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Connections Between Body and Soul: The Asceticism of Medieval Saints

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Abstract

After studying female mystics and asceticism in Professor Nancy McLoughlin's History course on *Women, Visions and Authority*, Sarah Hanson became interested in the connection between the body and the soul and how physical ascetic practices were believed to influence the state of the soul. Looking specifically at food based practices, her project explores the relationship between the asceticism of religious women, as described in hagiographical accounts and the saint's personal writing, and the medieval understanding of the soul. Sarah hopes to attend graduate school to study medieval European History.

The relationship between the body and the soul has been defined and redefined in Western European tradition since Plato due to its important role in answering political, social, religious, philosophical and medical questions. In late ancient and medieval Europe, saints' lives recorded in hagiographical accounts were used to influence the religious community's understanding of the relationship between the body and the soul. Late ancient saints' lives displayed the religious piety of saints by detailing their ascetic practices. By the high and late Middle Ages women's hagiographical accounts became particularly concerned with asceticism. This study examines the contributions of female saints to the understanding of the relationship between the body and soul by looking specifically at the use of food-based ascetic practices in their accounts. The results of this study indicate a change in the medieval understanding of the body-soul relationship. Whereas saints' accounts from late antiquity focused upon how the body influenced the state of the soul, by the high and late Middle Ages there appears to have been an increase in the focus on the soul's ability to influence the body. This increased focus on the soul enabled women to overcome the inferiority ascribed to their physical bodies by medieval theorists and perhaps explains the growing number of female ascetics in the late Middle Ages.

Faculty Mentor



Sarah Hanson's paper seeks to illuminate medieval understandings of the relationship between the body and the soul. This problem has remained an enduring point of concern not just for theologians, but for philosophers, anthropologists and medical theorists as well. Sarah's project is of particular interest because of the source material she uses—medieval texts written by and about women visionaries. Sarah demonstrates conclusively that although these women were formally excluded from medieval universities, they nevertheless actively contributed to evolving understandings of the relationship between body and soul through their own writings, and most significantly, through their actions. Sarah's conclusions place her within an ongoing debate among medievalists regarding the intellectual authority of medieval women.

Key Terms

- ◆ Asceticism
- ◆ Hagiography
- ◆ Saints

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Introduction

The relationship between the body and soul, which plays a central role in late antique and medieval European depictions of holiness, remains a concern for modern societies. Jeffrey Bishop addresses the enduring relevance of “questions of mind-body” in his 2000 article for *Perspectives on Biology and Medicine* (519). Using the writing of Gregory of Nyssa, a fourth-century philosopher and hagiographer, Bishop argues that an understanding of the relationship between the body and soul is valuable for modern medicine. In his reexamination of “both the modernist and postmodernist interpretation of mind-body interaction,” Bishop addresses the medical view prevalent in the United States in which death is marked by the end of consciousness of the brain (519). He applies Gregory’s late antique idea of the unified relationship between body and soul, a balance of the corporeal and the incorporeal, to demonstrate the historical and cultural particularity of modern Western medicine’s portrayal of the body and soul as two separate entities (Bishop 522, 528). In response to this failure to examine such important conceptions of the relationship between the body and soul, Bishop concludes: “we who practice medicine are in danger of further alienating our patients” (529).

Questions regarding the relationship between the body and the soul have informed epistemological theories, as well as medical and religious practice, from antiquity to the present. For instance, Descartes also examined the “mind-body” relationship in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Rozemond 467). While Descartes identified the mind as being “radically different than the body,” he viewed the relationship between the body and soul as dualistic and accepted an “integration” between the incorporeal (the mind and the soul) and the corporeal (the physical body) (Rozemond 435, 459). Though many see this study of dualism as a new perspective on Descartes, “the incorporeity of the mind or the soul” in Western philosophy is as old as Plato and is not disconnected from Descartes’ view of the mind-body relationship (Rozemond 435). Descartes saw the mind as the causal power in the production of sensations in the body, but also believed that there was “action of body on mind” (Rozemond 467, 464). An example of Descartes’ view of the connection between the body and the soul can be seen in his examination of the cause of hunger: “the brain motion ‘will be the cause of the fact that the soul, being united to this machine [the body], will conceive the general idea of hunger’” (Rozemond 459). Hunger, according to Descartes, is therefore not a mere physical reaction to consuming an insufficient amount of food, but is an idea put into “motion” by the brain which causes hunger to be rec-

ognized both in the soul and in the body (Rozemond 459). Discussed throughout history, the relationship between the body and soul is central to our current understanding of our relationship with the physical world and our abilities to control our reactions to the desires of the body.

Whereas Descartes used hunger as an example to explain the relationship between the body and soul, Gregory of Nyssa, the source for Bishop’s medical article, was greatly concerned with the impact of one’s diet on the body and soul. Food was an important topic to Gregory, who declared taste to be the “mother of all vice,” and also held great significance to late antique religious experts (Bynum *Feast* 38). Late antique and medieval individuals often sought religious and philosophical perfection through the practice of asceticism. The discipline of asceticism focused primarily upon restricting the physical wants of the body, such as a control of hunger through fasting and limited food consumption. Though many of the practices of asceticism were physical, the idea that ascetic practices impacted the state of the soul reflects late antique and medieval notions of the connection between body and soul. A saint’s use of ascetic practices to form a closer link to God, as well as hagiographers’ detailed accounts of a saint’s ascetic practices to support and promote a saint’s holiness, display the belief that physical behavior directly influenced a saint’s spiritual state. However, this study of saints’ accounts demonstrates that throughout the Middle Ages a focus on the ability of the soul to influence the body increased both in hagiographical accounts and in saints’ personal writing. The development of the body-soul relationship from the third to fourteenth centuries is evident in this examination of the use of food-based asceticism as a marker of sanctity.

