HOLY ASEXUALITIES:
DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS AND LATE MEDIEVAL RELIGIOUS WOMEN'S ASEXUAL EMBODIMENT

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ABSTRACT

This thesis traces multiple strands of late medieval asexuality and compulsory sexuality that inflected the lives of holy women. Reading the sexuality of these holy women through the lens of asexuality adds another dimension to the study of medieval virginity, and challenges the presumption that virginity was always a struggle. It also has the radical potential to disrupt the naturalization of sex in both modern and medieval periods. This thesis begins by examining medical and natural philosophical discourses, which constructed a gendered iteration of compulsory sexuality by naturalizing lust as an inherent feature of women's bodies. It next examines hagiography, in which a category of "holy asexuality," in which a moment of divine intervention was thought to purify these women's bodies from a state of carnal sin to perfection, contrasted with the utterly non-sexual concerns represented in their own revelations and visions. Holy asexuality was thus generated underneath the umbrella of compulsory sexuality, and depends on it, even as the religious women themselves resisted its normative forces. The final chapter demonstrates how holy women lived in and through the category of holy asexuality through the letters of advice that they wrote. While "holy asexuality" was prescriptive, late medieval holy women's embodiment constitutes another sort of holy asexuality. They resisted the demands of compulsory sexuality and established their unique connections to the divine through asexuality. Their understanding of asexuality opens up possibilities for reading the category as something other than the absence by which asexuality is typically defined.

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INTRODUCTION:
ASEXUALITIES, MEDIEVAL AND MODERN

A 14th-century witness once testified that "he had never known anyone as much a stranger to carnal emotion as" Gertrude of Helfta.[1] This statement, an assertion that she was fundamentally unfamiliar with the passions of the flesh, rings of asexuality. But how can we understand and define this state? This thesis will explore this question by examining asexual "resonances," and arguing that reading asexuality into virginity and chastity adds a fresh dimension to understanding medieval religious women's sexuality.

The lives of medieval religious women were often inflected by the virtues of virginity and chastity, and there are varying reports about their experience of sexual desire. Much scholarly attention has been devoted to mystical eroticism, or the displacement of the sexual onto a divine entity, yet this work assumes the universal experience of sexual desire. Little work, in contrast, has been done on asexual experiences. Since there are no self-declarative statements of identity in the archive of the Middle Ages, traces of embodiment across the ages must be accessed through different means. Asexuality theorists Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper argue for reading asexual resonances, which they understand as a "certain texture, sensibility, or implication of asexuality that shifts the focus from asexual identities to asexual traces, touches, instances."[2] Contemporary theory and terminology provides access and a lens into past

[1] Gertrude of Helfta and Pierre Doyére (translator and compiler), *Œuvres Spirituelles: Le Héraut (Livres I et II)* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1968), 162, "quod scilicet nunquam hominem cognovisset a quo omnis carnalis commotio esset tam penitus aliena sicut ab ista." (Translation: Gertrude of Helfta and Alexandra Barratt (translator), *The Herald of God's Loving Kindness: Books One and Two* (Kalamazoo, Mich: Cistercian Publications, 1991), 64.).
[2] Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper, "Asexual Resonances: Tracing a Queerly Asexual Archive," *GLQ* 20, no. 3 (2014), 304.

embodiments, but they still must be understood on their own terms and through their own cultural logics. This thesis seeks to provide such an explanation.

I am terming one of the discursive strands of medieval asexuality traced in this thesis, "holy asexuality," to describe the idealized state of asexuality that formed the end goal for chaste holy women. The sources in this thesis, namely medical discourses, hagiography, and letters of advice, reveal means of reading asexuality in the Middle Ages and the medieval logics that governed and defined it. Medieval asexuality was embodied, experienced, and written about far differently than the modern category, and these differences are instructive. Taken together, modern and medieval asexualities can work to further denaturalize the experience of sexuality and challenge normative assumptions of its universal experience.

Terminology

Contemporary asexuality is understood in a variety of ways, but it of course hinges on its oppositional relationship to sexuality. It is commonly understood as the absence of sexual desire, desire for partnered sexual contact, or the experience of sexual desires that do not match up to the 'norm.' For the purposes of this thesis, asexuality will be used as a broad term to encompass various bodily and affective desires that do not align with the presumption of universal experience of sexual desire. "Queer work," according to Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "wants to address the full range of power-ridden normativities of sex."[3] Sex, itself, can be normative. Asexuality stands in resistance to the assumption that all people experience sexual desire. This concept is called "compulsory sexuality," a notion derived from Adrienne Rich's "compulsory heterosexuality," and refers to "the assumption that all people are sexual

[3] Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "What Does Queer Theory Teach Us About X?" *PMLA* 110 (1995): 345.

and…describe[s] the social norms and practices that both marginalize various forms of non-sexuality, such as a lack of sexual desire or behavior, and compel people to experience themselves as desiring subjects, take up sexual identities, and engage in sexual activity."[4] Just as Rich argues that heterosexuality is not universal or natural to human bodies but is upheld as an institution of power, so too is sexuality, or the experience of sexual desire, compelled.[5] This is not to assert asexuality as the base human experience, but rather that asexuality can work to queer sexual norms and assumptions. Asexuality and compulsory sexuality, both medieval and modern, are tied together; they can mutually reinforce or resist one another, depending on their deployment.

Instead of reading for an asexuality that is defined by explicit declarations of self-identification, which is a core component of many modern definitions of sexuality, Przybylo and Cooper argue for a reading of asexuality that is categorically queered.[6] They take issue with the logic of sexual orientations which naturalize and essentialize sexuality as an unchanging biological reality. Furthermore, the common refrain that asexuality is not a choice and remains static over the course of one's lifetime further naturalizes sexuality. These characteristics are not useful for historical analysis and actively participate in the restrictive power of Foucault's discourses of sexuality by making it the site of 'true' knowledge about oneself, thus limiting and defining the experience of sexuality. Przybylo and Cooper instead argue that the "demarcation of celibacy as choice and asexuality as nonchoice is specious, since it does not account for the complex ways in which sexual identity, practice, and experience are never strictly 'not a choice'

[4] Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence (1980)," *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 3 (2003): 11–48; Kristina Gupta, "Compulsory Sexuality: Evaluating an Emerging Concept," *Signs* 41, no. 1 (2015), 132.
[5] Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence."
[6] Przybylo and Cooper, "Asexual Resonances," 300, 303.

but rather made possible by specific sociocultural discursive environments."[7] By queering what asexuality means, and leaving room for celibate lifestyles and other such experiences as legitimate asexuality, the boundaries between sexuality and asexuality are blurred to include those who do not easily fit inside of its modern bounds. Choosing to abstain from sex, often by choosing a life of virginity and enclosure, can thus be classified as a late medieval asexual resonance. The vision of asexuality within these medieval texts can expand and challenge modern notions of asexuality, resisting definitions of sexuality that naturalize it and rendering the variety of sexual experiences in the past visible.

In order to understand asexuality in the Middle Ages, its modern treatment must be briefly assessed. Asexuality was often pathologized as sexual "frigidity." More recently, asexuality was labeled as "hypoactive sexual desire disorder" in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental disorders and was and was only tenuously declassified as a disorder as recently as 2013.[8] This public understanding of asexuality and its legacies is underscored by the "Timeline of asexual history" Wikipedia page, which, in contrast to other queer studies timelines, only goes back to 1869.[9] This lack of a recognized history reduces asexuality to a purely modern phenomenon. While the category itself may be modern, this presumption of modernity implies that alternate experiences of sexual desire, or the lack thereof, are similarly modern. Medievalists, notably Roland Betancourt and Leah DeVun, have found trans* lives the past despite trans* identity categories not existing.[10] Similarly, this thesis seeks to demonstrate

[7] Przybylo and Cooper, "Asexual Resonances," 301.
[8] CJ DeLuzio Chasin, "Reconsidering Asexuality and Its Radical Potential," *Feminist studies* 39, no. 2 (2013): 405.
[9] "Timeline of Asexual History," Wikipedia, March 8, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_asexual_history.
[10] Leah DeVun, *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 21; Roland Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality:*

asexuality in the past even if there were no asexual identities there. While the category and its exact specification may not transcend time, the bodily desires that it consists of do. They were simply understood and policed differently in the premodern past. Additionally, the norms of compulsory sexuality have plagued scholarly investigation into medieval women's sexuality, and medieval sexuality in general, which further obscures past asexuality. Asexuality is only beginning to overcome its pathologized past and gain nominal acceptance. Asexuality desperately needs a history. This thesis is an attempt to recover a sliver of that history and to illustrate its radical potential.

Scholarly Legacies

Existing scholarship about asexuality further reinforces the notion of its medieval absence. Simone Chess, Aley O'Mara, and Liza Blake, to name a few, are producing exciting work on asexuality in early modern literature, yet by sticking to conventional periodization, they frame asexuality as emerging from Protestant anxiety over Catholic virginity. This work still hinges on a Foucauldian timeline of sexuality which excludes the medieval period. I am not arguing that the modern category emerged during the Middle Ages, but rather that the logic of compulsory sexuality and asexual embodiment have far deeper roots than this train of thought allows. Dyan Elliott and many other medievalists have noted the omnipresence of discourses on sexuality during the Middle Ages and have productively pushed Foucault's genealogy of sexuality into the premodern past.[11] It is imperative, then, that this same work be done for

Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2020).

[11] Dyan Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell: Metaphor and Embodiment in the Lives of Pious Women, 200–1500* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 174.

asexuality, a topic which has been thoroughly neglected, if not outright declared an impossibility, in the field of medieval sexuality.

Much work has been done, however, on virginity. The study of virginity in the Middle Ages is longstanding, and its focus ranges from theology to lived experiences. John Bugge's *Virginitas* follows the intellectual history of virginity, noting how various theologians understood it across the medieval period. Since the publication of Joan Scott's seminal essay, however, scholars have moved from examining virginity as an attribute of "women" to considering it in light of gender theory. For example, Sarah Salih positions virginity as a separate gender identity. Using Judith Butler's theory of citational gender, she positions the experience of virginity as the opposite of heteronormativity and a challenge to stable gender identity.[12] Salih notes that virginity could be an alternative to heterosexuality, yet this begs the question, why not to sexuality itself? Virginity is also often included in early LGBT+ scholarship, where various essay collections frame it as a defining feature of the medieval sexual landscape.[13] However, in these works, there is little attention to how the practice and performance of virginity could inflect bodily and affective desires, apart from the assumption that virginity was a universal struggle. The opposite has not yet been examined. This assumption falls into the trap of both medieval and modern compulsory sexualities. It neglects to imagine how people's desires may not have fit into these discourses on virginity and temptation.

More recent work on virginity is deeply influenced by developments in queer theory. This work often focuses on medieval sexual binaries which differ from the present. Karma Lochrie, for instance, argues against the possibility of reading heteronormativity in medieval

[12] Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 34.
[13] Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage, *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996).

sources at all. Instead, she conceptualizes medieval sexuality as having a binary opposition between procreation and chastity.[14] She wrote, "monastic virginity cannot be defined by enclosure, bodily integrity, or even asexuality. Monastic virginity is, in fact, never the repudiation of desire but its reconfiguration."[15] This assertion forecloses asexual possibilities by implying that there is always underlying sexual desire. Similarly, Ruth Mazo Karras, in *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*, argued for chastity as a sexual orientation. Karras directs the experience of sexual desire towards the divine for enclosed people. She specifically notes that monastic virginity could not be read as asexuality, writing that "the chastity these people sought to achieve was not asexual; it was achieved not by repressing their sexuality but by redirecting it."[16] Karras makes room for the experience of erotic desires, but hinges them upon the experience of sexual desire. Eroticism, however, need not be inherently sexual. Audre Lorde famously disconnects the sexual from the erotic, framing the erotic as intimately relating to another person in ways that *can* include sex, but do not *have* to.[17] Foucault also asserts, "the rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sexual desire, but bodies and pleasures."[18] Decoupling bodily pleasures from sexuality makes room for other sorts of bodily and affective practices, including asexuality, and helps make people with alternative desires visible and intelligible. Karras further states, "medieval chastity, for some people, can be called a sexual identity or orientation precisely because it was an erotic

[14] Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xv.
[15] Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies*, 44.
[16] Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 70.
[17] Audre Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic: the Erotic as Power* (Brooklyn, N.Y: Out & Out Books, 1978), 3.
[18] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (Reissued, Vintage: 1990), 157.

chastity."[19] Were there no sexual or erotic desires, chastity could not be considered a 'sexuality,' which renders asexualities absent under Karras's configuration. With all sexual desire redirected towards the divine, the erotic becomes essentially synonymous with the sexual, thus missing the asexual possibilities that abound within the category of chastity. Insights from asexuality theory could help to flesh out the potential experiences, or lack thereof, of sexual desire while living under these chaste, virginal identity categories. While all of this scholarship is productive in its own right, these authors' outright denial of asexual possibilities is symptomatic of compulsory sexuality. This axis of analysis allows us to critically examine asexual logics within a system of compulsory sexuality and universal notions of sexual embodiment, and thus, add a much needed dimension to our understanding of these categories and how they were experienced. Removing sexuality as a default explanatory category creates space for additional queer options.

Virginity and chastity have significant overlap with asexuality during this period. This overlap, though, was contested and unstable. Though there was no unified understanding of virginity, medieval scholars often distinguished between spiritual and physical virginity. Pierre J. Payer argues that for many scholars, "the essence of virginity is located squarely in the will and has nothing necessarily to do with the presence or absence of physical lesion in the genitals."[20] Some earlier patristic authors distinguished between virginity as a state of the body and chastity as a state of the mind, but there was by no means consensus.[21] Later in the Middle Ages, virginity became less tied to the body itself, but rather control over said body, where "virginity [was] perceived to be much more a state of mind than a state of body," with the tension lying

[19] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 69.
[20] Pierre J. Payer, *Bridling of Desire: Views of Sex in the Later Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 163.
[21] Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2000), 3.

"between a constructed, immutable chastity and an equally constructed, mutable body."[22] When discussing the issue of whether women who had been sexually assaulted were still virgins, though there was again much debate, "the overriding principle is the spiritual, voluntary nature of virginity, which cannot be taken away against one's will or outside of one's will," prevailed.[23] The concept of virginity was itself unstable, and thus asexuality's tie to it was as well.

The premium that medieval texts attach to virginity complicates Cooper and Przybylo's model. Since there were escapes from compulsory sexuality, it could be argued that it was hardly compulsory, which has led some early modernists to claim that there was no medieval compulsory sexuality.[24] However, even though virginity did provide an 'out' from gendered female activities, such as childbearing, heterosexual sex, and other domestic duties, women choosing to lead a virginal life critically *had* to opt-out.[25] The "normal expectation" for women was marriage, and marriage prescriptively came with sexual obligations.[26] There were exceptions, as Dyan Elliott has copiously noted in *Spiritual Marriage*, and many people practiced chastity or virginity within marriage. Virginity generally was regarded as nobler than procreative sex and as an "expected, ideal state of humanity" that contained "to some extent, a fundamental lack of sexual awareness," according to Michelle Sauer, and it was not reasonably expected for every woman to choose to perform a virginal identity.[27] Using Cooper and Przybylo's methodology of moving away from identity-driven conceptual frameworks,

[22] Payer, *Bridling of Desire*, 162; Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity*, 7.
[23] Payer, *Bridling of Desire*, 165.
[24] Liza Blake, Nicholas A. Brush, Simone Chess, Rachel Chung, Catherine Clifford, and Aley O'Mara, "Early Modern Asexuality and Performance," Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies Roundtable, 15 October 2020.
[25] Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 6.
[26] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 38.
[27] Michelle Sauer, "The Expected Ideal: Marriage and Virginity," in *Gender in Medieval Culture*. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Place, 2015), 47–48.

compulsory sexuality must be judged based on performance and expectations. In most marriages, it is impossible to discern each partners' experience of desire from surviving sources. Far more revealing are the roles that they were expected to perform, or the roles that they opted out of by choosing virginity. Thus, even though virginity was a visible, accepted category for women to occupy, and a category with certain asexual resonances, it was by no means the norm; women were instead expected to participate in an institution like marriage in a late medieval version of compulsory sexuality.

Asexuality is not, however, merely a new word to replace virginity. Modern asexuality refers to a person's experiences of sexual desire, or lack thereof, and thus *can* be synonymous with some theologians' understanding of virginity, yet also fundamentally differs for those who require a struggle with lust before achieving holy perfection. These texts thus pose a challenge to modern understandings of the body and sexual desire, which do not always allow for a more fluid experience of desire. Medieval authors instead offer possibilities for erotic and intimate desires that are fundamentally opposite of carnal desires. According to Przybylo and Cooper, where there is the sexual, there is always an asexual possibility, looming as its presumed opposite.[28] If the opposite did not exist, then it need not be specified. This distinction is also clear in medieval texts by or about religious women. Jane Tibbetts Schulenberg rightly points out that even though the saints she discusses are virginal, the texts still have everything to do with sex; in their effort to portray the virginity and virtue of their subject, these texts inevitably focus on it.[29] However, they do not just focus on sex. Desire also features prominently in these narratives, and

[28] Ela Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2019), 299.
[29] Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, "Saints and Sex, ca. 500–1100: Striding Down the Nettled Path of Life," In *Sex in the Middle Ages: a Book of Essays*, edited by Joyce E. Salisbury (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 203.

must be distinguished from sex. The saints' relationship to sex hinges on their experience of sexual desire, in many medieval texts. Virtue could not be won in its absence.

Asexuality helps to further 'queer the queer,' or to resist normalization and categorization, by decentering queer theory's focus on sex. Many medievalists use sex, following Dinshaw's logic, as a lens to examine sapphic religious women. Their asexual possibilities are essentially unexamined in the scholarly literature. Medieval asexuality, with all of its distance from the present, thus provides the perfect ground for this work. The sources themselves resist neat identificatory categories and must be read against the grain. As will be seen in future chapters, though normative models of compulsory sexuality and asexuality were constructed, they were also resisted. Asexuality's radical potential is only recently being revisited as another site where the normativities of sex are exercised in early modern literature studies. According to Carolyn Dinshaw, sex, including sexuality, sexual desire, sexual identity, and sexual subjectivity, are intrinsically bound to cultural systems of representations, and are thus always "heterogeneous and indeterminate."[30] Asexuality is similarly indeterminate, and by adding another normative axis to critique—compulsory sexuality—asexuality theory queers the queer and adds a new dimension of understanding to religious women's sexualities. Asexuality therefore makes room for understanding alternate, subversive modes of being and the ways that medieval people made sense of them, as well as resisting the normativities of compulsory sexuality, past and present.

Sexuality may not have been the mechanism of a Foucauldian biostate in medieval Europe, but sex and virginity were certainly mechanisms of control.[31] Examining asexuality—a lens which is fundamentally excluded from discourses inflected by compulsory sexuality—helps

[30] Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1999), 12.
[31] Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell*, 281.

combat the definitional aims of discourses of sexuality, thereby undoing these mechanisms of control. Even when women lived in these categories which attempted to define their experience of sexuality, their lived experiences were not actually determined by these prescriptive norms. Asexuality has the radical potential to upend our ways of seeing the world, both medieval and modern.

This thesis will examine the logic of asexuality and compulsory sexuality in a variety of different medieval discourses. Chapter 1 will focus on medical and natural philosophical writings, showing how medieval people understood sexual desire and positioned it as both natural and universal. It will also show some resistance to these naturalizing discourses, namely in the form of Hildegard of Bingen's deployment of humoral theory to establish a spectrum of ways of engaging with, or not engaging with sex and sexual desire. Chapter 2 uses hagiography and revelations to establish the category of 'holy asexuality.' This category was used to understand asexual embodiment and to position it as a superior bodily state, and it was performed by holy women to their advantage. Chapter 3 will use medieval religious women's letters of advice to illustrate how they resist the binary opposition between asexual and sexual, instead carving out spaces for asexual embodiment through their devotional and theological programs. Ultimately, this thesis seeks to show methods of reading asexuality in the deep past and how medieval and modern asexualities can mutually transform one another, working together to unknot restrictive cultural logics that define and determine the experience of sexuality.

