Christ dolls has often been thought to be exclusively an act of feminine devotion and has been considered by some historians to be an

expression of the motherly urges these women may have felt but could not express due to their monastic and celibate lifestyles. This practice has also been considered an act of *imitatio* [imitation] of Mary, a way of identifying with the Virgin.

However, historian Ublinka Rublack believes that these explanations shortchange the complexity of such relationships:

Interpreting dolls as compensations for non-existent husbands and male babies, as some historians have done, overlooks the fact that nuns experienced real love, desire, and motherly care on a complex spiritual and emotional level, within an eroticized spirituality now alien to our understanding and imagination. What needs to be emphasized in nuns' emotional responses to the infant Jesus is the historical specificity of the psychological processes involved— their meaning in their own time, and not their contemporary interpretation as merely 'displaced desire'. (Rublack 39)

Rublack's sentiments parallel those expressed by Bynum in her response to Leo Steinberg's interpretation of the writings and art of ecstatic mystics as purely sexual. Bynum also believes that such explanations put too much of a contemporary spin on the meanings of these visions, writings, and acts (*Fragmentation* 405). The characterization of the use of Christ dolls as a manifestation of the desire to act out the female impulses denied to nuns by their lifestyle is flawed. Although very popular with women, this form of worship was not exclusively bound to the female gender. Men also sought to understand Christ through the relationship of motherhood, using the Christ dolls themselves. Many Beguines, Franciscans, and Dominicans cared for their Christ dolls year round, but the practice was especially common among Dominicans of both genders around the time of Christmas: "Dominican Christmas sermons...encouraged their audiences to become 'mother of

Christ' and to let their souls give spiritual birth to Christ" (Rublack 42). Although Rublack states that the use of Christ dolls was not exclusive to the female gender, she does highlight some differences in how men and women related to those dolls. While many women intensely identified with many aspects of the role of mother, men appear to have interpreted the act more as *spiritually*, or metaphorically, giving birth to Christ. Rublack cites the case of the Dominican chaplain, Friedrich Sunder who "frequently asked Mary for her permission to let his soul give birth to the Infant before the Eucharist. This, he explained, turned Mary into Jesus's physical and him into his spiritual mother"(42). The record of Sunder's experience does not hint that he even considered the idea of *physically* becoming the mother of Christ. Sunder distances himself further from the state of motherhood as he explains that when he "spontaneously welcomed the infant Jesus as 'my child', the Infant implausibly said that he was not his child, but his brother," and, later, Sunder vocally rejects the idea of his motherhood to a vision of the Virgin (42). The experiences recorded by nuns, on the other hand, describe much more physical relationships.

When women embraced the role of mother of Christ, many physically became his mother. In his book, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, Herbert Grundmann states that, in some cases, women even reported experiencing the symptoms of pregnancy, including lactation (176). Many nuns even claimed to have suckled Christ. In contrast to the relationships men described between themselves and their Christ dolls, the relationships nuns reported appear much more somatic and multidimensional: "Dominican nuns typically saw the Infant Jesus as a child with whom they played, joked, kissed, who accompanied them when they were ill or

dying and for whom they cared in turn during Advent” (Rublack 41). To these women, Christ becomes a tangible, corporeal form to which they can relate. Some women, such as Adelhait Oethwins, reported the doll becoming “flesh and blood” at her touch (43). Instead of focusing almost solely on the humanity of Christ, their male counterparts, such as von Heinrich von Nördlingen and Heinrich Suso, “concentrated on the baffling contradiction that God’s son became human” and in doing so “emphasized his *distance* from mankind” (Rublack 41, emphasis mine). To the women, his infant state emphasizes his humanity rather than divinity.

In a description of one particular doll given to Margaretha von Ebner by her confessor, Rublack mentions that “it could not stand on its own feet [and] had to be laid in the cradle, stood on an altar, or cradled in the arms” (43). This description highlights the similarities the Christ doll had to real, human infants. In likening the doll to human babies, the vulnerability of the state of infancy is emphasized. Although divine in spirit, Christ in form is fully human and subject to all that comes with the state of human infancy: cold, hunger, and utter dependence on the care of his mother. This vulnerability is paralleled in the inability of Margaretha’s Christ doll to stand on its own. In another instance, Margaretha describes her attempt to quiet the Infant Christ as he fussed in his cradle at night:

Then I said to him: “why won’t you be good and let me sleep? This certainly isn’t how I ought to bring you up!” Then the child said: ‘I will not let you sleep: you must take me on to you’ then I took him out of the cradle with great desire and joy and put him on my lap. Then he was a darling child. Then I said: ‘If you kiss me, I’ll forgive you for disturbing me.’ Then he threw his arms around me and held me and kissed me. (44)