Hagiography, the documentation of the experiences and miraculous events in a saint’s life, provides the best evidence for the changing notions of the relationship between the body and the soul. Hagiographical accounts also display the special contribution made to this change in the high and late Middle Ages by the accounts of female saints. Saints, idealized depictions of individuals deemed to be holy in their society, were described by hagiographers to convey and reinforce what was understood to be pious by the religious community. The accounts of female saints were composed by male hagiographers who used the perceived natural inferiority of the female gender to draw greater significance to the devout nature and ascetic practices of women. Female saints therefore achieved far greater status as religious authorities than their society attributed to be within the ability of women. Hagiographies present a negotiation of what was considered holy in medieval society. The hagiographical

accounts of saints' lives often reflect how the author's view conformed to fit the expectations of the reading public regarding pious behavior (Bynum *Feast* 149). In this sense, saints' lives and ascetic practices, though exceptional, were used by male hagiographers to translate an understanding of the relationship between the body and the soul to general medieval society.

This study examines three hagiographical accounts from late antiquity and two accounts from medieval Europe. The late antique accounts include the *Lives* of Paul the Simple, Daniel the Stylite, and St. Macrina. Paul the Simple's relationship with the monastic hero, Antony of Egypt (c. 251-356) reveals the ascetic practices of an exemplar monk whose story was popular throughout the Roman world (Brown 601). Daniel the Stylite (c. 409-493) received widespread appeal during the Byzantine tradition through his hagiographical account and was recognized in the religious community as an important ascetic (Baynes). Antony and Daniel's *Lives* provide a context for the study of the account of St. Macrina (c. 324-379), which is one of the few surviving accounts of a woman from the "early community of Christian women in the East" (Petroff 64). Macrina's hagiographer was also a church leader with great and lasting authority, Gregory of Nyssa, the philosopher cited by Bishop in his reflection on the importance of the relationship between the body and the soul for the practice of modern medicine.

Though both male and female examples from late antiquity are compared in this study, only female accounts from the high and late Middle Ages are analyzed. Food-based asceticism had been an integral part of men's hagiographical accounts in the late antique period but became less important in the hagiography and writing of male religious figures in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Bynum *Feast* 95). For example, though Francis of Assisi, the most significant male saint of the later Middle Ages, practiced strict asceticism and dietary controls in his life as a monk, neither his *Lives* nor his own writing discuss his dietary practices in detail (Bynum *Feast* 95).

While ascetic practices relating to food became less central in the accounts of medieval male saints, asceticism—especially practices related to fasting and dietary restrictions—held increasing importance for female saints (Bynum *Feast* 69). Medieval religious authorities associated women with lust and weakness, saw women as biologically inferior because they were composed of a "cool" complexion of bad humors (fluids believed to determine not only the health of a person but also their character), and believed that women

had an open body which made them "more prone spiritual influences and invasions" (Bynum *Frag* 202, Caciola 142, 130). The porosity of the female body was associated with the belief that women had a greater need to excrete fluid from their bodies, and women's purgative activities—such as sweating, urination and menstruation—were seen as physical traits that made them more open to both demonic and divine possession (Caciola 144). Fasting provided a solution to women because the limitation of food intake could lead to the stoppage of bodily excretions (Caciola 159). Religious women not only showed their devotion to God through their ability to control their desire for food, but they also were able separate themselves from the culturally-ascribed negative female traits, such as need for constant physical purgation and openness to possession, which caused them to be seen as inferior to men (Caciola 159).

While medieval religious authorities believed fasting—often causing great physical suffering—purged some of the impurities associated with the human body, abstinence from food was also considered to be a spiritual exercise that improved the state of the soul (Bynum *Frag* 234). Caroline Walker Bynum in *Fragmentation and Redemption* states that the body and soul were understood to be a "psychosomatic unity" (222). Rather than adopting a dualistic view which identified the "body primarily as the enemy of the soul, the container of soul, or the servant of soul," Bynum argues that medieval Europeans understood the body and soul as combined and working together in one entity (*Frag* 222). Though medieval people viewed the body and soul as united, Bynum suggests that for all that the body could show on earth, medieval people ultimately considered the body to be "inferior to the soul" because the body was subject to corruption, such as aging, sickness, and disease (*Frag* 236). Ultimately, the soul was understood to be the more dominant part of the self, remaining intact even after the physical deterioration of the body.

This emphasis on the soul was important for female religious figures. While women were understood to be inferior to men because of their physical bodies, medieval society according to Aquinas also saw the souls of men and women as "equally images of God" (Caciola 139). Medieval religious experts viewed the souls of men and women as equal; therefore, women used asceticism to connect with God by disassociating themselves from the needs of their bodies. If their bodies were what made them inferior, focusing on the condition of their soul alone, and even rejecting the body, helped women in their effort to achieve equal religious status among men. A focus on the rejection of a saint's physical needs, such as hunger, also helped hagiographers

to prove the extraordinary nature of their female subjects. The findings of this study agree with Bynum and Nancy Caciola in recognizing the connection of the food-based ascetic practices of female saints with women's ability to circumvent the perceived inferiority of their gender (Caciola 139, Bynum 5). This study builds upon Bynum's examination of the importance of food for medieval women in *The Holy Feast and Holy Fast* by assessing recent scholarship and using the accounts of saints—specifically their food-based ascetic practices—as a lens through which to examine the body-soul relationship.