Queer theory looks towards its future, and asexuality theory does so too.[32] Medieval asexualities can help imagine a new future for asexuality, one which is not defined solely by

[32] Will Rogers and Christopher M. Roman, *Medieval Futurity: Essays for the Future of a Queer Medieval Studies* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2020), 2.

relation to its supposed opposite. Touches of asexual queerness in the past engage with the "open mesh of possibilities," and illuminate alternative embodiments and experiences.[33] In the words of Carolyn Dinshaw, queer readings of history "make new relations, new identifications, new communities with past figures who elude resemblance to us but with whom we can be connected partially by virtue of shared marginality, queer positionality."[34] Though asexuality is often defined in a strict binary in relation to sexuality, asexuality was so much more than absence to the religious women discussed in this thesis. Their resistance to the norms of compulsory sexuality and the ways in which they carved out alternate, asexual modes of being serves not necessarily as a model, but as an impetus to imagine more open futures for ourselves and to resist the naturalizing impulse of compulsory sexuality.

[33] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," in *Literary Theories*, 537–552 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 8.
[34] Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 39.

CHAPTER 1:
MEDICALIZING ASEXUALITY: COMPULSORY SEXUALITY AND THE MEDIEVAL BODY

The concept of compulsory sexuality derives from Adrienne Rich's renowned compulsory *hetero*sexuality, the theory in which heterosexuality is both assumed and enforced.[35] Compulsory sexuality, in turn, is the assumption that everyone experiences sexual attraction and is "a system that regulates the behavior of all people, not just those who identify as asexual."[36] Though this concept is clearly rooted in a contemporary, identity-oriented version of asexuality, here I make the case that it can still be applied to the Middle Ages by analyzing the differing pressures that compulsory sexuality exerted, as well as responses and resistance to it. Early modern literary historians have traced compulsory sexuality to the Reformation, where they credit the origins of compulsory sexuality, and the asexuality of those who resist it, to Protestant anxieties over Catholic celibacy. Aley O'Mara, for example, studies how marriage in Shakespeare functions to reinscribe compulsory sexuality onto characters who resist marriage and heterosexual sex.[37] Despite the immense value of these insights into early modern asexuality, however, I argue that anxieties over sexuality did not spring into existence fully formed from the Reformation; positioning asexuality as the product of two, binarily opposed forces diminishes the centuries-long distrust of religious women and their sexuality that had been mounting throughout the later Middle Ages as well as medieval Catholic anxieties about both marriage and virginity.[38]

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[35] Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence."
[36] Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics*; Gupta, "Compulsory Sexuality," 132.
[37] Aley O'Mara, "Early Modern Asexuality and Performance," Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies Roundtable, 15 October 2020.
[38] Dyan Elliott, *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

Medical discourses of the high and late Middle Ages reveal that women in particular were assumed to be insatiably lustful. Given their assumed physiologies as overtly sexual, asexually-oriented religious women would have had to resist both patriarchal, gendered assumptions about their sexuality in addition to social expectations of compulsory sexuality. Virginity perhaps gave asexual people an ability to live out their bodily and affective desires, but it was by no means presumed as a possible experience in these texts, apart from being labeled as a defect of the body.[39] Reading for a medieval compulsory sexuality allows scholars to map asexuality within the umbrella of virginity, which, in turn, allows medieval understandings of virginity to inflect asexual resonances. Though medieval medical discourses did not have the normalizing power that they do today, they often reinscribed notions of the 'natural' and reflected the norms underlying the production of these texts.[40] In regard to asexuality, they reveal a late medieval physiological model in which sexual desire was conceived of as essentially universal, and, in the few instances in which it was not, it was labeled as unusual, defective, or queer.

This chapter traces a medieval compulsory sexuality through the writings of various medical authors writing in Latin; in these texts, it shows how the concept existed and exerted pressure on the lives of celibate, enclosed religious women despite the prominence of the category of virginity. The texts included are Constantinus Africanus's *Liber de coitu*, Albertus Magnus's *De animalibus*, an anonymous author's *De secretis mulierum*, Hildegard of Bingen's

[39] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 8; Catherine Rider, "A Defect of the Mind or Body: Impotence and Sexuality in Medieval Theology and Canon Law," in *The Ends of the Body*, edited by Suzanne Conklin Akbari and Jill Ross, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 198.
[40] John P. Sexton, "Atypical Bodies: Seeking after Meaning in Physical Difference," in *A Cultural History of Disability in the Middle Ages*, edited by Jonathan Hsy, Tory V. Pearman, and Joshua R. Eyler (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 23.

Physica and *Causa et curae*, Thomas of Cantimpre's various works, and the *Trotula*. These texts were selected in order to gather a variety of different genres and under the umbrella of medicine and natural philosophy. They were written over the course of the period in question and by authors with different positionalities. These texts can by no means encompass the wide variety of late medieval ideas about sex, but instead provide a sampling of some of the possibilities. As I demonstrate, some of the texts reify compulsory sexuality, and others resist it, thus providing several lenses into the late medieval logic of compulsory sexuality and revealing asexual possibilities. These medical authors insisted that sexual desire was universal, natural, and human. Therefore, when they talked about the absence of sex in humans, they constructed an implicit category of asexuality as defective or disabled. By creating compulsory sexuality, they brought into being its absent (or unnamed) being: asexuality.

Compulsory Sexuality and the Naturalization of Sex

Naturalizing sex and sexual desire obscures asexual resonances. By making sexual desire seem to be an inherent feature of the body, there is little room to represent people who reside outside of the boundaries of these normative understandings. Discourses that naturalize lust and sexual desire are one of the most visible places to find the logic of compulsory sexuality at work. When attempting to recover asexuality in the deep past, often only the more dominant discourses that were elite enough to be written down survive. Therefore, in terms of method, it is necessary to pick through their internal logics, and the ways in which they naturalize sexuality in order to access the possibilities of their asexual resonances, given the minimal chance that such asexual possibilities were preserved in the archives. Thus, medical and natural philosophical discourses

that naturalize sexual desire, positioning it as integral to human embodiment, are a key starting point for finding traces of asexuality in the later Middle Ages.

Constantinus Africanus, an 11th-century physician, is credited with playing a large role in "transforming sex into a medical issue" in his widely read *De coitu*.[41] This text is a translation of an Arabic text by Ibn al-Jazzār, a 10th-century physician of Islamic medicine, of whom Constantinus translated many works, and treats many Aristotelian ideas about sex. He focuses on sexuality as a function of the body, discussing both sexual function and dysfunction, without religious value judgments attached to it. So absent are these moralizations, that Chaucer famously referred to him as a "cursed monk" for writing this text.[42] Though Chaucer's assertion also reflects changing attitudes towards sex over the course of the Middle Ages, this comment also points towards the utility of using medical discourses to access medieval notions of sex, and the work that these texts do to naturalize sex.[43] *De coitu* was widely circulated, surviving in 30 manuscripts, and thus had widespread influence on medical ideas about sexual intercourse.[44] Constantinus states:

> The Creator, desiring the race of animals to persist in a steadfast and consistent way, and not perish, arranged that it should be renewed by intercourse and by generation, so that being thus renewed, it should not utterly be destroyed. Therefore, he fashioned natural members for animals that would be fit and proper for this task, and he implanted within them such marvelous power and such lovely delight that there is no animal that does not take enormous pleasure in sexual intercourse.[45]

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[41] Faith Wallis, "Medicalizing Sex: Constantine the African," in *Medieval Medicine: A Reader*, edited and translated by Faith Wallis (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 511.
[42] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Norton Chaucer*, edited by David Lawton, Jennifer Arch, and Kathryn L. Lynch (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 276, lines 1810–11.
[43] Monica H. Green, "He Wrote What?" Constantinus Africanus, October 10, 2018. https://constantinusafricanus.com/author/monicagreenasuedu/.
[44] Green, "He Wrote What?"
[45] Constantinus Africanus and Enrique Montero Cartelle trans., *Constantini Liber de coitu. El tratado de andrología de Constantino el Africano* (Santiago de Compostela: Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, 1983), 76, "Creator volens animalium genus firmiter ac stabiliter permanere et non perire, per coitum illud ac per generacionem disposuit renovari, ut renovatum interitum ex toto non haberet. Ideoque complasmavit animalibus naturalia membra que ad hoc

By stating that creatures are "fit and proper" (*apta forent et propria*) for sex, he places sexuality squarely within the realm of the natural. If the purpose of genitalia is sex, then it has its purpose within a teleological view of nature.[46] The continuation of the species is presented here as an imperative of nature, or at least preferred, and, as Joan Cadden puts it, "nature always prefers what is better" for itself.[47] In this passage, Constantinus explicitly attributes to God the ability to procreate via intercourse. Not only does sex have a necessary function within the natural order, but it is the design of the creator that people use these organs for their intended purpose. This passage also suggests that the pleasure coming from sexual intercourse legitimizes its practice. The universalized "delight" (*delectationem*) experienced when partaking in intercourse encourages and legitimizes sex, but also reduces it to the domain of the body. External "natural members" (*naturalia membra*) are what take delight, in contrast to later authors who add additional, mental layers to sexual desire. Though people might deny the body these delights for various reasons, they are presented here as something that all functioning human beings experience. Ultimately, this text reads like high medieval sex-positivity because it does not add the layer of condemnation that prescriptive discourses often add to their discussions of sexual behaviors, but the effect of this medical theory was to naturalize and universalize sexual desire. The effect of this naturalization of sexual desire was that, in the medieval medical concept of the body, there was no place for human beings who did not experience sexual desire.

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opus apta forent et propria, eisque tam mirabilem virtutem et amabilem delectacionem inseruit ut nullum sit animalium quod non pernimium delectur coitu." (Translation: Wallis, 511).

[46] Joan Cadden, *Nothing Natural Is Shameful: Sodomy and Science in Late Medieval Europe*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013, 4.

[47] Cadden, *Nothing Natural Is Shameful*, 4.

Albertus Magnus, a German Dominican friar, further naturalized sex and sexual desire, and also gendered this desire, in his *ca.*1260 work, *De animalibus*. He writes that girls naturally begin to desire sex at the onset of puberty:

> However, around the fourteenth year, due to the descent of the menses and the spermatic humor their buttocks begin to thicken and the cleft of the vulva begins to close up, the lips of the vulva begin to soften and to thicken, and hair begins to grow around it. These are called the signs of puberty. Also at this time a girl begins to desire intercourse, but has no emission in her desire. The more she either has intercourse or rubs herself with her hand, the more she desires it, since through such rubbing the humor is attracted but not emitted and along with the humor comes heat. Since a woman's body is cold and suffers from closed pores, the semen of intercourse is not emitted quickly and this is why certain girls, at about the age of fourteen, cannot have their fill of intercourse. If they have no male at this time, they nevertheless busy their mind with intercourse with a male and they often imagine their penises.[48]

Albertus curiously does not discuss the onset of sexual desire in men, perhaps because this text was intended for a male audience who would already be familiar with male puberty. However, this text is highly encyclopedic, so the omission of male sexual development and desire indicates that it was less significant to the category of 'man' than it was to the category of 'woman.' Woman therefore emerges as a medical site for the investigation of the development of desire, becoming a canvas upon which various questions and answers about human nature and sexuality were posed.

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[48] Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus Libri XXVI: Nach Der Cölner Urschrift*, translated by Hermann Stadler (Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1916), 676, "Circa quartumdecimum autem annum propter menstrui et humoris spermatici descensum et nates incipiunt inspissari et fissura vulvae incipit claudi, et labia vulvae mollificari et ingrossari, et pili germinare incipiunt in circuitu eius: et haec sunt quae vocantur signa pubertatis. Incipit etiam tunc puella desiderarare coitum, sed in desiderio non emittit, et quanto plus coit aut etiam manu se confricat, tanto plus appetit, eo quod per talem confricationem humor attrahitur, sed non emittitur, et cum humore attrahitur calor: et cum muliebre corpus sit frigidum et clausuram patiens pororum, non cito emittit semen coitus: et haec est causa, quod quaedam puellae circa annum quartumdecimum non possunt de coitu satiari: et si tunc non habent virum, tamen mente pertractant coitum virilem et saepe imaginantur veretrum virorum." (Translation: Albertus Magnus, *On Animals: A Medieval Summa Zoologica*, translated by Kenneth F. Kitchell Jr. and Irven Michael Resnick (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 776).

In *De secretis mulierum*, a treatise falsely attributed to Albertus Magnus, the author draws on various medical, cosmological, and natural philosophical ideas to discuss women's sexuality. Helen Rodnite Lemay claims that 'Pseudo-Albert's' medical knowledge is lacking according to standards of the time, and was potentially both written and used within a religious community to instruct "priests in natural philosophy, particularly as it pertains to human generation," and contains strong misogynist sentiments.[49] Like many authors of these medieval medical texts, the boundaries between these disciplines are blurred. Even Constantinus's *De coitu* subscribes to many aspects of a late medieval Christian worldview and cannot be separated from their understanding of nature, medicine, and sin. Pseudo-Albert asserts that young women: "greatly desire coitus because of the abundance of matter that they have. Therefore it is a sin against nature to prevent this, and to keep them from having sex with the man they choose. This practice, of course, goes against custom, but that is off the present topic."[50] This passage again naturalizes sexual desire while revealing the tension between philosophical ideas about the natural order and religious prescriptions. The author acknowledges that social and religious conventions actually prevent women from acting according to their "evil, viscous, and corrupted humors" (*malorum et viscosorum et corruptorum humorum*) that produce such sexual desire, on which they must act in order to be healthy and release their superfluities.[51] Ironically, the author repeatedly degrades women based on these same cultural ideas that position women as more

[49] Albertus Magnus and Helen Rodnite Lemay trans., *Women's Secrets: A Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus's De Secretis Mulierum with Commentaries* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992) 4, 7, 16.
[50] Albertus Magnus and Jose Pablo Barragan Nieto, *El De Secretis Mulierum Atribuido a Alberto Magno: Estudio, edicion critica y traducción* (Porto: 2012), 462, "Iste enim mulieres iuvenes, quando multum habundant in tali materia, multum appetunt coire propter materie habundanciam. Et hoc est ex instinctu nature. Et ideo peccatum est in natura tales retrahere et prohibere eis aditum ad illum quem diligunt, quamvis autem hoc peccatum sit in moribus, de quo nichil ad presens." (Translation: Lemay, 132).
[51] Albertus Magnus and Barragan Nieto, trans., *El De Secretis Mulierum*, 452–54.

sinful and lustful, while claiming to be operating from a more objective stance that has little to do with these socially constructed notions. Again, by leaving no room for exceptions within this universalizing picture of sexual desire, the author naturalizes its experience.

Women's sexuality was understood through medieval concepts of 'nature' and the 'natural,' of which multiple versions manifest in these medical and natural philosophical discourses. According to Karma Lochrie, "the fall introduced another nature…that was not so *naturally* natural but was instead the result of reason's subversion."[52] Thus, there is a tension between these two understandings, tension which manifests in various medical understandings of sex. Intercourse, before the Fall, was not natural, yet became so as a result of the Fall. The Fall "is responsible for many aspects of the human condition that are today regarded as given: gender difference, sexual desire, and involuntary seminal emissions."[53] Lochrie seems to suggest that gender difference and sexual desire were not naturalized under this medieval view of nature, because they were not part of the original, idealized form of human nature. However, medieval understandings of the dual natures does similar work. Medieval medical authors typically operated from the standpoint of the second, postlapsarian 'natural,' discussing the operation of the body in their current moment. If 'Nature' was the ideal state, failure to live up to these ideals of perfection was to be expected, and this failure was inscribed onto the body and its functions.[54] Sin and imperfection characterized this second nature, and, though they were to be resisted, were still naturalized as inherent to postlapsarian bodies.

Medical texts were entangled with these Christian ideas about sin and often reinscribed their tenets. While medical discourses enforce compulsory sexuality by placing it onto everyone

[52] Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies*, 23.
[53] Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies*, 23.
[54] Cadden, *Nothing Natural Is Shameful*, 36.

as a more neutral attribute of humanity, religious discourses enforce it through positioning everyone as existing in a state of sin. These views draw on each other and influence one another, with some religious texts borrowing the medical language of superfluity while couching it in the language of sin. These stances are ultimately inseparable and cannot exist without the justificatory power of the other.

One of the ways in which sexual desire is naturalized in medical texts is by localizing sexual desire as a function within various body parts. For example, Albertus Magnus cites Galen about the womb desiring semen:

> Further, if it is granted that the womb desires the sperm in and of itself and seeks after it, it would not follow that it would always retain it and not reject it unless the sperm were always to remain in that very complexion within the womb for which the womb desires it. Yet it frequently corrupts within the womb, harming it and the entire woman. It is therefore not unsuitable that this same womb rejects it just as previously it had desired it and drawn it in.[55]

Here, Albertus grappled with Galen's rather contradictory stance on what the womb actually desires and what is healthy for it. The womb is almost granted a degree of agency in this passage, capable of feeling, desiring, and choosing. If the womb has this power, then one of the key sources of lust is the body; if lust comes from the body, then it is a symptom of the uncontrollability of the body after the Fall.[56]

Peter of Spain, most famously the author of a 13th-century textbook on Aristotelian logic, also composed a series of questions on Constantine the African's *Viaticum*. *The Viaticum* was a

[55] Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus*, 710–11, "Adhuc autem si concederetur. quod matrix diligit sperma propter se et appelit ipsum, non sequeretur quod ipsum semper retineret et non reiceret, nisi sperma in matrice semper in tali complexione permaneret, propter quam matrix diligit ipsum: corrumpitur autem frequenter in ipsa || et laedit matricem et totam mulierem: | non est ergo inconveniens, quod matrix eadem tunc reiciat ipsum, sicut prius dilexit et attraxit." (Translation: Kitchell and Resnick 808).
[56] Cadden, *Nothing Natural Is Shameful*, 153.

translation of an Arabic work on passionate love, and thus includes similarly naturalizing sentiments as *De coitu*. In the second version of this text, he asks:

> Second, it is inquired why there is so much pleasure in intercourse. To this it should be said that there are four causes of it: the first is the disposition of the members, which are extremely sensitive because they are filled with nerves. The second cause is on the part of its action, since each faculty delights in its own action; even the faculty expelling the fetus takes pleasure in its action…Some assign a fifth, final cause, saying that God created a great pleasure in such an action lest, because of its uncleanness, animals abominate it and thus procreation would perish.[57]

Not only does this statement universalize sexual pleasure and desire, but by saying that "each faculty delights in its own operation," these parts of the body are similarly assigned a degree of agency.[58] He also claimed that sexual desire arose from the womb, and that the "womb desire[d] to be filled," much like Albertus Magnus.[59] Peter made a distinction between lust and love in his series of questions. He wrote that "it must also be noted that that love enters through the senses to the interior faculty, namely to the fantasy, and from the fantasy [it progresses] to the estimative faculty, whose function is to recognize friendship and enmity."[60] Even though lust can only progress into love by engaging with one's imaginative and estimative faculties, its original

[57] Peter of Spain, "Questions on the Viaticum Version B," in Mary Frances Wack, *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages: The Viaticum and Its Commentaries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 244–46, "secundo queritur propter quid est tanta delectatio in cohitu. Ad hoc decendum quod huiusmodi quattuor sunt cause: Prima est dispositio membrorum que sunt valde sensibilia qua nervosa. Secunda causa est a parte sue operationis quia quelibet virtus delectatur in propria operatione; etiam expulsiva virtus fetum delectatur in sua operatione...Quintam etiam causam assignant aliqui a parte finis dicentes quod magnam posuit deus delectationem in opere tali ne propter eius immundiciam ab animalibus abhominaretur et sic deficeret generatio" (Translation: Wack, 245–47).
[58] Peter of Spain, "Questions on the Viaticum," 244–46.
[59] Peter of Spain, "Questions on the Viaticum," 238, "cum tamen tam stomachus quam matrix appetat repleri."
[60] Peter of Spain, "Questions on the Viaticum," 233, "Notandum autem quod amor intrat per sensus ad interiorem virtutem, scilicet ad fantasiam, eta fantasia usque ad virtutem estimativam cuius est cognoscere de amicicia et inimicicia sicut divit Avicenna et preter illam omnibus rebus." (Translation: Wack, 232).

source is within the body. Thus, though the mind can 'stop' this desire, or choose not to act on it, sexual desire was ultimately a naturalized feature of the body per this viewpoint.