Crib of the Infant Jesus

“This extraordinary miniature cradle, produced in Brabant and known as *arepos de Jésus*, served as a reliquary crib for the Christ Child. Such cribs were popular devotional objects in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, both in private homes and in convents. They were often venerated during Christmas festivities and may have been given as presents to nuns taking their vows. This splendid example, which comes from the Grand Béguinage in Louvain, features beautifully carved representations of the Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi on either end, as well as angels on each of the four bedposts. The Tree of Jesse—the biblical family tree of Christ—is illustrated on the embroidered silk coverlet, under which the Child (now missing) originally lay, his head resting on the Lamb of God embroidered on the pillow. Inside the bed is the case for the relic” (Crib of the Infant Jesus).

Christ, as the infant child, depends on the good will of his mother for attention and love. Rublack states, “Margaretha’s notion of motherhood thus played with the idea of reversing her dependence on Jesus’s love by making the Infant dependent on her. He needed her and asked for closeness which she could decide to give or not” (44). The reliance all children have on their mothers, and which is displayed even in Christ, creates a new level of connection to which women are able to appeal in their devotions and heightens understanding of Christ’s humanity.

The marked differentiation between men’s *spiritual* motherhood and *physical* motherhood suggests that this is one relationship to Christ which men were unable, or unwilling, to fully embrace and understand. This creates an opportunity for women to exert control over their own spiritual lives— an exclusively intimate relationship for women to enjoy with Christ, something which did not go unnoticed by men of the Church.

Grundmann discusses two women’s orders of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, both of which had members claiming ecstatic experiences such as nursing the Infant Christ (which, it was deemed, required personal deification) and *deificatio*⁸, itself. Mechthild of Magdeburg defended her Beguine order, and her defense, though similar to other defenses which were deemed heretical, was accepted. This, Grundmann states, is because “Mechthild had consciously fitted herself into the ecclesiastical order, entrusting herself to the spiritual guidance of her Dominican friends” (Grundmann 178). In contrast, the order from the Ries area

⁸ *Deificatio* is an event where one is endowed with personal divinity or grace.

of Germany, Grundmann states, “distrusted and rejected the spiritual guidance of theologically trained leaders, since such men had no understanding of the religious experiences which filled their lives” (178) and was deemed heretical.

One common thread in the nuns’ stories of the animated Christ dolls was the sudden departure of this animation and connection. Rublack states that in these tales, “Jesus withdrew suddenly and inexplicably causing them anguish when he never returned” (Rublack 45), citing the case of Sister Anna of Töss as an example:

And one time at Christmas she sat in the choir thinking upon the childhood of our Lord, and then she saw her Dearly Beloved going as a child to the altar, and as he walked his little curly locks shimmered, and a great radiance shone forth from his eyes so that it seemed to her as if the whole choir rose up and went up into the heights where the altar was, and came to her and sat down upon her dress which she spread out, and then, when full of desire, she wanted to embrace him, she saw him no more. (45-6)

The anguish these women felt at the departure of the Infant Christ from their lives echoes the anguish and sorrow felt by the Virgin Mary at the departure of her son. Through this full *imitatio* of Mary, the women are able to relate to Christ on an entirely human level. Not only do they feel sorrow at the loss of his divine presence, they feel the genuine sorrow of a mother who grieves for the loss of a son.

| Conclusion

While many before me have examined the place of women and femininity in religion, I feel that the conclusion I have reached is slightly different from those of whom I have read. Why do so many people find femininity in Christianity so fascinating? At first, I believed, with Christianity being an overwhelmingly male dominated religion, the place of women was merely a topic which, until recently, had not been explored in depth. However, I soon realized there was something vitally important that I was missing, for, although Christianity can certainly be said to be a traditionally male dominated religion, this may also be said about both Judaism and Islam. In these religions similar feminine comparisons are not often made. So, why are they made in Christianity?

I believe this is because of the inherent feminine qualities of Christ— God enfleshed. Without feminine analogies and understanding of feminine relationships, Christ would not be a relatable figure— as ineffable as God the Father. Humanity and flesh are what separates Christ from his father. Christ strikes a chord in human hearts because of his human suffering, forgiveness, and love. It is Christ's physical and emotional humanity which speaks to his followers, as opposed to his divinity. This humanity is Classically associated with femininity. It is through feminine allegories and relationships that people have traditionally related to Christ whether or not they are aware of them. Christ's loving and sheltering aspects stand in contrast to God the Father. While masculinity has certainly helped to shape the

Christianity known today, femininity has also had a great, yet subtle impact on how we see, and relate to, both Christianity and Christ.

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