The concerns represented in the records of female saints are significant. The piety of medieval ascetic women was shown through the display in their accounts of a greater concern for their spiritual state than for their physical health (Reineke 254). Though asceticism was a practice common among both Christian and pagan religious figures in the late Roman Empire, by the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries asceticism in Europe had evolved into a practice identified strictly with the Catholic Church: “a Christian was someone who fasted” (Brown 606, Reineke 252). In the high and late Middle Ages, women began to serve more important roles in the spread of Christianity. Women, “as quintessential laypersons [...] locked in an enduring position of deferential subordination,” were used by the clergy as models of pious behavior for the laity (Elliot 48).

This paper's examination of the high medieval *Life of Christina* by Thomas Cantimpré, the late medieval account of the Catherine of Siena's *Life* by Raymond of Capua, and Catherine's own letters demonstrates how European Christian understandings of the relationship between the body and the soul changed over time and may have reflected concerns raised by women's claims to sanctity. The account of Christina the Astonishing (also called Christina Mirabilis, c. 1150–1224) records the life of a female ascetic from the first generation of “new spiritual energies and apostolic service” of the Beguine Movement (Petroff 175). As an educated religious authority, Thomas Cantimpré, the author of Christina's *Life*, would have been familiar with the hagiographical accounts of Antony, Daniel and Macrina. The differences between these late antique *Lives* and the *Life* of Christina demonstrate the particular values of high medieval Europe, and the *Life* of Christina marks the beginning of a new period in women's spirituality.

The apex of this new period is represented by the final accounts referenced in this study, those treating Catherine of Siena (c. 1347–1380). As a woman, Catherine attained an unusually high position of authority in secular and ecclesi-

astical politics and is considered to be one of the greatest female writers of medieval Italy (Scott 34, 46; Bynum *Feast* 165). In addition to the hagiographical account of Raymond of Capua's *Life of Catherine*, this study examines Catherine's own letters to Daniella of Orvieto. Catherine's writing demonstrates that the change between the body and soul relationship is evident not only in hagiographical accounts, but also in a saint's personal correspondence. I agree with Bynum that it would be a mistake “to take the ideas of male theologians and biographers about women as the notions of women about themselves” (Bynum 295). However, Catherine's own letters reflect that the saints themselves shared a concern with accounts authored by male hagiographers regarding the soul's influence on the body. While male hagiographers' accounts of saints' lives indicate a concern with the soul's influence on the body, Catherine's letters serve as evidence that saints were personally concerned with the body-soul relationship.

The detailed accounts of saints' asceticism in these sources suggest that ascetic practices—especially fasting—played an important part in the authentication of both male and female European religious figures. A comparison of these accounts also demonstrates that the ways aspiring holy men and women used food to negotiate the relationship between the body and the soul changed between the third and fourteenth centuries. Whereas in the third, fourth and fifth centuries the hagiographical accounts of both male and female saints focused more upon how the body could direct the condition of the soul, by the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries hagiographical accounts suggest a shift in religious understanding of the relationship between the body and soul. Rather than focusing upon the influence of physical practices upon the state of the soul, the accounts of Christina the Astonishing and Catherine of Siena demonstrate the emergence of a greater focus on the soul's influence upon the body by the high and late Middle Ages.

Late Antiquity—The Third, Fourth and Fifth Centuries

Abstinence from food was an important topic in late antique society: the fourth-century monastic writer John Cassian named gluttony as the first of his “eight principle vices” and medieval cookbooks even included instructions on effective ways to fast (Cassian 117, Bynum *Feast* 41). Though asceticism was not yet a practice that defined Christianity, ascetic practices were used by both pagan and Christian groups as a “statement” to show their superiority in society (Brown 606). Medieval ascetic practitioners like

St. Antony, Daniel the Stylite, and St. Macrina used adherence to strict behavioral practices to evidence their “aspirations to excellence and personal transformation” (Brown 604, 606). Using asceticism to showcase their religious authority, the accounts of these three religious figures suggest that the late antique and early medieval understanding of the relationship between the body and the soul focused upon how the physical state of the body could improve the state of the soul.

St. Antony

A hagiographical account involving St. Antony in the third and fourth centuries indicates his belief that the practice of asceticism was necessary for a true monk. Palladius’ “Lausiac History” provides the account of Paul the Simple, a disciple of St. Antony. When Antony was first visited by Paul, he refused Paul because of Paul’s age—St. Antony believed that Paul could not withstand the harsh physical practices of a monk’s daily routine (Palladius 83). St. Antony rejected Paul not because of Paul’s mental or spiritual capability, but because he believed Paul’s body could not withstand the physical suffering caused by strict asceticism. St. Antony’s focus on Paul’s physical state, rather than the state of Paul’s soul, suggests that St. Antony believed physical practices were more essential in the life of an authentic monk. Antony’s rejection of Paul was solely based on Paul’s physical state, thus indicating Antony’s belief that the strength of Paul’s soul, without the necessary accompanying physical strength, would not have been enough for Paul to become a successful monk.

Despite St. Antony’s initial refusal, Paul continued to pursue his desire to become a monk. St. Antony limited himself to eating only “after a five days’ fast” and never enough to satisfy his hunger, and Paul finally proved himself to Antony by eating even less than Antony: days of consuming “neither bread nor water” (Palladius 83–85). St. Antony became “convinced after the required number of months [of ascetic practice] that Paul ha[s] a perfect soul,” and declared that Paul had succeeded in becoming a true monk (Palladius 83–85). It was Paul’s ability to fast and control what he consumed that indicated to St. Antony that Paul was ready to take on a monastic life. While spiritual capacity was a necessary part of being a monk, it was Paul’s asceticism and evidence of his strength to withstand the pain of asceticism that enabled him to join St. Antony. This account of St. Antony and Paul the Simple suggests that ascetic practices were a main indicator of spiritual achievement in late antiquity. For St. Antony, control of the body through fasting had a direct influence on the state of a monk’s soul and the ability to connect to God.