It would be unfair to claim that there was any universal agreement as to the source of sexual desire. Peter of Abano (c. 1257 –1316), an Italian philosopher and physician, for example, attributed desire to the mind and certain foods, whereas Constantinus Africanus, taking a nod from Aristotle, claimed that "appetite arises from liver."[61] Many of these views, however, by framing body parts as the origin of desire, naturalize lust as an expected, practically universalized feature of the body. This reasoning betrays a logic of compulsory sexuality, in which everyone is presumed to experience desire equally, or at least if their bodies function 'properly.'

By contrast, Hildegard of Bingen's formulation of sexual desire makes space for asexuality. Hildegard attributed lust predominantly to a "windiness" (*ventus*) of the "loins" (*lumbis*) that diffused into the womb and mind, thus rooting sexual desire in 'naturally' occurring bodily processes.[62] Hildegard also discusses a large variety of types of people based on humoral theory and organized across a gender axis in *Causae et curae*. She envisions each of these types as having a different level of sexual desire, or different lifestyles that they are better suited to. Crucially though, the varying level of lust between a choleric and melancholic man was rooted in different levels of passion and not bodily defect.[63] Of course, since this system is figured through the humors, which are corporeal in nature, this system does fit with other late medieval

[61] Constantinus, *Liber de coitu*, 80, "tria vero sunt in coitu: appetitus ex cogitacione fantastica ortus, spiritus et humor. Appetitus ab epate, spiritus a corde, humor a cerebro." (80 for LATIN), (Translation: Wallis, 512); Cadden, *Nothing Natural Is Shameful*, 52.
[62] Hildegard von Bingen, *Hildegardis Causae et curae*, edited by Paul Kaiser (In aedibus B.G. Teubneri, 1903), 75, "Ventus autem, qui in lumbis eorum est."
[63] Joan Cadden, "It Takes All Kinds: Sexuality and Gender Differences in Hildegard of Bingen's 'Book of Compound Medicine," *Traditio* 40 (1984), 173.

understandings of lust that situate it within the body. What is of interest here is that Hildegard's classificatory system makes space for asexual feelings, naturalizing those who do not feel as much sexual desire, thus resisting the universalizing tendency of the logic of compulsory sexuality.

In sum, it is clear that many medical and natural philosophical discourses reinscribed the notion that sexual desire was integral to postlapsarian human embodiment. Naturalizing the experience of lust obscured asexual possibilities. The sheer existence of these discourses, which may contain traces of popular thought outside of the university or monastery, perhaps exerted power over the lives of those whose experiences resisted the logic of compulsory sexuality. At the very least, they exerted interpretive power, governing the representations of asexual experiences. Just as in the present, naturalizing sexual desire makes it almost unthinkable to imagine its absence. These discourses do tremendous work to make medieval asexualities unthinkable. However, as demonstrated in chapters two and three of this thesis, medieval people did live outside of these boundaries and did imagine alternative ways of being.

Women's Insatiability and Compulsory Sexuality

Not only was sexual desire naturalized to all fallible bodies during this period, it was seen as a far greater issue for women, whose 'weaker' nature made it more difficult to control the sexual desire that arose naturally from their bodies. According to Joan Cadden, "women's unsatisfiable sexual appetite was so well established as to require no substantiation."[64] Under Aristotelian understandings of women's bodies, women were imperfect versions of men. However, that did not mean that they each varied from the more idealized, male form in a unique

[64] Cadden, *Nothing Natural Is Shameful*, 129.

way. Rather, women had their own, imperfect category of which they were a part. Cadden argues that "defective though she may be as a human being, a woman who is passive and insatiable is still true to her type."[65] One of the defining characteristics of women within late medieval medical discourses was the inability to control their lust, and in fact their being permeated with even more sexual desire than an idealized (male) human. Thus, within the logic of these texts, it was far more difficult for women to escape their corporealness in order to occupy an asexual state.

Women's physiology, at least within these discourses, both justified and explained their higher degree of lust. Lust was often theorized to come from an abundance of superfluous material. Cadden, summarizing many medical thinkers, writes that "young women are particularly humid, and may have narrow pores. These conditions make them prone to menstrual pain and to a buildup of their superfluities that causes a great desire for sex. Intercourse is therefore good for them."[66] Sexual voraciousness "was connected to menstruality," and thus gendered female.[67] Pseudo-Albert, in *De secretis mulierum*, states exactly this: "Rather, they greatly desire coitus because of the abundance of matter that they have."[68] In order to be healthy, women needed to expel these abundances, be it through sex, nocturnal emissions, masturbation, or menstruation. Albertus writes,

> These same changes occur in virgins since some, as long as they are virgins, have many superfluities in their bodies and they emit these through nocturnal emission, through intercourse, and also with the menses. When their bodies are thus cleansed, they become

[65] Cadden, *Nothing Natural Is Shameful*, 6.
[66] Cadden, *Nothing Natural Is Shameful*, 131.
[67] Cadden, *Nothing Natural Is Shameful*, 129.
[68] Albertus Magnus and Barragan Nieto, trans., *El De Secretis Mulierum*, 462, "Iste enim mulieres iuvenes, quando multum habundant in tali materia, multum appetunt coire propter materie habundanciam. Et hoc est ex instinctu nature."(Translation: Lemay, 132).

> more healthy and have better growth because of the departure of the superfluity which had been hindering health and growth.[69]

Virginity is presented as somewhat unhealthy here, because it makes it all the more difficult to expel humoral excesses.[70] Masturbation destroyed "even nominal claims to virginity," which thus leaves menstruation, and debatably nocturnal emissions, as the only 'sanctioned' way for an enclosed woman to release her superfluities.[71] Though Albertus discusses women's masturbatory practices at length, stating that they imagine sex with men and "might often rub themselves with their fingers or other instruments until their pathways are loosened by the heat of the rubbing," he "offers no parallel discussion of masturbation for males."[72] This further genders the practice, and ties it to women's physiological differences from men.

Asexual resonances subvert the expectations of gendered compulsory sexuality. If it was nearly impossible for women to exist asexually and to experience no sexual desire, then enacting these affective desires, or even suggesting that women's sexual desire was less potent than men's, stands in opposition to the policing of compulsory sexuality. Contrary to the vast swath of medieval authors who argued for women's greater lustfulness than men, Hildegard of Bingen proclaimed the opposite. She stated in *Causae et curae* that sexual desire comes from a mental

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[69] Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus*, 678, "Et istae eaedem mutationes accidunt in virginibus, quoniam aliquae quamdiu sunt puellae virgines et habuerint in corpore multas superfluitates, emittunt ipsas || per pollutionem | in somno || factam | vel per coitum et emittunt etiam menstruum: et tunc purgatis corporibus efficiiintur tunc maioris sanitatis et melioris augmenti propter exitum superfluitatis quae prohibebat sanitatem et incrementum." (Translation: Kitchell and Resnick, 778).

[70] Joyce E. Salisbury, "Gendered Sexuality," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, edited by Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 89.

[71] Dyan Elliott, *Fallen Bodies Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 47.

[72] Elliott, *Fallen Bodies*, 46; Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus*, 676, "tamen mente pertractant coitum virilem et saepe imaginantur veretrum virorum, et forte saepe se confricant digitis vel aliis instrumentis." (Translation: Kitchell and Resnick 776).

"winds" (*ventus*).[73] Though women certainly experienced desire, it was less ardent or all-consuming as male desire.[74] Hildegard claims that "when [women's] delectation rises, it is gentler in a woman than in a man, fire of this kind not burning as ardently in her."[75] Here, she directly subverts the widespread notion that women were full of insatiable lust. One reason why women were presented as less lustful, is that since they were 'naturally' weaker than men, their sexual desire was weaker, and thus more controllable; when other medieval authors argued for women's weakness and resulting lasciviousness, they implied that they were morally inferior as well. Hildegard's conception, though subscribing to some of these existing gender norms, situates women in a better moral position than men, at least in regard to resisting sexual temptation. Her assertion actually suggests that many women within the monastery *were* leading asexual lives, less affected by sexual temptation, and thus subverting the gendered expectations of compulsory sexuality.

Hildegard's undoing of compulsory sexuality is further evident in her *Physica*. She lists many plants that combat lust in this text, but far more of these plants combat male lust, thus suggesting that male sexual desire was a larger problem than female lust. Both rue and dill, for example, helped to sate male desire, and while several plants helped extinguish sexual desire in both men and women, such as mandrake and wild lettuce, there are no plants listed in the *Physica* that only diminish women's lust.[76] In the entry on rue, she writes: "If a man is

[73] Hildegard, *Causae et curae*, 75.
[74] Hildegard, *Causae et curae*, 76, "Delectatio autem in muliere soli comparatur, qui blande et leniter et assidue terram calore suo perfundit, ut fructus proferat, qui si eam acrius in assiduate incenderet, fructus magis laederet quam eos produceret."
[75] Hildegard, *Causae et curae*, 76, "levior in ea est quam in viro, quoniam huiusmodi ignis in ea tam fortiter non ardet ut in viro." (Translation: Throop, 63).
[76] Hildegard von Bingen, Reiner Hildebrandt, and Thomas Gloning, comps., *Physica: Liber subtilitatum diversarum naturarum creaturarum (Band 1)* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 97, "Igitur ut homo delectationem et libidinem carnis in se extinguat, accipiat in estate anetum et bis tantum bachminze et brochuurtz / [lunchwurz] modicum plus, et radicem ir(i)s

sometimes stirred up in delight, so that his sperm arrives at the point of emission but has in some way been retained within his body and he has begun to be ill from it, he should take rue and a bit less wormwood and press out their moisture."[77] Here, Hildegard uses the same language of emission and superfluity to discuss men's sexual desire that other authors use to position women as inferior. Her writings reveal resistance to the gendered compulsory sexuality that posited all women as full of superfluous desire, and makes much more space for asexual possibilities than the treatises of Albertus Magnus or Peter of Spain, both of whom naturalized sexual desire, and correlated it specifically with female gendered bodily functions. Hildegard reverses this script, making women physiologically more suited to chastity and the asexual resonances that accompany it. The notion of embodied asexuality, as it could have been experienced within the walls of a convent, has the potential to subvert the gendered expectations of compulsory sexuality.

Some scholars such as Sarah Salih have used Judith Butler's conception of gender to argue that enclosed, religious women did not occupy the same gender category as lay women.[78] While their social roles did drastically differ, because of their anatomy, both religious and lay women were often included under the same, overarching category of women within these medical discourses. A primary distinguishing factor between many women was their sexual status: virginal, married, or widowed. There were of course differences in how women's bodies functioned while existing in any of these states, but excessive lust was typical of all three, at least

illirice bis tantum ut bachminze et ascheloch tantum ut iris illirice et hec omnia in acetum inscidat, et ex eis condimentum faciat, et sic frequenter cum omnibus cibis suis comedat."

[77] Hildegard, *Physica*, 93, "Si homo aliquando ita in delectatione conmovetur, quod sperma ad articulum emissionis pervenit, sed tamen intra in corpore aliquo modo a continente retenta fuerit, et ille inde infirmari ceperit, rutham et modicum minus de absinthio accipiat, et succum earum exprimat."

[78] Salih, *Versions of Virginity*.

under the more dominant, male-authored treatises. Though some might have been able to overcome it, they could not escape it altogether. By this same token, these religious women could not escape the demands of compulsory sexuality, which constantly interpreted their bodies as lesser, weaker, and inherently wracked with desire. Though not all women participated in marriage, and sometimes had the option to 'opt-out' by choosing a life of enclosure, they were often still classified as 'women,' and thus were thought to experience the same insatiable sex drive as befitted all other women.[79] This is one reason why medical discourses are crucial for examining medieval compulsory sexuality: by making women's lust a symptom of their physiology, it was practically inescapable. Additionally, this medical reasoning testifies to the coupling of patriarchal gender norms, heteronormativity, and compulsory sexuality, which, when allied, restricted both representations of asexuality, and the ability for the average woman to embody it.

Impotence and Suffocation of the Womb

Humoral theory allowed for individualized care of the patient, which both made space for those who do not experience desire to exist naturally, while simultaneously medicalizing their lack of desire as bodily defect. Of course, not everyone who was unable to have children for various reasons and who was categorized as either impotent, frigid, or other, was asexual, but people who experienced a medieval variety of asexuality *could* have been treated under these categories. Thus, discourses surrounding impotence, frigidity, lovesickness, and suffocation of the womb are a fruitful place to trace asexual resonances. "Individual imperfections and failures were expected" under the view of postlapsarian human nature, but imperfections that deviated

[79] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 9; Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 6.

too far from the 'norm' were still treated as medical defects.[80] Many of these medical treatises, such as *De animalibus* and *De coitu*, leave only a little room for variation and make sweeping generalizations about the typical function of human bodies. When they do discuss people with either an excess or absence of sexual desire, they provide treatments or cures in order to normalize the experience of sexual desire and to bring it into line with procreative expectations. These bodies are treated as atypical, or deviant. The language of 'accident' was also frequently used both to describe sex and deviance from bodily sexual norms.[81] Albertus Magnus, for example, writes that some girls "by accident" (*accidens*) never have nocturnal emissions, which makes it easier for them to live chastely; they also are not able to reproduce, described as a "fault" (*vitium*) of their complexion, which illustrates how sexual desire was tied to pleasure in generation.[82] The abnormalities that authors and physicians treated in regard to sex overlap with asexuality, and illustrate how, despite the holier iteration of asexuality seen in religious discourses, the absence of sexual desire was still treated as deviant in relation to 'normal' bodily functioning.

In *De coitu*, Constantinus argues that intercourse typically promotes health, but leaves some room for individual variation. He does provide situations in which sex is less healthy, such as on a full stomach, if one is humorally more warm than cold, or if one has sex too often.[83] Constantinus also provides times of day during which sex is the healthiest, typically when a person is in their most balanced state.[84] He relays that Rufus of Ephesus supposedly said that

[80] Cadden, *Nothing Natural Is Shameful*, 36.
[81] Naama Cohen Hanegbi, *Caring for the Living Soul: Emotions, Medicine, and Penance in the Late Medieval Mediterranean* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 26.
[82] Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus*, 678.
[83] Constantinus, *Liber de coitu*, 114, "universaliter ergo melius est coire secundum quod diximus et, si quis coierit circa mediam noctem, peccat, quia cibus est semicoctus."
[84] Constantinus, *Liber de coitu*, 114, "est autem hora coeundi congrua, quando corpus fuerit in temperamento omnium exteriorum, scilicet ut non sit plenum nutrimento neque vacuum neque

"intercourse eliminates a harmful condition in the body and reduces rage" and is particularly good for melancholics, because it "brings the insane to their senses, and relieves a lover from his passion, provided he can lie with the woman he desires."[85] While this passage reveals Constantinus's bias towards male experiences and has a clear heteronormative bent, this statement does provide a physiological explanation for the benefits of sex. By removing harmful superfluities, according to Constantinus, the body is calmed and cleansed.

Menstruation was thought to have a similarly cleansing effect, and was one of the ways apart from sex that women were understood to expel their humoral excesses.[86] Constantinus further claims that: "so we distinguish between strong and weak vital power, and we say that [intercourse] benefits one whose vital power is strong and harms one whose vital power is weak because it chills, as Galen says."[87] Leaving room for individual variation when prescribing a regimen of health was the key to individual diagnoses, and could function as a cure for various medical conditions.

One of the interpretive difficulties posed by *De coitu* is that Constantinus predominantly treats men. Though he still naturalizes sex because of its reproductive functions, which does apply to women, he generally lacks concern for female sexual function. Perhaps this is because Constantinus was a monk, and had more experience treating male 'members,' but this also reflects how little concern was given to female pleasure and sexuality when it was not being

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frigidum neque calidum neque siccum neque humidum, sed temperatum." (Translation: Wallis, 516).

[85] Constantinus, *Liber de coitu*, 126–28,"diximus enim quod coitus prodest hominibus duobus modis. Rufus vero ait quia coitus solvit malum habitum corporis et furorem mitigat, prodest melancolicis et amentest revocat ad noticiam et solvit amorem concupiscencie, licet concumbat cum alia quam concupivit." (Translation: Wallis, 518).

[86] Salisbury, "Gendered Sexuality," 89.

[87] Constantinus, *Liber de coitu*, 124, "Ideoque distanciam fecimus inter fortem et debilem virtutem, et diximus quia fortem habenti virtutem prodest, quoniam calefacit eum, et debilem virtutem habenti nocet, quia infrigidat, sicut dicut Galenus." (Translation: Wallis, 517).

treated with suspicion. This omission further attests to the erasure of women's sexuality in the historical record.[88] These are the "blanks" that Ann Matter calls for historians to discover.[89] Not only is women's sexuality in general absent, but their asexual possibilities are as well. Constantinus Africanus does not consider the gendered implications of chastity, much less asexuality, nor does he leave room for the practice much at all. All that he discusses is the sexual function of various body parts and the diseases or dysfunctions that can afflict them. However, within the discussion of sexual functioning, some of these authors medicalize asexuality.

By positioning women's desire as both natural and inescapable, discourses that center women's sexuality leave little room for women to occupy asexual spaces. Reading against the grain of these texts, however, reveals asexual traces, because of the deep anxieties towards the imagined state of female lust. As Danielle Cooper and Ela Przybylo remind scholars, whenever a text is about sexuality, asexual possibilities always loom large.[90] Accordingly, it is worth noting that *De secretis mulierum* includes a similar passage as *De coitu*, but instead centers women's sexuality. The author writes: "This sickness happens in women because they are full of corrupt and poisonous menses, and therefore it is good that these women, whether young or old, often use men, so that this matter might be expelled."[91] Writing about suffocation of the womb, which will be discussed later, this text subscribes to the misogynistic notion that women were insatiably full of lust, and is similarly heteronormative as *De coitu*. The author again situates women's

[88] Jacqueline Murray, "Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, edited by Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 194.
[89] E. Ann Matter, "MFN Gay and Lesbian Issue," *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* 13 (1992): 1-3.
[90] Przybylo and Cooper, "Asexual Resonances," 303.
[91] Albertus Magnus and Barragan Nieto, trans., *El De Secretis Mulierum*, 460, "Hec autem egritudo contingit mulieribus quia multum habundat in eis de menstruo quod corruptum est et venenosum. Et ideo cautum est et bonum ut tales, quecumque fuerint sive iuvenes sive antique, sepe viris utantur, ut materia talis expellatur." (Translation: Lemay, 132).

sexual desire as natural and their sexual practices as healthful, if immoral. By stating that women "use" (*utantur*) men, which does not imply a mutually consenting relationship, he highlights women's supposedly poisonous, wicked natures. Unlike Constantinus or Albertus, who leave some space for differing experiences of sexual desire, Pseudo-Albert inflects the expectations of compulsory sexuality with misogyny, thus inciting greater suspicion towards women's presumed sexual desire.