Daniel the Stylite

Asceticism was similarly valued by a fifth-century religious man—Daniel the Stylite. In the *Life of Daniel the Stylite*, Daniel’s ascetic practices were so strict that another man, Titus, became suspicious of Daniel’s authenticity. After observing Daniel for a few days and realizing that Daniel never veered from his controlled diet, Titus approached Daniel and asked him how he maintained such a rigorous way of life (Daniel 60–64). Daniel responded, “Believe me, brother, I both eat and drink sufficiently for my needs; for I am not a spirit nor disembodied, but I too am a man and am clothed with flesh” (Daniel 62). Daniel acknowledged the worldly needs of his physical body, but explained that he only ate to sustain himself—never for the pleasure of tasting food. He prevented himself from breaking with his strict eating habits by standing upon a pillar thirty feet above the ground with very little room to move—making him “unable to walk or to relieve [himself] to aid indigestion” (Daniel 62). While Daniel recognized the needs of his physical body, his strict adherence to his ascetic regime suggest that he believed his ascetic practices impacted the state of his soul.

Daniel’s ascetic lifestyle reinforced his authority as a religious figure and also served as a conversion tool. When Titus realized that Daniel’s ascetic practices were genuine, he too adopted strict eating habits. Daniel suggested to Titus, “[d]o whatever your flesh can endure,” and told him that by understanding the “natural capacity” of his body Titus could “know how to regulate [his] food” (Daniel 63). As when Paul was influenced by St. Antony and took up an ascetic manner of life following his example, Titus followed Daniel’s ascetic example. In both Antony and Daniel’s accounts, abstinence from food was a central aspect of their ascetic identity, and Titus began to show his piety by only eating “either three dates or three dried figs” from “one evening to another” (Daniel 64). For Daniel, in order for Titus to become a devout follower of God, it was necessary for him to adopt similar restrictive eating habits.

The accounts of Paul the Simple and Daniel the Stylite demonstrate the connection between late antique understandings of what it meant to be a true religious follower and ascetic. For both St. Antony and Daniel the Stylite, food was something that needed to be severely controlled in order to maintain a strong connection with God. The people around Antony and Daniel emulated their physical practices, and thus their asceticism not only had an effect on the state of their own souls, but upon the souls of others. While these accounts indicate that male asceticism focused upon controlling food intake, the account of St. Macrina

provides evidence of the importance of asceticism for fourth-century religious women.

St. Macrina

Though St. Macrina's hagiographer St. Gregory of Nyssa had his own personal views of food, his hagiographical account of St. Macrina did not contain the same focus on food that is present in the accounts of St. Antony and Daniel the Stylite (Bynum *Feast* 38). However, as in the accounts of male ascetics, St. Macrina's account did present evidence of a belief in the connection between the body and the soul (Bynum *Holy* 38). St. Gregory wrote that "[j]ust as by death souls are freed from the body and released from the cares of this life, so [Macrina's] life was separated" from immoral worldly practices and "divorced from all mortal vanity" (79).

While St. Macrina appeared to believe that her soul and body were connected while on earth, her account suggests that she believed her soul would separate from her body at the end of her life. Macrina said to God, "Once I have put off my body, having no fault in the form of my soul, but blameless and spotless may my soul be taken into Your hands as an offering before Your face" (Gregory 82). While the soul and body were joined on earth, Macrina believed that through ascetic practices—"putting off [the] body"—she would be able to move away from her physical dependence on worldly things like food (Gregory 82). Gregory's account made a case for the possibility of perfection of the soul: after death and separation from the body the soul had "no fault in [its] form" (Gregory 82).

Though he emphasized the superiority of the soul over the body, Gregory used concepts of eating to describe the state of Macrina's soul. In one instance, St. Macrina stated that "she had secretly nourished in the depths of her soul" and would one day be "loosed from the chains of the body" (81). Though her ascetic practices purposely did not "nourish" [*trephō*]¹ her physical body, Gregory used this bodily function to describe the strengthening of Macrina's soul. According to Gregory, Macrina replaced the satisfaction which came from eating food with the fulfillment of eventually being able to release her soul from her body.

In another instance, St. Macrina asked God to forgive her sins so that she "may be refreshed and may be found before [God] once [she] has put off [her] body" (82). While on

earth—contained in a physical body—Macrina believed it was necessary to ask God to forgive her sins and "refresh" [*anapsuchō*]² her soul through physical ascetic practices (82). The concept of spiritual nourishment in Macrina's account prefigures the focus upon the soul's influence over the body in the accounts of Christina the Astonishing and Catherine of Siena. Rather than using ascetic practices only to display religious piety, Macrina asked God to strengthen her soul so that she may have influence over her body.

High and Late Middle Ages: The Twelfth, Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries

Bynum discusses the changes that took place during the high Middle Ages which allowed religious women to gain more authority in society and in the religious community, emphasizing both the growth in the number of ascetic women and the increase in the importance of food from 1100 to 1400 (*Feast* 20). Bynum observes that the period saw "an increase in the number of female saints—a clear indication of the growing prominence of women both in reflecting and creating piety" (*Feast* 20). The accounts of Christina the Astonishing and Catherine of Siena display the development and growth of women as religious figures. The focus placed on fasting and diet in these female saints' *Lives* resembles the importance of food in the accounts of Antony and Daniel the Stylite.