Once again, it is Hildegard of Bingen who offered an alternative possibility. In *Causae et curae*, Hildegard writes about whom sex benefits and whom abstinence benefits, based on their humoral complexion, leaving immense space for variety of the experience of sexual desire. Interestingly, though, she spends more time discussing men's sexuality than women's, and there is little correlation between men's and women's sexuality within each humoral 'type.' While it is unclear whether these humoral 'types' were Hildegard's personal addition to the text, they are present in the only known surviving manuscript.[92] For choleric women, abstinence could lead to "suffering and weakness." Sanguine women similarly were "unhealthy without husbands," whereas melancholic women were "stronger and happier without husbands," and "made weak with husbands."[93] In *Causae et curae*, there is far more variation about whom sex benefits than in *De coitu* or *De secretis mulierum*, which testifies to Hildegard's resistance to the demands of compulsory sexuality. It is not atypical or an 'accident of nature' for melancholic women to enjoy abstinence. Hildegard naturalizes the variation of sexual desire, the opposite of medieval authors who claimed that all women were inherently lascivious. Sex is not universally beneficial

[92] Cadden, "It Takes All Kinds," 165; Hildegard, *Causae et curae*, 88, "et si maritis caruerunt, dolebunt in corpore."
[93] Cadden, "It Takes All Kinds," 163; Hildegard, *Causae et curae*, 87, "si autem maritos habent, sanae sunt"; Hildegard, *Causae et curae*, 89, "et ideo etiam saniores, fortiores et laetiores sunt absque maritis quam cum eis, quoniam, si cum maritis fuerint, debiles reddentur." (Translation: Throop, 73).

here, either. By contrast, while Constantinus left room for some variation, he did not leave anywhere near as much as Hildegard. He still referred to a relatively universal model of human sexuality when making most of his assumptions about sexual desire and the health benefits of sex, which contrasts heavily with Hildegard's model that has eight separate types, four for men and four for women, with various sexual practices associated with each one. Hildegard's mode of classification resists the naturalization of sexual desire and the norms of compulsory sexuality that naturalized it, instead putting forth a system in which asexual practices could also be 'normal.' This is not to say that Hildegard's system is 'perfect,' by any means; despite her resistance to medieval compulsory sexuality, she still naturalizes these categories.

One medieval medical category that overlapped with asexuality was impotence, which often meant the inability to participate in intercourse. Henry of Susa, a 13th-century canonist, drew on various medical discourses to suggest that impotence was a "defect," presumably of the body, which "suggests that the problem was seen not as a symptom of the body's inherent uncontrollability (as Augustine would have it), but instead as something that was not expected to happen if the man's body was working normally."[94] Though Henry was not a medical scholar or practitioner, legal discourses often allied with medical ones, particularly when discussing marriage. Frigidity in canon law was "always considered alongside impotence, as part of the same legal and medical problematic."[95] Both frigidity and impotence were typically issues within marriage, because marriage was the sanctioned, sacramentalized, place in which people were allowed to have sex in the later Middle Ages. These discourses minimize asexual possibilities

[94] Rider, "A Defect of the Mind or Body," 198.
[95] P. M. Cryle and Alison Moore, *Frigidity: an Intellectual History*. (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 25.

and medicalize them, situating them as a problem to be solved through either legal or medical intervention.

Frigiditas, a condition closely aligned with impotence, and meaning some sort of sexual coldness or inadequacy, was also seen as naturally occurring under a view of nature in which defect and imperfection was the norm, yet also fell under the jurisdiction of healthcare, which sought to normalize or cure these bodies. The urge to normalize the absence of lust, or the inability to have sex, is revealed through the medicalization of these states. As Ruth Karras puts it,

> Medical writers also recognized that the level of sex drive varied from individual to individual. This might be, but rarely was, extrapolated to argue that some people were more suited than others to chastity. More often, it was couched as a problem for the married, if one spouse's sex drive was much weaker than the other's, or if the lack of desire resulted in their being unable to conceive.[96]

The existence of anxieties over frigidity again reveals the existence of a medieval compulsory sexuality, as well as showing how the boundaries of compulsory sexuality were policed with medical treatments that sought to normalize the experience of sexual desire.

Many medical theorists subscribed to the Galenic and Aristotelian notion of women also emitting seed. In *De animalibus*, Albertus Magnus claimed that,

> It happens that some never have nocturnal emissions or ejaculate sperm during intercourse because of some disposition of their complexion, as we have said before. This accidental trait occurs more in women than in men since their bodies are less porous and the semen of intercourse only comes forth from them after long rubbing. Thus, when girls are chaste and avert their mind they live into old age since they have never been defiled nor have they experienced the pleasure of intercourse. This also occurs in men, but rarely. Some also suffer this because of some flaw in their complexion as we have said before. Such as these do not reproduce.[97]

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[96] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 68.

[97] Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus*, 678, "Quibusdam tamen accidit numquam pollui in somnis vel emittere sperma II coitus | propter dispositionem aliquam complexionis, sicut diximus iam ante: et hoc accidens plus accidit mulieribus quam viris, || eo quod corpora earum sunt minus porosa, et non egreditur ex ipsis semen coitus nisi per longam confricationem: et ideo quando puellae castae sunt et avertunt animum, stant usque ad antiquitatem ultimam, quod numquam

Because people who do not emit seed cannot reproduce, Albertus is likely referring to impotence or frigidity. Here, he makes room for the possibility that some women never experience emissions, meaning that varying embodied experiences of sex were acknowledged during this period. However, the text is ambiguous about whether the women who do not experience emissions also experience sexual desire. Superfluities still build up within them, but it takes far more effort to release them. Typically, it is the release of abundant material that causes pleasure, which suggests that people who do not either emit seed, or need to emit seed, experience sexual desire and pleasure atypically. Curiously, women's bodies are positioned as less porous in this text, which contrasts with many other medical understandings of women's bodies that position them as more porous, and thus weaker and more impressionable.[98] This divergence, though, is crucial to the internal logic of Albertus's argument. This physiological understanding of women's bodies bolsters his claim that women are full of harmful superfluities and that, because of their lack of porosity, they are harder to emit. If women are more likely to suffer this 'accidental' 'flaw' in their complexion, Albertus could be seen as making room for women's experience of asexuality. However, this portrayal ultimately polices compulsory sexuality, because it situates this experience as outside of the bounds of normalcy. This diverging understanding of women's physiology perhaps illustrates how vexing the issue of impotence and asexuality was for late medieval scholars. Though Albertus does not provide a cure, and is largely more interested in Aristotelian categorization and description, thus not medicalizing the condition, he still positions impotence as atypical within the schema of the natural world. He

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polluuntur neque experiuntur coitus delectationem: et hoc fit etiam in maribus, sed perraro. Quaedam autem habent hoc ex vitio complexionis, sicut ante diximus, et illae non generant." (Translation: Kitchell and Resnick, 778).

[98] Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 130.

cannot imagine an asexual possibility, even as he participated in the construction of necessary sexuality.

Albertus also points to an explanation for chaste women's potential asexuality, in that it is achieved by averting one's mind, presumably away from impure thoughts of sex ("*avertunt animum*"). Joan Cadden, in *Nothing Natural is Shameful*, argues that habit could influence a person's nature, which could provide an explanation for Albertus's claim.[99] Of course, this quotation also reinforces a sense of compulsory sexuality, in that he believes chaste women must have had something from which to avert their minds in the first place. Compulsory sexuality is the norm against which those who do not emit seed deviate, revealing how 'abnormal' asexual resonances were thought to be during this period, given that they were 'flaws' and 'accidents,' and ultimately reveals that women's sexual desire, or lack thereof, was a large concern for medieval medical and philosophical authors; they felt the need to naturalize sexual desire, and to marginalize the experiences of those whose desires diverged.

Cures for impotence show how asexuality was brought within the medical domain, revealing how medicine had the power to naturalize expectations of sexual desire. According to Cryle and Moore, women's failure to produce semen, and thus to produce children, was often attributed to "a blockage of some sort" and was not "the lack of any passion or heat."[100] This is inline with gendered understandings of sexuality, under which women were inherently more lustful, yet ignores the implications of cures for impotence, whose goal often was to stoke lust. While it is fair that many did not care about women's pleasure during sex, if desire and pleasure

[99] Cadden, *Nothing Natural Is Shameful*, 73.
[100] Cryle and Moore, *Frigidity*, 28.

was necessary to conceive a child, then it could not have been entirely insignificant.[101] If aphrodisiacs could cure impotence and frigidity, then they were fundamentally diseases of desire or of a dysfunction to express expected sexual desires.

Several recipes for 'curing' impotence occur in these medical discourses. Though impotence does not neatly overlap with asexuality, Constantinus Africanus situated it as a problem related to the absence of lust. He includes a recipe for "another electuary—none better can be found—for increasing lust. Take roots of garden carrots, discard the inner part and pound up the peels for a long time, [add] one pound of gum arabic, put it in a pan with one ounce of sesame oil and fry it…"[102] Here, impotence is directly tied to the experience of lust. There were many reasons why one might desire to have intercourse that have little to do with bodily pleasures, such as wanting to have children or to fit within social conventions that demand normalcy. These recipes functioned to normalize and medicalize the experience of sexual desire, and thus reveal an underlying compulsory sexuality. Humoral theory made room for exceptions, and thus people who did not experience sexual desire could reasonably exist under this framework, yet their asexuality hindered their ability to participate in institutions like marriage, in which sexual desire was expected. Medical 'cures' for impotence, or for any of the medieval diseases that can map onto asexual experiences, were a means of enforcing compulsory

[101] Julia Dresvina, "'I am not having what she's having': Female sexual (un)pleasure medieval and modern," in *Painful Pleasures: Sadomasochism in Medieval Cultures*, edited by Christopher Vaccaro (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022), 215.
[102] Constantinus, *Liber de coitu*, 162–64, "Aliud electuarium quo melius non invenitur ad augendam libidinem. Accipe radices dauci domestici et proice interiora et tere cortices diutissime, lib I arabicam et pone in frixorio stagnato et superadde 3 I olei sisamini et sic eam frige et postea superpone III lib. mellis et dimitte coqui, donec condensetur, et appone vitella ocorum V et commisce et post parum depone ab igne et supermitte galange 3 II, seminis eruce, piperis longi, cinamomi geriofilati et alithini, seminis herbe fefesse, seminis rape, seminis ceparum, seminis dauci ana 3 II et commisce diligenter et, si volueris tingere colorem, adde croce 3 II et postea reconde in vase vitreo et cum opus fuerit utere." (Translation: Wallis, 522).

sexuality. Medical remedies for impotence or frigidity are always couched in the belief that the desire to have sex is both natural and normal, particularly within marriage. The underlying goal of these recipes is to produce children, a task for which sexual intercourse is necessary. These recipes attempted to bring people who existed outside of conventional understandings of sexual desire back into the fold, allowing them to participate in these social institutions. While humoral complexions allow for individual experience, as attested to above by Albertus Magnus, only so much deviation was acceptable. Asexual modes of existing were deemed by these texts to be too far outside of these bounds, hence their medicalization.

Constantinus lists foods that both stimulated and dissipated desire. Those with an excess of desire were also treated as abnormal, much like those seen as having too little. The chickpea, for example "generates semen naturally by itself" because it "is very nutritious, it generates windiness, and it is warm and humid."[103] "Skink and 'wolf-testicles'—that is ragwort—rouse lust" and thus were suitable for aphrodisiac potions.[104] He also includes a brief description of some plants that restrict lust, stating, "more effective than these for constraining the appetite for intercourse is to cook lentils with lettuce seed, and drink the liquid: the appetite of lust is extinguished."[105] Constantinus presents both aphrodisiacs and anaphrodisiacs with a shocking lack of moral commentary. He simply presents them in the text and leaves the reader to do with his recipes what they will. Given that one of the goals of *De coitu* is to describe sexual dysfunction and medical interventions to solve these issues, Constantinus's cures further portray

[103] Constantinus, *Liber de coitu*, 146, "dicimus autem quia cicer tria possidet: nutrit enim multum, ventositatem generat et calidum est et humidum; et hoc solum naturaliter generat semen." (Translation: Wallis, 520).
[104] Constantinus, *Liber de coitu*, 146, "sunt eciam pocionibus apta stincus et testiculi vulpis, id est, satirion, quia accendit libidinem, ut stincus." (Translation: Wallis, 520).
[105] Constantinus, *Liber de coitu*, 156, "Hiis autem forcius est ad comprimendum appetitum coitus, si lenticule coquantur cum semine lactuce et elixatura eorum bibita fuerit: extinguitur appetitus libidinis." (Translation: Wallis, 521).

impotence as a malfunction of lust. Thus, Constantinus medicalizes a condition that correlates with asexuality and provides remedies to normalize the experience of sexual desire, at least so that married couples can fulfill their social role of producing children.

While Constantinus spends far more time discussing recipes that promote lust, Hildegard of Bingen largely writes about plants that quell lust. The medical and the religious are deeply entangled in Hildegard's writings, and moral prescriptions about sex are more present in her *Physica* than in *De coitu*. Java peppers, mandrake, dill, wild lettuce, bennet, myrrh, sardonyx, and sparrow hawk are all substances that extinguish lust. Removing lust has a positive connotation within this text, and often promotes health. This shows that Hildegard is far more concerned with people having an overabundance of lust, which would be far more of a problem within her monastic context, than those who can naturally exist chastely within a nunnery. Though Constantinus was a monk, as a physician he treated many people outside of the monastery who sought treatment for their lack of sexual desire. This is one potential explanation for Hildegard's differing focus, but she also adds more moralizing sentiments to lust than Constantinus does. She wrote that, "if anyone eats java pepper, it tempers the shameful ardor which is in him. It also brings joy to his mind and makes pure his thinking and disposition (as its beneficial, moderate heat extinguishes the unworthy passions of lust, in which fetid, slimy mucuses lie hidden, and clarifies a person's mind and his disposition by illuminating them)."[106] Lust has a "shameful ardor" (*indignus ardor*) that java pepper can mitigate, thus provoking a clarified mind free of such passions.[107] While in *Causae et curae*, Hildegard takes a more neutral

[106] Hildegard, *Physica*, 74, "Et si quis kubebo comedit, indignus ardor ille qui in ipso est temperatur…*q*uoniam utilis et temperatus calor eius indignos ardores libidinis, in quibus fetidi et limosi livores latent, extinguit, et mentem hominis et ingenium eius accendendo calefacit." (Translation: Throop, 27).
[107] Hildegard, *Physica*, 74, "quoniam utilis et temperatus calor eius indignos ardores libidinis, in quibus fetidi et limosi livores latent, extinguit." (Translation: Throop, 136).

stance about which types of people are best suited to various sexual lifestyles, lust is presented in this text as deeply harmful, perhaps to a person's body or perhaps to their soul. Her description of mascel has similar moralizations:

> The mascel has a useless and harmful heat. Its wood, sap, and leaves are of no use for a person, and are harmful to his health and dangerous for his libido, since it excites lust in a person. If a person eats its fruit, he will become sick from it. Its fire and smoke are not good for a person's health.[108]

It is unclear what a healthy libido looks like to Hildegard before it is harmed by mascel, but unnaturally stoking one's sexual desire is contrary to health. In the *Physica*, Hildegard consistently presents lust as negative and unhealthy, thus resisting the medical discourses that naturalize sexual desire while subscribing to religious discourses that position lust as a sin. Hildegard's complex relationship to compulsory sexuality is present in both of her texts discussed here, making asexual resonances evident through her contestatory stance. At the very least, she makes space for asexuality in a discourse where many medieval authors reinscribe compulsory sexuality anew.

In the medical construction of suffocation of the womb as a diagnostic category one can glimpse how asexuality was rendered into a defect. For example, *The Trotula* describes suffocation of the womb, a condition experienced by women who did not have sex, as a disease of sexual desire. It is characterized as a sickness of the menses and occurs when the womb is

[108] Hildegard, *Physica*, 217, "Masholtra / Mascel 2 inutilem et nocivum calorem habet, et etiam frigus quod habet inutile est, 3 et lignum et sucus et fructus inutilia sunt ad omnes usus hominis, 4 et omnia nociva sunt ad sanitatem eius et periculo- sa ad libidinem, quia in homine libidinem excitarent. Et si homo de fructu eius comederet, inde infirmaretur 5 propter inutilitatem caloris ipsius, quia rectos humores in homine destruit. 6 Sed et nec ignis nec fumus eius ad sanitatem hominis valet." (Translation: Throop, 136).

drawn upward and women abound with "corrupt semen" (*sperma nimium corruptum*) that is not released.[109] According *to The Trotula*, suffocation of the womb:

> Happens to women because corrupt semen abounds in them excessively, and it is converted into a poisonous nature. This happens to those women who do not use men, especially to widows who were accustomed to carnal commerce. It regularly comes upon virgins, too, when they reach the age of marriage and are not able to use men and when the semen abounds in them a lot, which Nature wishes to draw out by means of the male.[110]

This passage yet again naturalizes sex, claiming that removing these superfluities via intercourse is the best way for women to maintain health and to avoid this disease. This passage claims that suffocation of the womb mostly happens to women who abstain from intercourse, thus making it a disease of celibacy. Given that asexuality can map onto celibacy, suffocation of the womb can be construed as a medicalization of asexuality. If it is framed via compulsory sexuality as curable through sex, suffocation of the womb inscribes compulsory sexuality onto those who abstain from sex. The construction of this disease served to medicalize the asexual state that many unmarried and religious women occupied, thus making their sexuality subject to medical intervention. It could also be an effort to render asexuality under a system of compulsory sexuality that prevents its 'accurate' representation.

The treatises within *The Trotula* acknowledge that women who are vowed to chastity cannot marry and begin having regular sexual intercourse in order to cure themselves of this affliction. They thus provide a remedy for this case: rubbing the legs with laurel oil to apply to the nose "things which have a foul odor, such as galbanum, opoponax, castoreum, pitch, burnt

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[109] Monica Green, trans., *The Trotula*: *a Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001) 84–85, "Contingit autem hec[e] mulieribus quia sperma nimium corruptum habundat in eis, et in uenenosam[f] naturam conuertitur."

[110] Green, *The Trotula*, 84–85 "Contingit autem hoc[a] eis que uiris non utuntur, maxime uiduis que consueuerunt uti carnali commercio. Virginibus etiam[b] solet euenire cum ad annos[c] nubiles peruenerunt et uiris uti non possunt, et cum in eis multum habundet[d] sperma, quod per masculum natura uellet educere."

wool, burnt linen cloth, and burnt leather," and anointing the vagina with sweet-smelling oils and ointments. This procedure theoretically will "draw out and provoke the menses" (*menstrua attrahunt et prouocant*) and allow for their poisonous superfluities to be expelled.[111] A later section, "On the Preservation of Celibate Women and Widows," explains:

> There are some women to whom carnal intercourse is not permitted, sometimes because they are bound by a vow, sometimes because they are bound by religion, sometimes because they are widows, because to some women it is not permitted to take fruitful vows. These women, when they have desire to copulate and do not do so, incur grave illness. For such women, therefore, let there be made this remedy. Take some cotton and musk or pennyroyal oil and anoint it and put it in the vagina. And if you do not have such an oil, take trifera magna and dissolve it in a little warm wine, and with cotton or damp wool place it in the vagina. This both dissipates the desire and dulls the pain. Note that a pessary ought not be made lest the womb be damaged, for the mouth of the womb is joined to the vagina, like the lips to the mouth, unless, of course, conception occurs, for then the womb withdraws.[112]

The treatise acknowledges the social condition that prevented women from engaging in sexual activity. This cure allows for women to maintain their state of chastity while diminishing their desire. In that sense, the remedy artificially induces an asexual state that is idealized, though often viewed as impossible, for these women to achieve. Because it is not the chaste woman's 'natural' state, there is still the underlying implication that sexual desire was natural. Though the treatise does not argue that women vowed to chastity should marry to cure the suffocation of their wombs, some medical authorities did make this argument. For instance, Johannes Platearius

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[111] Green, *The Trotula*, 84–85.