Bynum observes that, in late antiquity, Clement of Alexandria described fasting as a practice that "emptie[d] the soul of matter and ma[de] it, with the body, clear and light for the reception of divine truth" (*Feast* 36). For Clement of Alexandria, both the body and the soul were influenced by ascetic practices, and only "with" the body was the soul prepared to connect to God (*Feast* 36). Similarly, another fourth-century account described fasting as a practice that "cures disease, dries up the bodily humors, puts demons to flight, gets rid of impure thoughts, makes the mind clearer and the heart purer, the body sanctified, and raises man to the throne of God" (Bynum *Feast* 37). In these cases, fasting had a powerful effect on the body, rather than the soul, for bringing the religious follower closer to God. The accounts of St. Antony and Daniel the Stylite suggest that the late ancient understanding of the relationship between the body and the soul was based upon the belief that ascetic practices affected the body, allowing the body to influence the state of the soul.

1. *Trephō* = To thicken or congeal a liquid; to make grow or increase; to let grow, cherish, foster; to have within oneself, to contain; to maintain, support (Gregory of Nyssa, *Patrologia graeca* 46:984A; definition from An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon: founded upon the Seventh Edition of Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon, Oxford English Press (1995), 816).

2. *Anapsuchō* = To cool, to revive by fresh air, to refresh. (Nyssa, *PG*, 46:985; definition from Greek-English Lexicon, 65).

This way of understanding the relationship between body and soul differed greatly from the understanding of later religious figures. According to Bynum, “[t]hirteenth- and fourteenth-century writers, busy defining exactly who should fast when, urged spiritual more than physical abstinence” (Bynum *Feast* 42). Bynum’s observation of a new focus upon the spiritual rather than physical supports the idea that there was a change in the medieval understanding of the relationship between the body and soul. The focus on the state of the soul rather than the body in the later Middle Ages can be seen in the hagiographical accounts of female saints. In both Christina the Astonishing’s and Catherine of Siena’s hagiographical accounts, the description of their asceticism indicates a focus on the soul. The discussion of the influence of the soul over the body in these texts suggests that the focus on the soul enabled women to release themselves from the physical inferiorities ascribed to their gender in order to achieve the status of an authoritative religious figure.

Christina the Astonishing

Whereas fourth-century ascetic practices involving dietary restrictions were described in greater detail in the accounts of religious males, during the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries descriptions of food-based asceticism became more prevalent in the accounts of female saints. Thomas Cantimpré’s *Life of Christina* supplies further evidence that ascetic practices were used in the hagiographical account of a female saint in order to establish and support her religious authority. By focusing on the state of the soul rather than on state of the body, Cantimpré’s *Life* succeeded in portraying Christina as a truly pious saint in spite of the perceived limitations of her gender.

As in the account of Daniel the Stylite, Christina acknowledged her physical need for food. Her account stated that she was “reinvigorated by food,” that “despite the extreme sensitivity of her body, she could not live without food,” and that she was “tortured by a most grievous hunger” (Cantimpré 438–9). Christina’s account differed from those of St. Antony and Daniel the Stylite in that Christina’s hunger led to the production of food, a remarkable gift from God (Cantimpré 439). When stranded without food, God caused the “dry paps of [Christina’s] virginal breasts [to drip] sweet milk” (Cantimpré 439). Becoming her own source of food released Christina from the body’s dependence upon worldly food, and when she consumed the liquid she was “nourished for nine weeks with the milk from her fruitful but virginal breasts” (Cantimpré 439). Just as Macrina’s account described the spiritual nourishment of her soul, nourishment was produced by God as a reward

for Christina’s spiritual devotion: the strength of Christina’s soul enabled her to circumvent the earthly hunger of her body.

Another instance of Christina producing liquid from her breasts suggests that spiritual food aided in the conversion of others and also enabled her to consume worldly food. When Christina’s sisters tied her down and “fed her like a dog with a little bread and much water,” Christina’s breasts again produced liquid (Cantimpré 442). Though her sisters did not support Christina’s fasting, they were converted by witnessing the miracle of liquid emitting from Christina’s breasts. The conversion of Christina’s sisters was similar to the conversion of Titus and Paul in the accounts of Daniel and Antony. In this same instance, Christina was able to use the liquid as a “flavoring for her bread” and she “ate it as food and smeared it on the wounds of her festering limbs as ointment” (Cantimpré 437). In addition to converting her sisters, the production of liquid from her breasts allowed Christina to consume earthly food, further emphasizing the impact of the soul upon the state of the body (Cantimpré 437).

The connection between Christina’s body and soul was perhaps shown most clearly at the end of her life when she became greatly frustrated with her desire to consume worldly food. After eating, “she would beat her breast and her body and say, ‘O miserable soul! What do you want? Why do you desire these foul things? Why do you eat this filth?’” (Cantimpré 443). Christina appears to have been upset at her soul, not her body, for its hunger for worldly food. While eating excessively was a sin that directly affected the physical body, in Christina’s account, the desire to eat or the allowance of the body to eat was seen as a sin of the soul.

Christina’s anger progressed, and she began “to beat her breast and her body most often” and cried out “O miserable and wretched body! What is it to you that you keep my wretched soul in you for so long?” (Cantimpré 449). As with St. Macrina’s internalization of suffering, Christina’s account stated that her soul was contained within her body on earth. While Christina placed blame upon her soul for desiring food, she recognized that she would not have the desire to eat if she were separated from her physical body, and proclaimed to her body, “woe to me who am united to you!” (Cantimpré 449). The use of the word “me” to identify with the soul suggests that Christina identified with her soul rather than her body, reflecting the focus on the “spiritual more than the physical” in the high and late Middle Ages in a manner similar to Macrina’s identification with her soul in the fourth century (Bynum *Feast* 42). This demonstrates the

medieval notion of the body-soul relationship as gendered female: the focus upon the soul in the accounts of female saints reflected women's necessity to derive strength from a source other than their believed inferior bodies.

After condemning her physical body, Christina began to focus more upon the goodness done by the body when it withstood the harsh restrictions put upon it by her soul. As her frustration with her body diminished, Christina then praised her body, saying "O most beloved body! Why have I beaten you? Did you not obey me in every good deed I undertook to do with God's help?" (Cantimpré 450). As already mentioned, Christina, like Daniel the Stylite, recognized her body's physical need for food and praised it for withstanding her ascetic practices. She addressed her body as a different entity from herself and her soul, stating, "You have endured the torments and hardships most generously and most patiently which the spirit placed on you" (Cantimpré 450). While the soul and body were connected on earth, Christina believed that her physical ascetic practices were unnaturally inflicted upon the body by her soul. In fasting, the soul denied the body the food it needed to survive; and, though conditioning the body through ascetic practices improved the soul, such practices caused harm to the body.

The importance of food-based asceticism in Christina's *Life* was similar to practices of Antony and Daniel the Stylite. The significance of asceticism in Christina's *Life* suggests that the documentation of ascetic practices—especially practices related to food—had increased in importance for women's hagiographical accounts since the time of St. Macrina. Writings by and about Catherine of Siena also focus on the soul's influence over the body. These writings demonstrate that, for one of the most authoritative women in both secular and ecclesiastical politics, the influence of the soul on the body was important to both the hagiographer and the actual female saint (Scott 34, 46).

Catherine of Siena

Raymond of Capua's fourteenth-century *Life of Catherine* focused on Catherine's ascetic food practices while emphasizing her spiritual feasting as a way to strengthen her validity and exceptionality as a female religious. Raymond wrote that "fullness of spirit overflow[ed] into the body, because while the spirit [was] feeding the body [found] it easier to endure the pangs of hunger" (Capua 53). Just as Christina the Astonishing was able to improve her physical state by consuming the liquid from her breasts, Catherine was able to improve her body through her spiritual "feeding"

[pascitur]³ (Capua 53). As with the use of words "nourish" and "refresh" in the account of St. Macrina, the use of the word "feeding" in Raymond's account reflects the use of concepts related to eating to describe the state of the soul (Capua 53, Gregory 82). The use of words associated with hunger, eating, and food to describe the soul suggest that, in her hagiographical account, Catherine of Siena compared her body's desire for food with her soul's desire for a connection with God.

Recognizing that the state of the body weakened as the state of the soul improved, Raymond rhetorically asked the reason behind the soul's dominance over the body: was it "not because in the former case the fullness of the spirit is sustaining the body with which it is hypostatically united?" (Capua 52). Though the belief that the body and the soul were connected on earth and that the state of both can positively or negatively influence the other was indicated in the accounts of Christina the Astonishing and St. Macrina, Raymond's account of Catherine focused even more on how the soul could improve the physical state of the body.

Just as Christina identified more with her soul, Raymond's hagiographical account of Catherine indicates that her soul was the guiding force of her self. Raymond wrote that "[t]here seemed to be two Catherines in her, one that suffered in a state of exhaustion, and another that toiled in the spirit, and the latter, fat and healthy of heart, sustained and strengthened the weakened flesh" (Capua 57). Raymond's focus on Catherine's soul rather than her physical body reinforced Raymond's belief that the soul was dominant over the body. Raymond observed that Catherine's "strength was very much reduced and insufficient—because, of course, growing in the spirit, it was natural that her body should waste away, the latter being, so to speak, subjugated by the former" (Capua 53). There was no debate regarding which had more control; according to Raymond, Catherine's body was subjugated to the power of her soul.

In Raymond's hagiographical account, Catherine revealed the importance of her soul when she incorporated her soul into her eating habits. For example, Catherine decided "always to eat her bread with tears: by making God an offering of tears before each meal she would first irrigate her soul and then take the food to sustain her body" (Capua 71). Like Daniel the Stylite, Catherine acknowledged the neces-

3. Phrase translation: *Nosti quod plenitudo spiritus redundat in corpus; dumque ille pascitur, istud facilius sustinet inedia cruciatus.* (Capua "Legenda Major" Chapter VI, paragraph 6). *Pascitur*, from *pasco*, *pavi*, *pastus*, *ere*: to cause to eat, feed, supply with food, nourish, maintain, support; *Pass.* to be fed, feed, graze, pasture. (Charlton T. Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary: Founded on Andrews Edition of Frond's Latin Dictionary, Revised, Enlarged, and in Great Part Rewritten*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press (1879, rpt 1998), 1311.

sity of food in sustaining the physical body. While Daniel restricted his food intake by eating only a few chickpeas a day, Catherine only ate limited amounts of certain types of food—meat and sugar were called a “poison” that her body would not ingest (Capua 52). In eating her bread with tears, Catherine incorporated her soul into her consumption of worldly food. Though strict ascetic practices were necessary to diminish the importance of the worldly body, Catherine used the few times she ate to increase her connection to God. The fact that Catherine had to “irrigate her soul” before eating reflected the impact of the soul on the body—her soul had to be prepared to eat before the physical body could actually ingest earthly food (Capua 53).

The strenuous measures taken to prepare the soul for eating caused Catherine to experience frustration with her body. Like Christina the Astonishing, Catherine voiced grievances with her physical body, and “would have been impatient at remaining in the body, but she was comforted by the knowledge that by enduring [suffering on earth] her heavenly body was increasing in splendor” (Capua 90). Catherine’s “heavenly body” related to the state of her soul (Capua 90). As in Christina’s account, it was believed that the soul and body would struggle on earth; however, upon death Catherine’s heavenly body would no longer desire food or have any other-worldly need, thus eliminating use of ascetic practices.