[112] Green, *The Trotula*, 120-121, "Sunt autem quedam[c] mulieres quibus non committitur[d] carnale commercium, tum quia uoto,[e] tum quia religione tenentur, tum quia uidue sunt, quia quibusdam mulieribus non licet ad fecunda uota transire, que cum uoluntatem habeant coeundi et non coeunt,[g] grauem incurrunt egritudinem. Talibus igitur fiat tale remedium. Accipe bombacem et oleum musceleum uel pulegium[h] et inunge et uulue impone. Et si tale oleum non habeas, accipe triferam magnam,[i] et cum modico uino calido resolue, et cum bombace uel lana succida uulue inpone. Id[j] etiam bene castigat luxuriam et dolorem sedat. Nota quod pessarium non est faciendum ne matrix ledatur, quoniam os matricis[k] uulue[l] iungitur, ut ori labia, nisi[m] fiat conceptio, quoniam tunc retrahitur matrix."

recommends "sex and marriage as suitable, even preferable cures" for a suffocated womb.[113] He writes: "If she is a virgin or widow, counsel her to marry…; if she maintains a vow of chastity or continence, let this remedy be prepared."[114] Other authors recommend masturbation, or emitting nocturnally during her dreams in order to release the buildup of harmful superfluities.

The debates about both the treatment and significance of suffocation of the womb permeated other discourses beyond medical literature, and can be seen in practical descriptions of hagiographic texts. In Thomas of Cantimpré's hagiography of Margaret of Ypres, a 13th-century unaffiliated mystic, he describes how she experienced a grave illness which could only be assuaged by taking a husband.[115] Margaret resisted however, stating that "truly I am the more fully espoused to Christ because of this."[116] Given that this was written earlier in his life, Thomas's attitude towards religious women had not yet degraded. Regardless of what Margaret's illness was, the 'cure' was marriage. Margaret valiantly resisted these medical prescriptions informed by compulsory sexuality in order to maintain her vow of chastity, displacing the cause of this illness, her purported sexual desire, onto Christ. Dyan Elliott argues that a literal, scientific reading of the passage situates Margaret as a martyr for virginity, which ties back to statements from Albertus Magnus and other authors about the potential physical harms of virginity.[117] This passage also reveals how medical concepts infiltrate other discourses, imposing different norms of compulsory sexuality than those typically found in religious discourses, even

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[113] Green, *The Trotula,* 219, footnote 114.
[114] Green, *The Trotula*, 219, footnote 114, ''Si ex corrupto spermate fiat, si virum habeat. Si virgo est vel vidua consilium…ut nubat, si voto castitatis vel continentie teneatur, fiat hoc remedium: salgemma, nitrum pulverizentur et distemperentur cum aceto et aqua salsa, et bombix intincta imponatur, ex hoc enim fit quedam morditio.''
[115] Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell*, 196.
[116] Thomas of Cantimpré, *Vita Margarite de Ypris*, in "Frères Prêcheurs et movement dévot en Flandre au XIIIe siècle," edited by Gilles G. Meersseman, *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 18 (1948), PAGE, "QUOTE" (Translation: Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell*, 196).
[117] Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell,* 199.

when they do not always agree. Suffocation of the womb, in this case, was a symptom of the policing of compulsory sexuality, showing how Margaret's sheer force of will resisted the insatiable demands of her body.

Thomas appears to have reserved special interpretation for the bodies of the holy women he celebrated in hagiography; when writing later about religious women, he rendered their sexuality as poisonous and removed any possibility of holy asexuality. Over the course of his career, he became increasingly hostile and suspicious towards the religious women whom he glorified in his early hagiographic work.[118] In *Bonum universale de apibus*, Thomas's sermon manual, which used the metaphor of the beehive to describe his ideal society, and includes revised snippets from his earlier hagiographic work, albeit reinterpreted.[119] He claimed that sexual abstinence was harmful for women in *Bonum universale de apibus*, and that religious women in particular sought out holy men for lascivious purposes: "some women who wished to make spiritual sons out of select men, instead become carnal mothers, giving birth to carnal sons from their spiritual sons."[120] Furthermore, when discussing an instance in which a priest tried to kiss Lutgard without her consent, he claimed that:

> Even if one were to suppose that such a person was telling the truth and had somehow become impervious to the kiss, he still must consider the safety of the "fragile vessel" upon whom the kiss is bestowed. It is precisely women who are inexperienced sexually, devout women who have never known coitus, who are most likely to be affected because the sexual pleasure elicited increases proportionately with the lack of sexual contact.[121]

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[118] Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell*, 241.
[119] Thomas of Cantimpré and Julia Burkhardt (trans. and comp.), *Von Bienen lernen. Das* Bonum universale de apibus *des Thomas von Cantimpré als Gemeinschaftsentwurf: Analyse, Edition, Übersetzung, Kommentar* (Schnell und Steiner, 2020), 39.
[120] Thomas of Cantimpré and Burkhardt, *Bonum universale de apibus*, 668: 2, 30, 19, "heu vidimus et hoc frequenter, quod quidam secundum verbu apostoli spiritu ceperunt et carne consummati sunt." (Translation: Elliott, The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell, 205–6).
[121] Thomas of Cantimpré, *Das Bonum universale de apibus*, 668: 2, 30, 50, "Ponamus te in osculis libidine non moveri. Quis securum te faciet, non mentem saltem virginis, non vas fragilissimum, corpus in osculis lubricari? Scimus maxime talibus feminarum etiam devotarum affici corpora, que coitum non cognoverunt, et in hoc evidentissima ratio demonstratur, quia hoc

Elliott argues that "Thomas's naturalist views…assign women a higher degree of lust generally, but religiously inclined women in particular," because they have no outlet for their ever-mounting sexual desire.[122] In both of these passages, which respond to increasing suspicion over the relationships between male clerics and the religious women they tended to, Thomas argued that religious women were even more lecherous than laywomen, often seeking out and manipulating clerics in order to sinfully copulate with them.[123] He adds further negative connotations to religious women's interactions with men when he states, "many religious women in our day [who] follow the pernicious conduct of the hen: as soon as they produce an egg, they begin to cackle."[124] Instead of rendering his subjects in his later works as occupying a holy, asexual state, as he does Margaret, this possibility is foreclosed for the vast majority of religious women and their even greater lust, and they are instead depicted as sexual predators.

These texts demonstrate that suffocation of the womb was understood to come from an excess of sexual desire, whereas impotence comes from its absence. Both, however, reveal the underlying norms of compulsory sexuality working to govern women's sexuality and bodies. Impotence is figured in these texts as a deficiency of lust that manifests in genital malfunctioning. It is through the absence of sexual desire that asexual possibilities are revealed. Suffocation of the womb, in contrast, purportedly came from an excess of unreleased desire; however, since it was a disease of virgins, it can be understood as an attempt to explain the behavior of women who have chosen celibate, or asexual, lifestyles. Though viewing sexual desire from opposite ends of the spectrum, both reveal how late medieval medical discourses

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in illis maiori dilectione coitus minoratur, quod in istis non expertis quasi solum sine corruptione corporis licitum augmentatur." (Translation: Elliott, The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell, 208).

[122] Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell,* 211.

[123] Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell,* 241.

[124] Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell,* 210.

reckoned with asexuality. Medical discourses largely reinscribed compulsory sexuality, albeit a slightly different version than the one put forth by religious discourses. Both used the postlapsarian state of sin as a starting point, yet medical texts focus more on bodily defects than on morality. Ultimately, both of these conditions illustrate the urge to explain asexuality through physiological terms, as well as the urge to normalize asexuality by treating it as a disease to be cured.

Holy Women's Extraordinary Bodies

While Thomas of Cantimprè positioned religious women's bodies as even more lustful than the bodies of laywomen, many other late medieval hagiographers (including Thomas prior to writing *Bonum universale de apibus*) used the gendered medical language of feminine superfluity to represent their would-be saints as even holier. These authors constructed the possibility for a holy version of asexuality, in which their subjects transcend the limitations of postlapsarian bodies to occupy the original state of nature. Of course, this version only ends up reifying the logic of compulsory sexuality through the extraordinariness of their situations. Using Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's famous theorization of extraordinary bodies, which prioritizes representations of the body over any material reality of it, one could argue that representations of saintly women's bodies in the later Middle Ages reveal the interplay between medical and religious understandings of compulsory sexuality, which position asexual embodiment as ever out of reach and relegated to the realm of spiritual perfection.[125]

In late medieval Latin medical and religious texts, virgins were thought to have a somewhat distinct physiology from "corrupted" (*corrupte*) women, though they still fell within

[125] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

the category of 'woman.'[126] For example, the author of *De secretis mulierum* offers several physiological differences between chaste and unchaste women. He writes that:

> The urine of virgins is clear and lucid, sometimes white, sometimes sparkling. If the urine is of a golden color, clear and heavy, this is the sign of a temperament with an appetite for pleasure, however this is found in women who are not corrupted. Corrupted women have a muddy urine because of the rupture of the aforementioned skin, and male sperm appear at the bottom of this urine.[127]

The author also implies a difference not just between virgins and non-virgins, but between women who desire sex and those who do not. He further claims that "the signs of chastity are as follows: shame, modesty, fear, a faultless gait and speech, casting eyes down before men and the acts of men."[128] The author gives several differences between virginal and non-virginal women, such as the clarity of their urine, which demonstrates, in contrast, how virginity was written on the body.[129] Virginity did not on its own make for extraordinariness, because it could still be coupled with sexual temptation, but was one of many bodily signifiers that could combine to construct an extraordinary body.

Take, as an example, Clare of Montefalco (c. 1268–1308), an Augustinian abbess and mystic, most famous for her autopsy that revealed physical symbols of Christ's passion in her heart. Clare reportedly had an unusual body in other ways, as well. The appearance of these tangible signs of sanctity made her body extraordinary enough, but she was also implied to miraculously be unable to masturbate. She purportedly possessed a lock on her virginity "that

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[126] Albertus Magnus and Barragan Nieto, trans., *El De Secretis Mulierum*, 448.
[127] Albertus Magnus and Barragan Nieto, trans., *El De Secretis Mulierum*, 446-48, "Urine enim virginum lucide et clare sunt, et quandoque alba et quandoque glauca. Si autem fuerit aurei coloris, clara et ponderosa, animum coeundi significat. Et hoc est signum in corruptis. Corrupte enim mulieris urine turbide sunt propter fracturam pellicule que dicta est, et sperma viri apparet in fundo talis urine." (Translation: Lemay, 128).
[128] Albertus Magnus and Barragan Nieto, trans., *El De Secretis Mulierum*, 446, "Signa castitatis sunt hec, scilicet, pudor et verecundia cum casto incessu, loquele, gestus, cum despectu applicacionis ad virum." (Translation: Lemay, 128).
[129] Albertus Magnus and Barragan Nieto, trans., *El De Secretis Mulierum*, 446–448.

she was not able to do or emit those things which women commonly do or emit—even without the help of another creature."[130] Her own brother, Franciscus, was the physician who tested her virginity and found this lock. The bodily truth of this claim is insignificant; it is the representation of her body as extraordinarily different in medical terms that illustrates the logic of compulsory sexuality at work. Because the physician's testimony about Clare's virginity was deemed authoritative, it was used to help prove her case for sanctity at her canonization hearing.[131] This passage also employs the medical language of superfluity. It positions Clare's body as distinct precisely because she does need to emit superfluities, because she likely was understood to be perfectly balanced and did not have superfluities to emit. Medical language permeating texts on saintliness reveals the allyship between the two discourses in service of compulsory sexuality. Clare's extraordinary body was only extraordinary within this patriarchal logic of compulsory sexuality, both the physiological norms of compulsory sexuality, as well as the moralizing, religious ones that positioned her as purer and more free from sin.

Such medical language is evident as well in the *Vita* of Lutgard of Aywières, composed by Thomas of Cantimpré. Thomas purports that Lutgard experienced early menopause at age 28. Thomas states, "yet another witness was the termination of the nuisance with which God tamed pride in the sex of Eve, for she was only twenty-eight years old when these things are said to have happened to her"[132] By losing what was given to her by Eve, menstruation, Lutgard

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[130] *Il processo di canonizzazione di Chiara da Montefalco.* Edited by Enrico Menestò in *Quaderni del Centro per il collegamento degli studi medievali e umanistici nell'Università di Perugia* (Florence/Perugia: La Nuova Italia, 1984), 266, "in se habebat tantam clausuram virginitatis quod non poterat facere vel emictere ea que mulieres communiter faciunt ct cmictunt, etiam sine opcrc alicuius creature." (Translation: Elliott, *Fallen Bodies*, 46).

[131] Jenni Kuuliala, *Saints, Infirmity, and Community in the Late Middle Ages* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 133.

[132] "Vita Auct. Thoma Cantipratano Coaevo," in *Acta Sanctorum Volume 22: Jun. III, Antwerp* (Antwerp, 1701), Col. 0249A, "Testis cessatio vexationis fuit, qua Deus in Evæ sexu superbiam mitigavit: fuit autem annorum viginti & octo quando ei ista contigisse feruntur." (Translation:

symbolically returned to the idealized state of nature from before the Fall. Furthermore, she was no longer plagued by the need to purge herself of humoral excesses, which, much like Clare, implies that her body was no longer producing superfluities to be expelled. Regardless of whether the cessation of menstruation was a miracle or because of ascetic practices, for Thomas, her physiological state testified to her state of holiness. Coupled with Lutgard's absence of sexual desire following a moment of transformation, Thomas represents her body as occupying a holy, practically unattainable asexual state.

By losing the superfluities that characterize female physiology within these medical discourses, the women are arguably ungendered and unsexed. Perhaps it is more fitting to say, however, that they lose the negative associations of femininity prescribed to other women. Clare still possessed the virtue of virginity, which was treated as a more feminine virtue, and Lutgard was not necessarily implied to return to a male state of nature, just one before the curse of Eve. Their holiness was all the greater because of their weaker, feminine bodies, and thus depended on having such feminine bodies to overcome.[133] In late medieval hagiographic narratives, the gendering of compulsory sexuality serves to strengthen the case for holiness when women do manage to achieve a saintly status. Seeking "incremental change toward purifying the body was the duty of every Christian" in order to better commune with God, according to John P. Sexton.[134] Thus, the purified state of these women's bodies were a key feature that allowed them to fulfill their mystical relationship. The view from within these mystics' writings, however, is quite different. Many repeatedly emphasize their own unworthiness and impurity. Christina

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Barbara Newman, and Margot H. King, *Thomas of Cantimpré: The Collected Saints' Lives: Abbot John of Cantimpré, Christina the Astonishing, Margaret of Ypres, and Lutgard of Aywières* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols: 2008), 256).

[133] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 57.

[134] Sexton, "Atypical Bodies," 26.

VanDyke asserts that the "theology of disability" presented in these mystical texts challenges traditional models of human perfection, changing the goal from attaining a purified state to embracing imperfection.[135]

The question of religious women's extraordinary, asexual bodies will be taken up further in a later chapter. What is important to note here is how medical language was used to represent the superhuman bodies of religious women. Representations of these bodies, due to their extraordinariness, were positioned as outside of the realm of typical human achievement. Clare is explicitly described as being able to do things "which women commonly do," which positions her as physiologically out of step from other women.[136] Her extraordinariness in fact depended on the ordinariness, sinfulness, and sexuality of other women. Ultimately, these representations were in the service of compulsory sexuality, and present a vision of asexuality that reifies normative sexuality.

Conclusion: Asexual Oppositions

Medieval asexualities existed in peculiar relation to both dominant medical and religious discourses. There was both a dominant form of asexuality, idealized as a state that the supremely holy can occupy that can only exist in opposition to the postlapsarian state of imperfection, that can be contrasted with a subversive, lived-in asexuality. The compulsory sexuality associated with being (mostly) unable to escape this corporeal state of sin both differs, and is entangled with the medical view, under which experiencing and acting on sexual desire is naturalized, regardless

[135] Christina VanDyke, "Taking the 'Dis' out of Disability: Martyers, Mothers, and Mystics in the Middle Ages," in *Disability in Medieval Christian Philosophy and Theology* (Routledge: 2020), 207.
[136] *Il processo di canonizzazione di Chiara da Montefalco*, edited by Enrico Menestò, Quaderni del Centro per il collegamento degli studi medievali e umanistici nell'Università di Perugia (Florence/Perugia: La Nuova Italia, 1984).

of social customs. While of course these two discourses operated differently, they were not founded upon as disparate foundations as their claims make it seem. They provide varying prescriptions about how to approach sex and sexuality, but they are both imbricated in the same religious norms that posited women as inherently more lustful and sinful than men. Compulsory sexuality in the Middle Ages was tied into both heteronormativity and patriarchy. It was always policed alongside procreative sexual activities and employs dominant misogynistic constructions of women's physiology to this aim.

However, this discourse existed in necessary tension with the embodied experience. Hildegard of Bingen, through her subversion of the ideas that women are more lustful than men, resisted the demands of compulsory sexuality. Medieval asexualities must always be read in tandem with misogyny and other axes of oppression. Importantly, the spirituality of many of these women whose lives resonate with asexuality were met with increasing hostility and distrust.[137] Misogynistic discourses, such as *De secretis mulierum*, used the norms of compulsory sexuality to justify women's inferiority and inbuilt wickedness, as well as policing both gender and sexuality.

Simone Chess argues that it is reductive to link asexuality and asexual identities purely to their medicalized, 19th-century origins.[138] Though this chapter has largely examined medical discourses, it hopefully has made clear that these discourses exist in opposition to actual, embodied asexual experiences. These texts show how relatively elite medieval authors made sense of asexual possibilities, often choosing to render them as outside the realm of possibility for 'typical' bodies. It is difficult, then, when writing about asexuality, not to fall into the trap of

[137] Elliott, *Proving Woman*; Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*.
[138] Simone Chess, "Early Modern Asexuality and Performance," Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies Roundtable, 15 October 2020.

Foucauldian obsession with sex. However, in order to understand the logic of asexuality, and the hints of lived asexual experiences in the past, it is crucial to understand the logic of compulsory sexuality which determined their absence in the archive. As Ela Przyyblo and Danielle Cooper argue, "whenever sexuality is at the heart of literary, historical, and theoretical analysis, so is asexuality."[139] These texts rarely mention asexual possibilities directly, and when they do, it is formulated through the language of accident, defect, or sanctity. Another issue is that these texts are centered around the language of sexual desire. Reading for a version of asexuality as something other than absence within these medical discourses is tricky, unless one wants to risk reaffirming the medieval religious binary of purity/sin. Przybylo further questions, "what is lost when we hinge asexuality, as well as other sexual orientations, to the mechanism of 'attraction'?"[140] These sources do not leave room for other modes of relating, and put forth a binary division between sexuality and asexuality. In order to read asexuality as something other than absence, asexual resonances must be traced in moments of resistance to these discourses. This chapter has sought to demonstrate the existence of a logic of compulsory sexuality within late medieval medical and natural philosophical discourses, thus tracing the existence of compulsory sexuality, and an asexual existence that opposes it, farther than either its 19th-century medicalization or Protestant anxieties.[141] Queer modes of being, it seems, have deep histories.

[139] Przybylo and Cooper, "Asexual Resonances," 303.
[140] Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics,* 3.
[141] Blake, Brush, Chess, Chung, Clifford, and O'Mara, "Early Modern Asexuality and Performance."

CHAPTER 2:
ASEXUALITY IN THE VISIONS AND *VITAE* OF CHRISTIAN HOLY WOMEN

Asexuality was crucial to constructing the sanctity of many late medieval holy women, as is revealed in the remarks of the 14th-century witness who claimed that "he had never known anyone as much a stranger to carnal emotion as" Gertrude of Helfta.[142] Late medieval hagiographies often present female saints, who possess the virtues of chastity and virginity, as overcoming sexual desire; however, this passage reveals that some holy women were perceived as having no sexual desire to overcome. Thus, these holy figures did not necessarily choose chastity or virginity as an act of athletic, heroic asceticism, but as a preference based around bodily and affective fulfillments. Gertrude's estrangement from carnal emotions rings of asexuality, that is, it is an "asexual resonance," meaning "a certain texture, sensibility, or implication of asexuality that shifts the focus from asexual identities to asexual traces, touches, instances."[143] Because of Cooper and Przybylo's resistance to the 'nonchoice' of sexuality, their model is particularly useful for the study of the Middle Ages because virginity and chastity can be read through an asexual lens. There are no moments of explicit self-declaration in these sources, nor are there the identity categories of the present, but that does not mean that asexual embodiment was impossible prior to the category's invention. By looking for resonances instead of declarative statements of identity, Cooper and Przybylo highlight the subversive potentials of asexuality that exist outside of the prescriptive boundaries of the modern category. Given that the current category of asexuality is just as culturally contingent as any other category, it does not

[142] Gertrude of Helfta, *Legatus divinae pietatis*, translated and compiled by Pierre Doyére in *Œuvres Spirituelles: Le Héraut, Livres I et II* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1968), 162, "quod scilicet nunquam hominem cognovisset a quo omnis carnalis commotio esset tam penitus aliena sicut ab ista." (Translation: Gertrude of Helfta and Alexandra Barratt, *The Herald of God's Loving Kindness: Books One and Two* (Kalamazoo, Mich: Cistercian Publications, 1991), 64).
[143] Przybylo and Cooper, "Asexual Resonances," 304.

neatly map onto the past; thus, an expanded definition, one which is 'queered,' leaves room for readings of late medieval women's experiences, and the textual representations of such experiences.[144]

What I am terming "holy asexuality" is the medieval notion that an asexual state, or rather the absence of sexual desire, was only possible after reaching spiritual perfection which allowed a holy woman to transcend the imperfect bodily condition after the Fall. It is the result of heightened state of holiness, brought about through both intense spiritual athleticism and God's divine grace. While asexuality need not be defined by absence, the logic of holy asexuality depends upon it. Holy asexuality, thus, existed in a necessary binary with compulsory sexuality, each one imaginable through its supposed opposite. Holy asexuality was citational and performed as the idealized opposite of the Fallen state.[145] Hagiographical literature reinforced and defined this category, showing what should be cited. Of course, this was not always what mattered to holy women within their own writings, but the hagiographical iteration of holy asexuality reveals the broader cultural imagining of asexual embodiment, making sense of it through available religious tropes.

In her 1991 essay "Saints and Sex, c. 500–1100: Striding Down the Nettled Path of Life," Jane Tibbetts Schulenberg rightly points out that even though the saints she discusses are virginal, the texts still have everything to do with sex; in their effort to portray the virginity and virtue of their subject, these texts inevitably focus on sex. Theorists Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper flip this concept on its head, arguing that where there is the sexual, there is always the looming asexual possibility, thus questioning the hegemony of compulsory sexuality to make

[144] Przybylo and Cooper, "Asexual Resonances," 304.
[145] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 13.

space for such asexual resonances. This becomes apparent in Christian theology, preoccupied as it is with sexual desire and sin. If the opposite did not exist, then it need not be specified. This chapter aims to take these resonances seriously and to not presume that there is some repressed, latent sexuality underlying every reference to asexuality. The question is, how can scholars read resonances of asexuality within these Christian sources—sources that both glorify and celebrate virginity? How does asexuality actually resist the restrictive sexual preoccupations of holy asexuality?

This chapter uses the hagiographies of Gertrude of Helfta, Christina of Hane, Margaret of Ypres, and Lutgard of Aywierès, as well as the revelations of Gertrude and Margaret Ebner to contrast the imposed logic of holy asexuality with the experience of its embodiment. These hagiographies rely on a series of tropes, such as the moment of transformation and the notion of purity of heart, to portray their subjects as embodying a state of holy asexuality. Though asexual embodiment is glimpsed in this hagiographical moment with Gertrude, the texts written by women about their own mystical experiences are better conduits for viewing this than hagiographies. These holy women's self-presentation is both holy and transgressive, resisting the demands of compulsory sexuality placed upon them by hagiographers.

Representations of Virginal Asexuality in Hagiography

Virginity and chastity take many forms in hagiography, often overlapping and bolstering claims of the holy woman's holy asexuality. This overlap ultimately reveals how asexuality became a culturally charged virtue of its own, rather than a morally neutral set of bodily and affective desires. Even though virginity was a visible option for women, and indeed one which was deemed far holier and 'superior,' it was not reasonably expected for every woman to choose

to perform a virginal identity.[146] Marriage, fallen though it may be, was the "normal" expectation for most women.[147] There was no homogenous view of what chastity and virginity entailed during this period. Various medieval scholars had their own definitions which did not necessarily speak to the realities of what the category of virginity might have meant to non-elites. Pierre J. Payer, in *The Bridling of Desire*, claims that "in spite of efforts to sort out the vocabulary of the virtues that were particularly concerned with sexual matters, the terms *continentia* (continence) and *castitas* (chastity) continued to lack determined and settled definitions."[148] Other such terms remained contested as well. Karras describes the differences between chastity, virginity, celibacy, and abstinence; chastity, for example, could mean either the absence of sexual activity, or the absence only of *illicit* sexual activity.[149] Celibacy could also mean the unmarried state, with or without practicing abstinence.[150] As Sarah Salih rightly points out, through "virginity's challenge to stable gender identity," it "is always itself multiple and unstable."[151] No single iteration of virginity prevailed throughout this period, and each performance of virginity, though perhaps echoing earlier performances of cultural motifs, embodies this multiplicity.

Holy asexuality often corresponds to an extreme state of virginity in hagiographies. As Sarah Salih asserts, while "several male saints are approvingly referred to as chaste or virginal…their sexual status is rarely the locus of their sanctity, as is often the case with women."[152] Virginity and chastity, and the accompanying suggestion of asexuality, are thus key to women's performance and representation of sanctity. One such iteration of chastity is depicted

[146] Sauer, "The Expected Ideal," 47–48.
[147] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 38.
[148] Payer, *Bridling of Desire*, 154.
[149] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 37–38.
[150] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 37–38.
[151] Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 15.
[152] Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 17.

in the revelations of Margaret Ebner (1291–1351), a German Dominican nun from the convent of Maria Medingen in Swabia. Her revelations purportedly came from her own pen and are largely drawn from her letters to her confessor, Henry of Nordlingen. Though there is debate over whether Ebner was truly the author of this text, in its relatively simplistic language and first-person narration, it reveals her mystical relationship with Christ.[153] Ebner's chastity, one of her many virtues, is purportedly on the same level as the Virgin Mary, the most famed virgin in the Latin West; during one of her mystical unions with Christ, he tells her that his "mother was a pure and chaste maiden, and because of that you should not forget that you have received your purity from all my sufferings."[154] Later in the vision, Ebner writes that "I thought to myself, there is no one more worthy than his tender mother. Then I was answered by my beloved Lord: 'Whosoever does the will of my Father is father and mother to me,'" thus placing Ebner on a level roughly equivalent to Mary.[155] Since her chastity was comparable to that of the Virgin Mary, who was born without the taint of original sin and concupiscence, Ebner is ascribed a state of holy asexuality.

Christina of Hane is also described as embodying exemplary virginal virtues. Christina (c. 1269–1292) is the only known female Premonstratensian mystic. She resided at a convent in

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[153] Susanne Bürkle, "Die Offenbarungen der Margareta Ebner: Rhetorik der Weiblichkeit und der autobiographische Pakt," in Weibliche Rede: Rhetorik der Weiblichkeit. Edited by Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf and Doerte Bischoff, 79–102. Germany: Rombach Druck- und Verlagshaus, 2003.

[154] Margaret Ebner, *Offenbarungen*, edited and compiled by Philipp Strauch in *Margaretha Ebner und Heinrich von Nördlingen: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der deutschen Mystik* (Freiburg, Mohr, 1882), 86, "nu was min muoter diu aller rainst und luterst magt, und mag es da von dir nit geraten, daz du alle din rainkait hast enphangen usse allem minen liden." (Translation: Margaret Ebner and Leonard P. Hindsley, trans., *Margaret Ebner, Major Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 132).

[155] Ebner and Strauch, *Offenbarungen*, 86–87, "so antwurt ich in mir selber, ez wer niemen wirdiger denn sin zertiu mutoer, so war mir von minem geminten herren geantwurt: 'wer den willen mins vaters tuot, der is min vater und min muoter.'" (Translation: Hindsley, 132).

Hane, in what is now the Rhineland-Palatinate, and though she was a canonness and had not taken full vows, she lived an enclosed life that closely resembled that of a nun during this period. Her life was characterized by her unique asceticism and almost heretical competition with the Virgin Mary. She is almost exclusively referred to as "this virgin" (*jonffrauwe*), making virginity one of her chief characteristics and central to how her sanctity is represented in this text.[156] According to Schulenburg, "particularly for female saints, the status of *virgo intacta* was nearly a prerequisite for sanctity," which helps to explain the author's use of this term as Christina's primary identifier.[157] Christina's hagiographer emphasizes her virginity when describing her as "truly a second Esther, who was raised for the real Xerxes among other virgins, and was kept in the house called the virgins' house so as to be adorned with perfect virtues and to be joined to him in a high and sacred love."[158] Similarly to the Marian comparisons made by Ebner, this passage functions to elevate Christina's chastity as practically divine. This passage is again marked by its repeated use of the term "*jonffrauwe*," again revealing its significance to the construction of her sanctity.

Christina's comparison to Mary in her text verges on competitive. This is particularly clear when she is enthroned as the queen of Heaven in a Marian fashion, an image which Racha Kirakosian argues positions Christina as equivalent to, if not greater, than Mary.[159] In a vision

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[156] *Die Vita der Christina Von Hane*, edited by Racha Kirakosian in *Die Vita der Christina Von Hane: Untersuchung und Edition* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2017), 283. (Translation: Racha Kirakosian as *The Life of Christina of Hane* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 1.)
[157] Schulenburg, "Saints and Sex," 204.
[158] Kirakosian, *Die Vita der Christina von Hane*, 283, "Sie ist woil die ander Hester, die dem gewaren Assuero vnder anderen jonffrauwen getzogen vnd gehalten wart yn dem husße, daz hieße der jonffrauwen huße, das sye yme getzirt myt gantzer doegenden vnd myt heilger hoger lyebden yme zo gelacht wurde." (Translation: Kirakosian, 1).
[159] Kirakosian, trans., *The Life of Christina of Hane*, ix; Kirakosian, *Die Vita der Christian von Hane*, 321–22, "Dar na quam der lyebhaber vnd kroynet sy myt iiij cronen: zo dem irsten myt der cronen der gerechticheit vnd myt der cronen gotlicher dogent vnd myt der cronen gotlicher wyßheit vnd myt der cronen gotlicher lyebden. Sehent, wie woillenkomenclichen sy gezert ist

relayed through the *vita*, Christ told Christina that she had never sinned, which given that this text endorses the idea that Mary was not born without original sin, Christina is placed on a similar plane as Mary.[160] However, Christina clearly viscerally struggled with sexual temptation, as attested to earlier in her *vita*, which both contradicts and complicates these claims.[161] One possibility is that since Christina never acted on any lustful thoughts, they were not interpreted as fully realized sins. This claim was made after Christina was adorned with perfect virtues, though, which could mean that her prior sins were absolved—purged by God in order for her to truly comprehend His divinity.

Gertrude of Helfta (1256–c. 1302), is described as possessing similarly glowing virtues as Christina and Margaret, and asexual resonances are a marked feature of her chastity. Gertrude was a German Benedictine nun from the convent of Helfta, in Saxony, who was known for her early devotion to the Sacred Heart. Two surviving works from her revelations, *The Herald of God's Loving-Kindness*, are discussed in this chapter. Book I was written by a fellow Helfta nun whom Alexandra Barratt calls 'Sister N,' whereas Book II was written by Gertrude herself. Gertrude's revelations often take a more reasoned approach to devotion, with less of the ecstaticism expected from mystics during this time.[162] In Book I, Chapter 9 of *The Herald of God's Loving Kindness*, entitled "Her Wonderful Chastity," Gertrude's hagiographer describes

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gewest yn allen dogenden vnd wie hytzich sy ist geweste entphenget yn der gotlicher lyebden. Dar vmb er yr hait geloifft zo geben die mytgeselschafft der ix chore der engel, vff daz sie yn stediger hytzsten der lyebden alwege sultde verlyben ynne gebenedienden myt den furygen engelen." (Translation: Kirakosian, 61).

[160] Kirakosian, trans., *The Life of Christina of Hane*, xxix; Kirakosian, *Die Vita der Christian von Hane*, 310, "Jch verzijgen dyr alle dyn sunden. Jch zegen dich zo myr. Jch bestedigen dich yn myr selber, als wer iß sach, dastu noch nye eyn hettes gesundiget. Vnd vber dyß sal ich dyr geben eyn vber fludige maiß." (Translation: Kirakosian, 41).

[161] Kirakosian, *Die Vita der Christian von Hane*, 290–92, "Dar vmb dryeffe sie van yre alle sunden vnd orsachen der sunden, daz ist alle stetde vnd lude vnd alle sachen, die yr moichten syn eyn orsache zo der bekarungen." (Translation: Kirakosian, 56).

[162] Barratt, *The Herald of God's Loving Kindness*.

the virtuousness of her chastity. The author remarks that so great was her abstention that "chastity too, which Saint Bernard set in the heaven of sanctity as its moon, shone brightly in her. She used to say, with complete conviction, that in all her life she had never looked at a man's face with such interest as to know anything about its appearance."[163] Of course, this passage reveals underlying heteronormative assumptions, presuming that Gertrude would only be capable of feeling lust towards a man. However, it also reveals the possibility that Gertrude did not experience lust in general; by not looking at a man's face with interest, or at all, her hagiographer paints a picture of a person utterly unconcerned with matters of the flesh, and thus approximating if not achieving a state of saintly perfection. The author also invokes other witnesses to her chastity, with one person claiming that "he had never known anyone as much a stranger to carnal emotion as she was."[164] Even by modern sensibilities this passage screams asexuality. Lust was markedly absent from Gertrude's experience of chastity, which could not be said for people like Christina whose struggle with temptation was palpable.

Late medieval virginity was understood in many ways, but one crucial distinction was between bodily and spiritual virginity. Payer argues that for many scholars, "the essence of virginity is located squarely in the will and has nothing necessarily to do with the presence or absence of physical lesion in the genitals."[165] As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the feminine gendered postlapsarian body was presumed to have sexual desire by many medieval authors. Thus, spiritual virginity centered around mental control over the body, with the tension

[163] Gertrude of Helfta and Doyére, *Legatus divinae pietatis*, 160, "Continentia etiam, quam beatus Bernardus ponit loco lunae, in ista perlucide emicuit; quod constantissime fatebatur se in omni vita sua nunquam alicujus viri faciem ita curiose vidisse, quod aliquid sciret de forma illius." (Translation: Barratt, 63).
[164] Gertrude of Helfta, *Legatus divinae pietatis*, trans. and comp. by Doyére in *Œuvres Spirituelles*, 162, "quod scilicet nunquam hominem cognovisset a quo omnis carnalis commotio esset tam penitus aliena sicut ab ista." (Translation: Barratt 64).
[165] Payer, *Bridling of Desire*, 163.

lying "between a constructed, immutable chastity and an equally constructed, mutable body."[166] When discussing the issue of whether women who had been sexually assaulted were still virgins, though there was again much debate, "the overriding principle is the spiritual, voluntary nature of virginity, which cannot be taken away against one's will or outside of one's will," prevailed.[167] This form of bodily control is read as virginity, whereas holy asexuality refers to when a holy woman's spiritual virginity was to such a high degree that she utterly transcended the body's supposedly universal demands.

Augustine relied on the distinction between body and soul to define virginity, claiming it was "the perpetual meditation on incorruption in corruptible flesh," thus making the will the driving force behind virginity.[168] Writing in the 13th-century, Albertus Magnus positioned virginity similarly to Augustine, with the "integrity of the flesh witnessing to incorruption of the mind."[169] Both of these definitions display the divide between the body and the soul, but what they ultimately reveal is that the source of virginity was thought to stem not from the body but the mind. Kathleen Coyne Kelly writes that, "there is no better example of the body exceeding its own physical boundaries than that of virginity, which exists on the cusp between the body and culture. By definition, virginity is an abstraction greater than the sum of body parts."[170] Though intrinsically tied to the body, virginity was clearly about more than whether a person's hymen was intact—it was a spiritual state, one that was often seen as "preferable to all others."[171] The mind was what had the power to silence the temptations of the flesh, if those temptations even existed, and in that silencing, which was often both chosen and rigorously worked towards, is a

[166] Payer, *Bridling of Desire*, 162; Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity*, 7.
[167] Payer, *Bridling of Desire*, 165.
[168] Payer, *Bridling of Desire*, 162; Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 25–26.
[169] Payer, *Bridling of Desire*, 163.
[170] Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity*, 16.
[171] Payer, *Bridling of Desire*, 161.

resonance of asexuality. The body can signify spiritual virginity, particularly when a holy woman's body remains inviolate after death, but the body is not the actual locus of virginity. For the five holy women in this chapter, their virginity reveals far more about their inner spiritual lives than it does about their bodies.

The distinction between bodily and spiritual virginity is evident in the case of Margaret of Ypres (1216–1237), an unaffiliated religious person living near Liège. She has alternatively been labeled as a Dominican penitent or a beguine, but her lifestyle ultimately resists such prescriptive categorization.[172] Her *vita* was written by Thomas of Cantimpré, a Flemish friar, author, and theologian. He claimed that Margaret "never relaxed the vigilance of her mind to commit any mortal sin."[173] In this passage, Margaret's mind is the force that holds sin, particularly sexual temptation, at bay. The force of a person's will, perhaps aided by divine grace, was far more significant than the reality of any physical state.

Margaret Ebner's revelations also rely on the binary between body and soul to construct her transformation towards a state of holy asexuality. Characteristically of Rhenish mysticism, her text engaged with a process "in which the individual turns from personal sinfulness to goodness, from the allure of the things of the world to enjoyment of the things of heaven, from the devil to God. This process entails a life of asceticism, in which the body is tamed by the spirit and the human heart is set on Christ and the things above."[174] Core to this transformation was the subordination of the body, both regarding hunger, sleep, and sex, which aligns with the conceptual distinction between bodily and spiritual virginity. In her *Pater Noster*, Ebner asks God, "Lord, in your highest love and your greatest and sweetest mercy, how they have ever

[172] Newman, and King, "Introduction," in *Thomas of Cantimpré: the Collected Saints' Lives*, 38.
[173] Thomas of Cantimpré, *Vita Margarite de Ypris*, 107, "numquam eam ad aliquod mortale intentum animum relaxasse." (Translation: Newman and King, 164).
[174] Hindsley and Schmidt, "Introduction," in *Margaret Ebner, Major Works*, 69.

flowed from your eternal Godhead, from heaven to earth, I ask you to preserve our souls in uprightness, our hearts in purity, our lives in true innocence, and all our desires and all our thoughts for our whole life in pure truth," with pure truth in this case referring to knowledge of the Lord.[175] Leonard P. Hindley and Margo Schmidt argue her *Pater Noster* is the most "concise expression of her prayer concerns," that conveyed deep concern over the purity of her soul.[176] In this prayer, Ebner asks not for physical purity but spiritual purity. Her focus is far more on things related to her soul—spiritual uprightness, purity of heart, etc.—which in turn could preserve the purity of her body. She also asks to live her life in pure innocence, which implies innocence of sin. As Michelle Sauer argues, virginity in its perfect form could entail a lack of sexual awareness altogether, something that, if God preserved Ebner's 'innocence,' she similarly may not possess.[177] Ultimately, her concern for soul, and thus the subordination of both her body and other worldly affairs, reveals a desire for holy asexuality in that she wishes for her thoughts and desires, both processes of the mind, to remain innocent and pure, thus implying her desire to remain free of lust.