While Raymond of Capua’s hagiographical account of Catherine’s life focused more on her eating habits than Catherine did in her own writing, Bynum notes that “Catherine’s own words make clear the centrality of food in her spirituality” (*Feast* 166-167). Catherine of Siena’s letters to Daniella of Orvieto are unique to this set of accounts of female saints in that they were written by Catherine herself. Suzanne Noffke, acknowledging “some scribal manipulation,” confirms in her study of Catherine’s word usage that Catherine is indeed the “single author” of her letters despite the fact that they have been collected by men (Noffke *Vol. I* xlvii). Catherine’s own letters (dated c. 1370–1380) emphasize the importance of ascetic practices to Catherine personally and indicate that the saints themselves, not only hagiographers, focused on the soul’s ability to influence the body (Noffke *Vol. I* xv).

Expressing ideas similar to those expressed in the *Life* of Christina the Astonishing, Catherine described her soul as being trapped inside her body on earth in a letter⁴ to

Daniella of Orvieto. Catherine wrote that “because [the soul] has the vessel of the body, it is necessary that this light of discretion impose a rule on the body (as it has placed one upon the soul) as the instrument it is meant to be to increase virtue” (Petroff 267). Presented here again is the idea that asceticism was first placed upon the soul, and then applied in addition to the body—the “rule of the body” was instructed upon the body following its placement upon the soul (Petroff 267).

With ascetic practices, the soul impacted the body by serving as the motivator for the actions of the body. Catherine wrote to Daniella of Orvieto about the nature of regulatory laws, stating that “the soul does not impose any act of penance as its chief desire” (Petroff 268). Catherine was concerned that Daniella was trying to imitate her own severe ascetic practices, and Catherine urged her to keep her attempts in perspective and “repeatedly chided her” for attempting more than was within her ability (Noffke *Vol. III* 232). Catherine conveyed that the purpose of asceticism was ultimately virtue and a connection to God: in asceticism, the focus should be upon the spiritual outcome and not the “act of penance” itself (Petroff 268). Catherine’s use of the word “impose” to describe the relationship of the soul to the body reflected the idea that it was the soul which motivated the acts of asceticism on the body (268). As with Raymond of Capua’s hagiographical account and the account of Christina the Astonishing, Catherine’s soul was more representative of the ‘self’ and was the source of the actions of the physical body.

Catherine further discussed the danger of pushing the practices of asceticism too far, and wrote that “these [regulation practices] [we]re not raised up for the purpose of the disorder that the body wages against the spirit” (Petroff 268). Like Raymond and Daniel the Stylite, Catherine recognized the natural demands of her body for food, and realized that placing extreme regulatory practices upon the body could cause the body to revolt against the soul. While maintaining the body in a way that enabled it to live on earth, Catherine wrote that the soul “impose[d] a rule of the body, mortify-

exists no complete, modern critical edition of [Catherine’s] letters” (12). Luongo notes that Noffke’s four-volume series of Catherine’s letters differs slightly from the 1940 edition by Dupré Theseider, the version she translated from. While another scholar, Antonio Volpato, “has attempted to take up and continue” Theseider’s work as well, “no critical edition has yet appeared in print” (Luongo 12). Luongo himself makes his own translations throughout his work but “depends” on Noffke’s translations (Luongo 12). Luongo clarifies the issue of a critical edition: “Thus we have the ironic situation of a translation into English of something close to a critical edition of Catherine’s letters, including attention to textual variations, before a critical edition is available in Italian” (12-13). In regard to Tommaso’s critical edition in Italian, Noffke, agreeing with Theseider, notes that Tommaso “misinterpreted the text” of Catherine’s letters (Noffke xxii-xxxiii). However, Tommaso’s edition is referenced when possible in this paper to identify Noffke’s critical edition with an Italian version.

4. For the sources of Catherine’s letters, English translations by Elizabeth Petroff and Suzanne Noffke are used in this paper, as well as Niccolò Tommaso’s Italian edition. F. Thomas Luongo in *The Sainly Politics of Catherine of Siena* (2006) addresses that “there still

ing it with vigils, fasts, and other exercises, all intended to curb our body” (Petroff 268). Presented here again was the idea of the soul “imposing” actions upon the body, and the phrase “to curb our body” reflected the soul’s use of asceticism to restrict the physical body for the purpose of enabling the growth of the spirit.

In one of her letters, Catherine explained that if the “[b]ody should be recalcitrant toward the spirit,” the soul must “take the rod of discipline, and fasting, [...] and the great vigils” and use them to put “enough burdens on the body that it becomes resilient” (Petroff 268). Catherine specifically mentioned fasting as a way for the soul to exercise control over the body—it was one of the “rule[s] of regulation” to be used by the soul to control the physical body (Catherine 267). Just as Raymond of Capua described Catherine’s ascetic accomplishment of subjugating her body to the will of her soul, Catherine herself wrote that “[w]hen the soul [had known] this truth with perfect light, it [rose] above itself, above the bodily instincts” (Petroff 271). Spiritual knowledge of the “truth” allows the soul to influence the effect asceticism had on the body, weakening the physical body while also building up the spiritual state of the saint.