Ebner's spirituality progressed beyond the limits of her body. In one of her ecstatic states, she claimed that Christ "gave me such great lightness of body that I did not perceive whether I myself even possessed a body," thus fully transcending the needs and limitations that it placed upon her.[178] Without her body, whose needs and desires in this case were the cause of her

[175] Ebner and Strauch, *Offenbarungen*, 83, "herre, in din aller höhst minne und din aller gröst und süezzest derbarmherzekeit, so siu von diner ewigen gothait ie geflozze von himelrich uf ertrich, so enphilh ich dir ze beüeten in luterket unser sel, in rainkait inseriu herzen, in warr unschulde unser leben und die lutern warhet aller unser begirde und aller unser mainunge und alles unser leben." (Translation: Hindsley, 130).
[176] Hindsley and Schmidt, "Introduction," in *Margaret Ebner, Major Works*, 64.
[177] Sauer, "The Expected Ideal: Marriage and Virginity," 48.
[178] Ebner and Strauch, *Offenbarungen*, 26, "nun waiss das min edliu warheit wol, Jhesus Cristus, daz er mir von siner güet do gab so grozz gerinkait mins libes, daz ich niht enphant, ob ich miu selbes lib truog" (Translation: Hindsley, 99).

spiritual struggles and temptations, lust would not be physically possible. The body, particularly women's bodies, were associated with lust, so transgressing its boundaries entailed the potential elimination of its 'inherent' desires.[179] This is also part of Ebner's transformation from sin to righteousness, and from worldly desires to heavenly meditations. Her transcendence of the body reveals the importance of this binary opposition to some medieval thinkers. Without the demands of the body, lust was rendered outside of the possibility of experience for Ebner, and through her experience of the absence of lust, she presented herself as a holier, more saintly figure—closer to the realm of God and free from such spiritual imperfections.

The holy asexuality that Ebner achieved as she moved away from her body ironically made bodily asexuality impossible. Holy asexuality, much like virginity, relies on the body as a signifier of holiness yet repudiates it as a site of spiritual possibilities. In this way, holy asexuality obscures the embodiment of asexuality, because holy asexuality relies on its binary relationship with compulsory sexuality, and the complementary binary of the body and soul. By rendering herself as a holy asexual, Ebner potentially legitimated her bodily experiences, but only by framing them as a product of her spiritual development. In many other ways, however, Ebner's account of her spiritual journey is tied to her embodiment; her disabled body is what enabled her communion with God and made space for spiritual contemplation, and the absence of sexual desire. Her experience of holy asexuality depended upon the repudiation of the body, and her differing deployment of her body when rendering her spirituality highlights how holy asexuality could be adopted as a strategy of survival for holy women whose bodily desires aligned with the goals of Christian monastic practice.

[179] Caciola, *Discerning Spirits,* 133.

The heart, another site riddled with both bodily and spiritual interpretations of virginity, reflects significant asexual resonances, which is clear when Gertrude's hagiographer describes how Christ took up residence in her heart due to the extreme purity of her body and chastity. This residency is described in Chapter 11 of Book I, where her hagiographer writes, "among her many glowing virtues, shining like twinkling stars, with which the Lord had made her extraordinarily beautiful as a dwelling-place for himself."[180] This residency, both physical and metaphorical, is only possible through extreme purity. Purity is a necessary precondition for this level of sanctity, but it is not spontaneously developed due to the Fallen state of the body; it rather must be both gifted by God and actively cultivated under the logic of holy asexuality. The physical presence of Christ within holy women's hearts suggests ways that hagiographers were making sense of asexuality under the regime of compulsory sexuality, and perhaps how holy women themselves understood their own asexual embodiment. Yet again, these tropes hinge the experience of holy asexuality upon divine intervention, thus precluding the possibility of simply existing asexually and ultimately reinforcing the norms of compulsory sexuality within this discursive context.

The less dramatic trope of 'purity of heart' similarly contains asexual resonances tied to virginity. However, this trope still yokes asexuality to a morally charged spiritual state, invoking a version of holy asexuality that obscures other forms of asexual embodiment. For Christina of Hane's hagiographer, her "purity of heart" is core to the performance of sanctity represented in the text. The author devotes a significant portion of the text to portraying the extent of her purity, which is partly accomplished through referring to her constantly as *jonffrauwe,* or "this virgin," a

[180] Gertrude of Helfta and Doyére, *Legatus divinae pietatis*, 170, "Hinc inter multa rutilantium virtutum quasi micantium stellarum claritatem quibus eam Dominus mirifice ad inhabitandum sibi decoraverat." (Translation: Barratt, 70).

state marked by its purported purity. This purity is granted to her by Christ, who "said to her soul, 'I have erected your life with complete humility. I have adorned you with complete purity.'"[181] Therefore, while she would not have gained this purity without her ascetic endeavors and desire to obtain it, it was ultimately unattainable without the intervention of Christ. Her heart's purity is also the reason why it is inhabitable by Christ, much like for Gertrude.[182] Were it not for both her endeavor to be virtuous and, as a result, gaining total purity through divine grace, He would not be able to take up residence within her heart. Her *vita* concludes with the line, "the soul which beholds God must be dead to all stains of sin,"[183] revealing how central Christina's purity is to the representation of her sanctity. Without a pure heart, and its accompanying lack of sexual temptation, her mystical relationship with Jesus would have been impossible. Holy asexuality such as that Christina exemplifies is of course an asexual *resonance* and is a way of reading asexuality in the past, yet its binary relationship with compulsory sexuality complicates the matter. Christina could only become pure of heart after enduring and systematically eliminating each of the seven sins, so her purity required the experience of temptation. While a transition from one experience of desire to another is not impossible, and as Cooper and Przybylo remind us, choice deserves a greater place in the study of sexuality in the archive, the *necessity* of temptation for most women to experience holy asexuality reveals how tethered the concept is to compulsory sexuality, which misogynistically restricts the range of sexual experiences available for women to articulate.

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[181] Kirakosian, *Die Vita der Christian von Hane*, 305, "Da sprache der here yn dem lyecht zo yrer selen: Ich hayn vff gerechte dyne leben myt aller oitmodicheit. Jch hayn dich getziert myt aller reynicheit." (Translation: Kirakosian, 35).
[182] Kirakosian, *Die Vita der Christian von Hane*, 285, "Daz ist, daz er alleyn wille syn yn dem reynnen hertzen, daz luter ist als die sonne." (Translation: Kirakosian, 5).
[183] Kirakosian, *Die Vita der Christian von Hane*, 346, "Die sele, die got beschauwen, die sal doit syn aller befleckonge der sunden." (Translation: Kirakosian, 98).

Gertrude of Helfta's heart is similarly pure, and similarly remarked upon by those around her. Her hagiographer wrote:

> And it can be said not only of her sense of sight, but also of her speech, hearing, and her other senses, that the beauty of her wonderful chastity shone so brightly in her that her close friends used sometimes to say jokingly that she ought rightly to be put on the altar among the relics, because of the purity of her heart! This is not surprising, since it was her habit to take a delight in holy Scripture beyond that of anyone I know, and consequently, she also took a delight in God, and this is what chiefly preserves chastity.[184]

By framing Gertrude as such a living exemplar of sanctity—one worthy of being a relic—due to the purity of her heart, she is presented as the antithesis of unchaste lust. The motif of purity of heart hints at the asexual possibilities accompanying the representations of these women's sanctity. Ebner, Gertrude, and Christina's hearts are regarded as pure specifically in regards to their chastity, and accompanying their chastity is the absence of lust, at least in these representations; without this absence, divinely granted by God, their hearts and souls may not have been regarded as such exemplars of spiritual perfection.

By comparing Gertrude to a relic, her holy asexuality and sanctity are linked to deadness. Gertrude was monastically enclosed, and thus 'dead to the world,' yet through her holy asexuality, she was also dead to her body by disavowing its demands. Since her body ceased mattering within the narrative of her sanctity as she spiritually transcended it, it functionally died when she achieved the state of holy asexuality. This is ironic, of course, because many relics were body parts, but the body mattered only in death, or to signify and prove the state of one's

[184] Gertrude of Helfta and Doyére, *Legatus divinae pietatis*, 160, "Et non solum dici potest de visu, verum etiam de loquendo, audiendo, caeterisque corporis motibus, quod tam mirae continentiae decor in ipsa resplenduit, quod familiares sibi sodales dicere solebant quandoque jocando, quod jure propter munditiam cordis inter reliquias super altare poneretur. Nec mirum, cum ultra omnes homines mihi cognitos assueta fuerit in sacra Scriptura delectari, et per consequens etiam delectari in Deo, quod est praecipuum conservatorium castitatis." (Translation: Barratt, 63).

soul. Holy asexuality was linked to occupying other planes of existence, specifically Heaven, so it unsurprisingly was also tied to saintly death.

Unlike for Christina, the origins of Gertrude and Ebner's pure hearts are unremarked upon. Within a teleological world order in which God is responsible for everything, He ultimately is the cause of their pure hearts. However, Gertrude's devotion to scripture was what produced her purity of heart, which placed a greater degree of agency on her. This is not to say that Christina was not responsible for her spiritual state, because she purposefully endured seven years of struggle to overcome all the vices, but rather that the final transformation from Fallen to holy asexuality was God's.[185] This is certainly a possibility for Gertrude and Ebner, yet their texts make it less clear who is ultimately responsible for their holy asexuality. These omissions and unremarked moments offer just as many asexual resonances, if not more, as those which ascribe all asexual resonances to divinity, because their silences leave greater interpretive space for asexuality outside the prescriptive domain of holy asexuality, ever-inflected by compulsory sexuality.

Christina's spiritual state in which she experienced holy asexuality transcends chastity and virginity, with her perfection being essentially inhuman. She was still both chaste and a virgin whilst experiencing her earlier temptations, meaning that her later state is something greater. Both in body and in spirit, the mere experience of lust or sexual temptation does not necessarily preclude a person from either category. Holy asexuality is thus a more applicable term than just virginity since it describes virginity at its spiritual peak. In Christina's case, as with many of the other holy women discussed in this chapter, the asexual state, represented as a

[185] Kirakosian, *Die Vita der Christian von Hane*, 290, "Sie eyn hait auch nyt gestreden eyn jaire ader zweyn, dan sie streydte vij gantzer jaire wieder die sieben heubt sunden, myt yglicher eyne gantze jaire, byß daz sie die alsammet vberwant vollenkomenclichen, als ich eyn teylle her na schryben wylle." (Translation: Kirakosian, 11).

gift from God to Christina, is a core component of the performance of spiritual perfection. Since it is not achievable without divine assistance under the logic of compulsory sexuality, it enhances this performance to a level beyond purely human. It is a mark of her grace, her distinctiveness. "The soul which beholds God must be dead to all sins," the concluding line of Christina's vita, emphasizes the unique spiritual state in which such asexual resonances are possible and restricts the asexual state to only those who are similarly holy. Instead of the representation of asexuality in hagiography adding to the range of sexual experiences available to late medieval women, given that it is a highly fluid and unstable category, holy asexuality is symptomatic of the restrictions of compulsory sexuality.

The vision of holy asexuality via virginity that is represented in these texts is a fluid state that a holy woman can occupy after reaching a certain level of spiritual achievement, both through their own asceticism and devotion, and in tandem with God's supernatural abilities. Holy asexuality was the pinnacle of virginal achievement, constructed as the ultimate triumph of soul over body. By virulently denying the body as a site of virginal holiness, though the body could still signify holiness, holy asexuality resists the possibility of bodies 'naturally' existing without sexual desire. Though virginity and holy asexuality could be deployed by holy women for a variety of reasons, providing the language to claim spiritual authority for themselves, as will be demonstrated in Chapter 3, this language was also deployed against women. Holy asexuality was only imaginable *within* the confines of compulsory sexuality. It was a means of making sense of the experiences of the embodied states of holy women, and in so doing this logic denied their embodiment in favor of their wills. Asexual bodies were impossible to hagiographers like Thomas of Cantimpré, so he instead imagined souls so devoted to God that they could overcome their inherently lustful bodies. This logic reveals asexual resonances across

time, of course, yet also reveals another angle of how virginity and chastity were used to obscure and restrict other modes of embodiment.

Transformative Asexuality in Hagiography

Holy asexuality is typically represented as a transformation within hagiography, in which a person's presumably lustful nature is transformed towards a state of holy asexuality, which reveals its binary relationship with compulsory sexuality. The moment of transformation is a common trope within the genre, such as Christina of Hane's *vita* when her hagiographer stated that "God gave her the assurance that henceforth she should never again be touched by temptation of flesh," after which lust, so prominent in the beginning of the hagiography, vanishes from the narrative.[186] This moment often precipitated a change of life towards a holy one or marked the point where a person achieves saintly holiness. Choice or transformation in regards to sexuality is not necessarily troublesome in this narrative, particularly when attempting to read historical asexualities, but rather that asexuality is imagined as *only* possible through the divine. . Recall that in Christina's hagiography, this singular possibility was depicted as an act of God's grace. In this way, the trope of the moment of transformation from a state of carnal, worldly sin to a lustless state of spiritual perfection reinforced the restrictions of compulsory sexuality.

The edifying function of Christina of Hane's *vita* reveals how compulsory sexuality inflected the hagiographer's understanding of bodily lust and the journey towards holy asexuality. Christina is depicted as struggling for seven years against vices, one year for each of

[186] Kirakosian, *Die Vita der Christian von Hane*, 290–91, "alle tzijt ryngen vnd wieder stryden moiste wieder die vnkußheit, daß sie yre hertzen vnd lybes reynicheit behalten moicht. Dar vmb dryeffe sie van yre alle sunden vnd orsachen der sunden, daz ist alle stetde vnd lude vnd alle sachen, die yr moichten syn eyn orsache zo der bekarungen." (Translation: Kirakosian, 12).

the seven cardinal sins.[187] However, while the other sections, centering around sloth, anger, pride, etc., take up a small paragraph, the section about lust spans multiple pages. It is also when combating lust that Christina deploys her harshest ascetic behaviors, such as when she took a "burning woodblock and rammed it into her body, while it was still glowing. Thus she extinguished the fire of her temptation with the great pain caused by material fire."[188] Even though she fought each sin for a year, because lust is given the greatest amount of explication, it is perhaps the most useful to the author's edificatory goals and to their imagined audience. This passage also reveals that there was a perceived physical reality to her lust, in that it could be temporarily stymied through horrific physical asceticism. This corporeal element of lust, coming from the body's Fallen state, could be combated more effectively through force of will, or rather the dedication to control the body, and it is through discipline of the body that its inherent sexuality can be overcome. Both the amount of time dedicated to discussing lust, and how to prevent it, as well as Christina's own ascetic practices, illustrate that lust was seen as one of the most important sins to tackle. The naturalized vision of bodily lust further illustrates how compulsory sexuality is deeply embedded into the logic of hagiographic texts.

In her struggle, Christina came to serve as an example to others contending with similar temptations, or at least she did to her hagiographer. The author of her *Vita* asserts that beyond wanting to prove Christina's virtue, "Our Lord also charged her with this great adversity for a

[187] Kirakosian, *Die Vita der Christian von Hane*, 290, "Sie eyn hait auch nyt gestreden eyn jaire ader zweyn, dan sie streydte vij gantzer jaire wieder die sieben heubt sunden, myt yglicher eyne gantze jaire, byß daz sie die alsammet vberwant vollenkomenclichen, als ich eyn teylle her na schryben wylle." (Translation: Kirakosian, 11).
[188] Kirakosian, *Die Vita der Christian von Hane*, 291, "Zo eym anderen mail namme sie eyn burnende hoiltze vnd stieße daz selbe also gluedich yn yren lyffe, also daz daz lypliche fure das fure yrer bekarunge myt groißen smertzen verleyst." (Translation: Kirakosian, 13).

second reason: that her struggle would serve as an example to all those who suffer temptation and adversity."[189] Furthermore, her hagiographer states that,

> I also want to take this opportunity to describe in part how wisely she withstood all vices with strict exercises, how she overcame all of them and trod them down. Thus she became a paragon and an example to all those who face a battle against the attacks of the vices…We may all read about sundry saints who struggled zealously against many vices and who overcame them perfectly. Likewise, many pious people on earth still struggle individually with numerous adversities—adversities that they can defeat with God's help.[190]

The specific didactic purpose of these texts is how to vanquish temptation, and since lust is the sin focused on in particular by the hagiographer, it is implied to be one of the most critical to overcome. Thus, since virginity and lust are of paramount importance to both the text and Christina's spiritual journey, and this is what people consuming the hagiography might need the most spiritual guidance combating, there is an assumption undergirding this text that lust is a 'normal,' universal experience. Even for people of paramount virtue, and even in stories where lust can be overcome, compulsory sexuality underlies the hagiographer's goal of edification. Without such compulsory sexuality, rooted in the cultural context of the Later Middle Ages, holy asexuality cannot be formulated in opposition.

In Book I of *The Herald of God's Loving-Kindness*, the anonymous author similarly takes advantage of 'teachable moments' while describing all of Gertrude of Helfta's many virtues. In

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[189] Kirakosian, *Die Vita der Christian von Hane*, 290, "Auch verhencket vnser here zo dem anderen mail dyeße groiße anfechtonge vber sie, dar vmb daz yre strytde eyn lere were allen den, die bekarunge vnd anfechtonge lydent." (Translation: Kirakosian, 12).

[190] Kirakosian, *Die Vita der Christian von Hane*, 290, "Auch so wil ich eyn deyl hie schryben, wie wyßlich myt starcker vbonge sie wieder stontde vnd alle vndogent vberwant vnd sie alle vnder sich tratte, daz dyße eyn spegel vnd eyn forme sy aller der, die yn dyeßem leben stryden wullent wieder die anfechtonge der vndogent. Jch eyn hayn noch nyt geleßen van keynem der menschen, der also swerlichen vnd auch also manchfeldenclichen hebe gestretden wieder die anfechtonge vnd auch also enxtlichen vnd gentzelichen vberwonden. Myr leßen woil van etzelichen heilgen, die gar stercklichen myt etzelichen vndogenden stretden vnd sie auch gar vollenkommenclichen vberwonden. Also strydent noch vil guder lude vff ertrich, yglicher myt etlicher anfechtonge, die myt godes hulffe vberwyntdent." (Translation: Kirakosian, 11).

the ninth chapter, which centers around her chastity, the author gives advice on how to maintain one's chastity: "it was her habit to take a delight in holy Scripture beyond that of anyone I know, and consequently, she also took a delight in God, and this is what chiefly preserves chastity."[191] This text provides a more specific, tangible example than Christina's *vita*, which presents her as a virtuous example to those struggling with temptation, yet her own ascetic practices were likely too harsh to be imitated by many. The text about Gertrude, in contrast, reveals that intense devotion to the scripture impacts one's chastity, perhaps because it brings the devotee closer to God, thus leading to greater virtue. This passage reveals the tension between lived experience and representations of holy asexuality. Gertrude's devotional strategies could be used to choose and embody asexuality, but by hinging asexuality on holy practices to combat one's 'inherently' lustful body, other asexual possibilities are lost. Though women could live within categories such as virginity or holy asexuality, their own asexualities were not defined by those categories. Hagiographic descriptions of their virtues use holy asexuality to obscure other asexual possibilities, rendering them impossible without Christian holy practices and divine intervention.

Similarly to Gertrude, Christina's hagiographer provides an account of the various strategies and exercises that she purportedly used to "gain all the virtues," and to transform herself from one sexual state to another.[192] These practices are also a direct invocation of the 'moment of transformation' trope. Christina's exercises were spiritual but with physical components; when her body experienced temptation, she punished it physically with harshly ascetic practices, such as mutilating her vagina with a burning piece of wood with the hope that

[191] Gertrude of Helfta and Doyére, *Legatus divinae pietatis*, 160, "delectari in Deo, quod est praecipuum conservatorium castitatis." (Translation: Barratt, 63).
[192] Kirakosian, *Die Vita der Christian von Hane*, 286, "Zo hantze dar na flyßichet sie sich myt allem flyße vnd myt starcker vbonge nach allen doegenden." (Translation: Kirakosian, 6).