As in the hagiographical account of St. Macrina, Catherine’s own writing associates words with concepts of food to describe the state of the soul. Throughout one letter to Daniella de Orvieto, Catherine described the spiritual feeding of Christ, which she deemed as perfect: in contrast to “people who feed at the table of penance,” the son of God “found his nourishment at the table of holy desire for his Father’s honor and our salvation” (Noffke *Vol. III* 233–5). While “people who feed” [*notricandoci*]⁵ at the table of penance were in danger of judging their strength “by human standards” because they focused on how their physical practices affected their worldly reputation, Catherine advised Daniella de Orvieto to find “nourishment” at the “table of holy desire,” where “they eat the food of God’s honor and the salvation of souls at the table of the cross”⁶ (Noffke *Vol. III* 234–5). The use of “eat” and Catherine’s imagery of spiritual feeding at God’s table reinforced the idea that the ascetic restrictions of food enable the growth

of the soul. The food at this spiritual table was provided by God, who “will be their flawless life-giving food” (Noffke *Vol. III* T65/G162, 237). For Catherine, unlike in the case of Christina the Astonishing, no tangible substance is produced: such spiritual food nourished not her body, but rather her soul. Catherine discussed how “the soul [...] begins to crave God’s honor and the salvation of souls as her food [and] because [the soul] has this craving, she is already feasting on and nourished by this charity for her neighbors that she hungers and longs for”⁷ (Noffke *Vol. III* 237). While ideas of the soul growing as the body suffers and weakens were also mentioned in Thomas of Cantimpré’s account of Christina the Astonishing, the description of the soul “feasting” upon its virtue of charity toward others accompanied by ascetic practices like fasting, is significant in that Catherine used a word associated with excessive eating to describe the actions of the soul (Noffke *Vol. III* 237).

Another letter to Daniella of Orvieto also reflected the idea of the soul improving through an increased consumption of spiritual food, which in turn coincided with a decreased intake of earthly food. Still focused on the importance of charity, Catherine described the fruits which grew from the branches of the “tree of charity” which “nourish us in the life of grace when we pick them with the hand of free choice and eat them with the mouth of burning holy desire” (Noffke *Vol. III* 296). Catherine again used words associated with food—“nourish” [*notricano*]⁸ and “eat”—to describe the effect of pious acts of charity. In this letter, Catherine turned the rewards of charity into spiritually-edible fruit which were to be taken into the “mouth of burning holy desire” (Noffke *Vol. III* 296). The direct connection with eating earthly food was clear: while fasting ascetics refrain from placing food into their mouths, Catherine connected the benefits of charitable works to the soul with spiritual food. Whereas the desire for earthly food was considered to be evidence of worldly constraints upon the soul while it was connected to the physical body on earth, ascetics viewed their desire for spiritual food as a blessing from God and, in this example, were even rewarded for virtuous actions with spiritual food.

The use of words commonly associated with concepts of food to describe the state of the soul was reflective of the importance of fasting in the twelfth, thirteenth and four-

5. Tommaseo’s edition of able of “those who feed at the table of holy desire” is *notricandoci alla mensa del santo desiderio* (Tommaseo T65). Both citations use *notrico*, a medieval version of *nutriro*/ *nutrire*: to feed, harbor, cherish. A dictionary by Tommaseo confirms that *notrico* and *nutrico* are the same and the replacement of the *c* with a *t* is a standard change (Catherine of Siena, “*Le Lettere di S. Caterina da Siena - ridotte a miglior lezione e in ordine nuovo disposte con proemio e note*,” edition di Niccolò Tommaseo, ed. G. Barbera, 1860; *Dizionario della lingua italiana* Bernardo Bellini, 1871). Though Tommaseo edited Catherine’s letters against the veracity of the original text, his consistent use of “nourish” reinforces the use of food-based words to define the soul as demonstrated in Noffke.

6. This sentence is also not included in Tommaseo’s edition (Tommaseo T213).

7. Tommaseo only includes a fragment of this letter (T213), so the phrase is also missing from his edition.

8. Tommaseo’s edition: *Di questi rami escono infiniti e variati frutti, tutti soavi e di grandissima dolcezza che notricano l’anima nella vita della Grazia, quando con la mano del libero arbitrio, e con la bocca del santo e affocato desiderio li prende* (Tommaseo T213). Tommaseo uses *notricano* consistently for “nourish” but the phrase “eat them with the mouth” is replaced with “take with the mouth.”

teenth centuries. Catherine used feelings of hunger and her body's desire for food as symbols of the yearning for a connection with God, using concepts of eating that could be easily identified by the audience of her letters to describe the soul in a way that could be understood on earth. The use of such words to describe the soul indicated that the body's desire for food was replaced by the soul's dominating will to connect with God.

Conclusion: Focus on the Soul to Overcome Perceived Female Inferiority

The increase of documentation describing the soul's power over the body, as displayed in the accounts of Christina the Astonishing and Catherine of Siena, suggest that the understanding of the soul as having power to influence the body developed in the recording of later ascetic practitioners. A shift in the understanding of the body-soul relationship reflects the growing number of female saints: women far more than men focused on ascetic practices in the high and late Middle Ages (Bynum *Feast* 69). Though women were assumed to be naturally inferior and prone to sinfulness, their souls were considered equal to the souls of men (Caciola 139). If religious women could circumvent their perceived physical inferiorities through fasting and other ascetic practices, perhaps they could release some of the restrictions placed on them because of their sex. Male hagiographers enhanced the evidence of extreme physical practices in their accounts of the lives of female saints in order to reinforce the saints' piety. Thus, an increase in the focus on the control of the soul over the body in hagiographical accounts and some of the saints' own correspondence, in correlation with the increase of female saints in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, reflects a new way of interpreting the relationship between body and soul as gendered female. The focus on demonstrating evidence of saints' asceticism, especially in such accounts of exceptional women, indicates that male religious authorities felt that exemplifying women like Christina and Catherine could hold great influence over the religious community and general medieval society. While the accounts examined in this study detail special cases of women who went outside their traditional female roles, the importance of their accounts for the religiosity of society indicate that the issue of the body-soul relationship in their accounts held broader significance. The power of the soul over the body was perhaps emphasized—both in female saints' hagiographical accounts and in their personal writing—as a way for women to escape the social inequality placed upon them because of their female bodies.

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