"she might be able to extinguish the mental fire of her flesh."[193] Lust is not portrayed here as merely the consequence of fallible flesh, but a mental process as well. However, Christina was unable to rid herself of lust without divine intervention. During one of her visions, Christina found "medicine against all adversity" in the wounds of Christ, and "God gave her the assurance that henceforth she should never again be touched by temptation of flesh."[194] Her bodily ascetic practices, driven by her will, helped bring her to this point of Christ's intervention, but this intercession had both bodily and mental effects. Though it is possible that Christina would have transcended her body to the point of not noticing its lust after this incident, the passage more so suggests the cessation of bodily lust altogether. This is further explicated when Christ tells Christina that, "my love within you is a peaceful salvation, a bodily power, a heartfelt gentleness, a firm freedom from ambition, a high knowledge of yourself and of my godhead, and a strong thirst for sweetness."[195] After this point, lust, much like the other six temptations, does not figure into the narrative, meaning that it potentially had little impact on the remainder of her life. Lust is almost a hagiographic prerequisite for holiness. If all bodies are presumed to have it, then there must be a section of the *vita* dedicated to explaining its absence. Since Christina's actual experience of sexuality is absent in the sources, it appears that her hagiographer was trying to make sense of an asexual state. This grappling with her lack of lust yet again opens up

[193] Kirakosian, *Die Vita der Christian von Hane*, 291, "daz sie wulte myt dem lyplichen fure leißen daz geistlichen fure yrs fleiße." (Translation: Kirakosian, 13).
[194] Kirakosian, *Die Vita der Christian von Hane*, 292, "artzedie wieder alle anfechtonge"; "Jn dem zoge dede yre got die genade, daz sie na der tzijt, als sie myr selber sagete, nummerme van keyner fleißelicher bekarunge berurt wart." (Translation: Kirakosian, 15).
[195] Kirakosian, *Die Vita der Christian von Hane*, 335, "Mynne lyebde ist yn dyr eyn heil des fredens, eyn craifft des lybes, eyn senfftichеit des hertzes, eyne sicher fryheit des gemoides, eyn hoge erkentenyß dyns selbes vnd myner gotheit, vnd ist eyn voiler durste aller soißicheit." (Translation: Kirakosian, 81–82).

possibilities for a kind of holy asexuality that was symptomatic of the broader system of compulsory sexuality.

Gertrude's hagiography does not contain such a dramatic moment of transformation as Christina, primarily because her earlier life is not discussed, which is often where their struggle to overcome various sins took place. Her hagiographer does, however, relay a brief incident indicating how Gertrude attained her exorbitantly high level of spiritual perfection:

> With confidence she placed [the scrap of fabric] on her heart and begged the Lord, by the love that had led him to choose so graciously the heart of [Gertrude] his beloved, purified of all human affection, to be his alone, to inhabit and to flood with spiritual gifts, and by her merits, that he would condescend mercifully to free her from temptation. A miracle, truly deserving everyone's acceptance and respect! As soon as she held that scrap of cloth, with the devotion I have described, pressed against her heart, the physical, human temptation was so taken from her that she was never troubled by another like it.[196]

The incident that compelled Gertrude's prayer was not elaborated upon. All that the text reveals is that witnessing some form of temptation led Gertrude to pray so intensely, and to desire to be free of mortal, corporeal temptation in general. Lust certainly is one such temptation, and one that Gertrude appears not to struggle with after this point in the loosely constructed narrative. Just prior to this, "cascading into the valley of human weakness, this loving-kindness bent its gaze on this woman among others, charmed by the gift it itself had bestowed."[197] 'Loving-kindness' in this case referring to the divine, this passage illuminates how this state was

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[196] Gertrude of Helfta and Doyére, *Legatus divinae pietatis*, 130–32, "ipsum cum fiducia cordi suo superimposuit, exorans Dominum ut per amorem illum quo cor dilectae suae ab omni humana affectione abstractum sibi soli tam dignanter elegisset ad inhabitandum, ac spiritualibus donis influendum, etiam per merita ejusdem ipsam misericorditer a sua tentatione dignaretur liberare: mira res! et vere omni acceptione et reverentia digna! quia mox ut panniculum illum cum jam dicta devotione cordi suo impressum tenuit suppositum, omnis illa tentatio tam carnalis quam humana sic omnino ab ea est amota, quod nec postea consimili est grava." (Translation: Barratt, 43–44).

[197] Gertrude of Helfta and Doyére, *Legatus divinae pietatis*, 128, "pro supereffluenti abundantia pietatis illius qua ad vallem humanae fragilitatis impetus suos dirigens, inter caeteros etiam hanc respexit ad quam ipsum suum proprium donum allexit." (Translation: Barratt, 42).

specifically bestowed upon Gertrude. It also highlights the circularity of spiritual perfection, in that God made Gertrude holier than others and then showered her with even greater spiritual gifts because of her pre-established holiness. Since her body was no longer seen to be afflicted by such temptations, Gertrude had supposedly reached a level closer to spiritual perfection. What the passages above ultimately reveal is that a state of temptation could be transformed into one of spiritual, and holy asexual, perfection, according to Gertrude's hagiographer.

Lutgard of Aywierès's *vita,* composed by Thomas of Cantimpré also contains a dramatic transformation from a state afflicted by worldly temptations to one in which she no longer experienced lust. Lutgard (1182–1246) was a mystic from the Low Countries. Though initially a Benedictine, she later joined the Cistercians for a more rigorous lifestyle. She also spiritually mentored Thomas in his youth, and he perhaps wrote her hagiography in order to acquire part of her finger as a relic after her death.[198] Once, when a man was wooing Lutgard, Christ came to her in a vision and said, "do not seek any longer the caresses of unseemly love. Here you may perpetually contemplate what you should love and why you should love it. Here I pledge that you shall attain the delights of total purity."[199] After this moment, Lutgard was no longer portrayed to experience lust, thus occupying the same state of asexual purity described in the writings by and about Gertrude of Helfta, despite such physical temptations being something that she struggled with earlier in her life. During yet another vivid incident, Jesus physically intervened to prevent even the most unwelcome of temptations; an abbot was forcing himself onto the other nuns when "the most courteous Jesus, however, placed the hand of his mercy

[198] Newman and King, "Introduction," in *Thomas of Cantimpré: the Collected Saints' Lives,* 11.
[199] Thomas of Cantimprè, "Vita Auct," Col. 0237D–Col. 0237E, "Blanditias inepti amoris ulterius non requiras: hic jugiter contemplare quid diligas, & cur diligas: hic totius puritatis delicias tibi spondeo consequendas." (Translation: Newman and King, 218).

between them so that she did not feel the taint of even the first carnal stirring in the man's kiss."[200] It is unclear in the text if this hand was a physical presence that blocked the abbot or if it was more of a spiritual blockade, but regardless, Christ acted as a seal protecting the integrity of both Lutgard's mind and body. The vow that Jesus made to protect Lutgard from physical temptations, prevented her from feeling anything even resembling lust. These instances reveal that hagiographers felt a compulsion to explain asexuality, or the aberration of listlessness, in Christian terms. Holy asexuality functions to Christianize asexual possibilities, rendering them inline with contemporary notions about bodies and the supposed universality of sexual desire.

Margaret of Ypres, much like Lutgard and Gertrude, underwent a transformation from one state of holiness to another. However, Margaret was purportedly never affected by lust, even when she felt intense love for a man:

> Even though she was without the venom of mortal sin, she had to endure in a cruel way the snares of the pursuing enemy. For, glancing incautiously at a very attractive young man, she fell in love with him with a most burning love for a while, although without the filth of lustful desire. Even though she sat and talked with him alone very often, she was never defiled either in will or in inclination. For Christ, the lover of chastity, was pleasing to her above all things.[201]

Through her desire to be chaste, her mind was never 'corrupted,' thus showing how the choice to embody asexuality was still a genuine expression of it. Choosing to control one's body by choosing to live a life of chastity had physical consequences, in this case the absence of feelings

[200] Thomas of Cantimprè, "Vita Auct," Col. 0241C, "Sed summæ benignitatis Jesus misericordiæ suæ manum ita mediam posuit, ut nec primi motus contagium in viri osculo senserit." (Translation: Newman and King, 235).
[201] Thomas of Cantimpré, *Vita Margarite de Ypris*, 108–9, "etsi sine veno mortalis peccati, crudeli modo perpessa est. Iuvenum enim quemdam, forma egregium, incaute conspiciens, amore ferventissimo, sine fece tamen concupisciencie, per tempus aliquod adamavit. Et quidem sepius cun eo sola sedens et loquens, numquam vel voluntate saltem vel animo coinquinata est. Castitatis enim amator Christus super omnia placebat ei." (Translation: Newman and King, 167).

of lust. This passage also illustrates the contrast between love and lust; Margaret felt a "burning love" for this man, but despite the intensity of these feelings, this love was "uncorrupted" by lust. Even though she tried to rid herself of these feelings of love, Margaret soon "felt faint stirrings of that affection she had so recently withdrawn from creeping seductively back into her mind."[202] In this case, given that Thomas of Cantimpré makes it abundantly clear that Margaret never felt 'lustful desire,' the *affectum* that is described in this text is void of sexual content. Distinguishing love from lust, with one not necessarily entailing the other, opens up the potential for non-sexual interpretations of the intense love that mystics like Margaret express for Christ without negating the queer possibilities of these devotions.[203] This passage also reveals how heteronormativity is coupled with compulsory sexuality. In order to Christianize the absence of sexual desire, heterosexual possibilities must be implanted into the narrative. Lust was only imaginable through interactions with men, and in order to demonstrate Margaret's purity, those interactions were disavowed.

Because of her devotion to the ideal of chastity, Margaret ultimately made a vow of chastity for both her body and mind: "as soon as she did this, God saw the virgin's perfection of heart and granted her this great favor; for the rest of her life, never would she feel even the first stirrings of temptation in her flesh."[204] This passage reveals how Margaret's choice impacted her experience of lust, and thus her experience of asexuality. The physical dimension of lust, that

[202] Thomas of Cantimpré, *Vita Margarite de Ypris*, 109, "sensit levi motu animi affectum suum, ab illo nuper abstractum, sue menti quasi blandientem irripere." (Translation: Newman and King, 169).
[203] Ela Przybylo, "Introducing Asexuality, Unthinking Sex," in *Introducing the New Sexuality Studies*, edited by Nancy Fischer and Steven Seidman (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016), 183.
[204] Thomas of Cantimpré, *Vita Margarite de Ypris*, 109–10, "Hoc facto vidit Deus perfectionem cordis in virgine, et hoc magnum concessit ei in omni vita sua, qua vixit postea, ut nec primos motos tentacionis in carne sentiret." (Translation: Newman and King, 169).

which people who chose a chaste lifestyle consciously resisted, evaporated upon making such a serious vow. While this vow was instigated by Margaret's own agency, the ability to enact it is represented as coming from God. Thus, the asexuality that she performs accompanies a state of enhanced holiness that was both achieved through her own devotion, as well as granted by a higher power. Transcending the limits of the body to not feel any sort of lust, and thus perform asexuality, required divine intercession, at least to Thomas of Cantimpré. Choice was central to Margaret's transformation, but ultimately the transformation was not earthly, and involved her moving away from the world and her body in order to occupy this state.

Christina of Hane is a trickier case, given that her hagiographer characterizes her as having graphically experienced lust during her lifetime. Christina's lust could not be written off as "burning love" or other types of erotic desire as Margaret's was. However, in keeping with Przybylo and Cooper's formulation of asexuality, this does not disqualify Christina from performing something akin to it; rather, Christina crucially challenges the notion of asexuality as a permanent, innate quality precisely *because* her experience of lust and sexual desire changes from one stage of her life to another. While still a spiritual novice, Christina devoted a year of her life to ridding herself of the experience of temptation. Her hagiographer noted that "she always had to combat and resist unchastity in order to keep her heart and body pure. That is why she drove all sins and causes of sin from her, all places and people and all things that could have led to temptation."[205] However, her efforts alone did not completely abolish her experience of lust. Christina's graphic asceticism towards this end need not be rehashed, but after her period of

[205] Kirakosian, *Die Vita der Christian von Hane*, 290–91, "alle tzijt ryngen vnd wieder stryden moiste wieder die vnkußheit, daß sie yre hertzen vnd lybes reynicheit behalten moicht. Dar vmb dryeffe sie van yre alle sunden vnd orsachen der sunden, daz ist alle stetde vnd lude vnd alle sachen, die yr moichten syn eyn orsache zo der bekarungen." (Translation: Kirakosian, 12).

struggle, while Christina was experiencing a vision and meditating on the wounds of Christ, "God gave her the assurance that henceforth she should never again be touched by temptation of flesh."[206] After this point in her *vita*, Christina was no longer tormented by lust; in fact, it vanishes from the narrative and never again appears as a struggle in her life. Though it was not granted out of the blue, this passage further illustrates how an asexual state is depicted as having been gifted by God after a period of prolonged spiritual struggle. Her hagiographer states that "this holy virgin Christina did not simply fight for one or two years," a struggle that the hagiographer implies would be both admirable yet achievable, "no, she fought for seven whole years" until they were "perfectly overcome," a far worthier and more strenuous endeavor.[207] Despite being "perfectly overcome," Christina had not necessarily reached this holy, asexual state until God decided to rid her entirely of lust, making her experience of holy asexuality fundamentally transformative. Holy asexuality was not a state that one could be born into, but rather one to be transformed into, because the bodily and affective desires that accompanied it were incompatible with gendered understandings of the female body.

In these passages, we can see that, by rendering holy asexuality as fundamentally transformational, its binary relation to compulsory sexuality was solidified. Holy asexuality depended on compulsory sexuality in that it could not exist without the logic that dictated that all bodies, particularly women's bodies, were inescapably lustful. Asexual possibilities were outsourced to divine intervention in order to account for their supposed impossibility under the

[206] Kirakosian, *Die Vita der Christian von Hane*, 292, "Jn dem zoge dede yre got die genade, daz sie na der tzijt, als sie myr selber sagete, nummerme van keyner fleißelicher bekarunge berurt wart." (Translation: Kirakosian, 15).
[207] Kirakosian, *Die Vita der Christian von Hane*, 290, "Sie eyn hait auch nyt gestreden eyn jaire ader zweyn, dan sie streydte vij gantzer jaire wieder die sieben heubt sunden, myt yglicher eyne gantze jaire, byß daz sie die alsammet vberwant vollenkomenclichen, als ich eyn teylle her na schryben wylle." (Translation: Kirakosian, 11).

logic of compulsory sexuality. Moreover, I argue that, in these late medieval hagiographic texts, compulsory sexuality also depended on holy asexuality as well. As Cooper and Przybylo argue, where there is the sexual, there is always a looming asexual possibility.[208] Asexuality appears on the fringes of these texts, always threatening the restrictive logic of compulsory sexuality. Holy asexuality, thus, was a sanctioned representation of the opposite of sex, still acceptable within the domain of compulsory sexuality, that satisfied imagined asexualities and kept the challenging potential of other asexualities at bay, particularly those which challenged the regime of compulsory sexuality. Representations of asexuality via the category of holy asexuality are still significant even if they do not reflect lived asexual experiences in the later Middle Ages. Lived experiences are far muddier and do not reflect the discrete boundaries between normative categories. Holy asexuality was lived *in* and performed, even if the people within the categories do not neatly match up to their prescriptive bounds. Hagiographies thus played a crucial role in defining the category and dictating performances of holy asexuality, as well as functioning as another arm enforcing compulsory sexuality.

Reading Absence in Holy Women's Revelations

Unlike *vitae*, which obscure as many asexual possibilities as it reveals, revelations and visions from holy women's own hands uniquely reflect their concerns and relationship with both holy asexuality and compulsory sexuality. Ultimately, what pervades these texts written by Gertrude and Ebner is not a deep concern for virginity and chastity, but concerns over other aspects of their holiness. They speak very little, if ever, about sexual desire and lust, and the asexual resonances within them point less to holy asexuality than to other asexual possibilities.

[208] Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics*, 299.

These absences are just as important as what hagiographies say out loud. Both Ebner and Gertrude constructed and expressed their claims to holiness in these texts, and chastity, and by extension holy asexuality, was often a large component of that for virginal holy women. Thus, by leaving out common features of hagiography, such as the experience of sexual desire before a 'moment of transformation' into a holy asexual state, they powerfully refute the demands of compulsory sexuality which were presumed to inflect their lives. Therefore, these texts provide key insights into the lived experiences of holy women and their sexuality. Though they lived in the categories of virginity and holy asexuality, they were not defined by them.

While asexuality vis-à-vis chastity and virginity may have been a crucial feature of many of the performed identities of these holy figures, they did not avow such an identity in modern terms. Karras argues that "sexual status was central to the distinction between clergy and laity, so that we may say indeed that chastity was a sexual identity that was constitutive of how individuals would have understood themselves and their role in life."[209] But, asexuality was only a component of this identity and not neatly equivalent to the category of virginity or chastity, instead playing a role in the articulation of these identities in their highest spiritual form. These identities instead reveal resonances of an asexual past. Furthermore, given the issues of authorship and editorial intervention that plague many of these texts, it can hardly be said that they reveal the 'real,' self-proclaimed identities of any of these holy women. Indeed, in the texts purportedly written by Margaret Ebner and Gertrude of Helfta, neither claims an explicit asexual or virginal identity to the degree expressed by texts written *about* Gertrude, Christina of Hane, Margaret of Ypres, and Lutgard of Aywierès, which often place a premium on virginity, transforming it into a characteristic mark of sanctity. These texts instead display the construction

[209] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 57.

and performance of sanctity, thoroughly mediated by male ideas about female spirituality. The absence of self-identification again powerfully testifies to the lived experience of religion within their own revelations and visions texts.

For Ebner, a clear anxiety over her purity and worthiness pervades the text, with Jesus giving her many reassurances, but this more so reflects her humility; she is not concerned about preserving her virginity or chastity, meaning that they are not in question. Chastity was such an expected part of Ebner's life that it hardly merited mention. Not only was it expected, it was easy, unthought. Gertrude, as well, is not concerned with preservation in Book II of *The Herald of God's Loving Kindness*. For these virtues, so central in hagiography that in her *vita* Christina of Hane is exclusively referred to as a "virgin," to be absent from these revelation texts is significant. Their absence suggests that leading a virginal lifestyle, contrary to religious prescriptions which required the experience and refutation temptation for holiness, was not a difficult affair.

Gertrude discusses how God led her towards her state of spiritual perfection in Book II, in a narrative that both parallels the transformational narrative of hagiography while also removing the motif's tie to freedom from sexual desire. Spiritual perfection was not a state that Gertrude was born with, but rather one that she strove towards. In Chapter 12, "Bearing with Human Inadequacy," she wrote that, "you showed me how your kindly patience bears with our inadequacies so that, when we have remedied them, you may be able to raise us to a state of blessedness."[210] Thus, within her own conceptualization of her spirituality, spiritual perfection was a state that she was elevated to through her devotion and dedication. This suggests a process

[210] Gertrude of Helfta and Doyére, *Legatus divinae pietatis*, 280, "qua scilicet notificasti mihi quam benigna patientia defectus nostros supportares, ut vel sic emendatos nos posses beatificare." (Translation: Barratt, 132).

similar to holy asexuality. Gertrude highlights the element of choice involved in her elevation in Chapter 17, "The Divine Self-Restraint," explaining that God's "kindly wisdom shines forth with greatest power in my forbearance towards those who are less than perfect, going so far as to lead them, through their free will, to the path of perfection."[211] Thus God transformed her into a tool to help with the enlightenment of others. However, while hagiographies make explicit mention of sexual temptation and desire as what is being overcome, Gertrude does not do so. She is not necessarily referring to sexual temptation or lust as the specific inadequacies or barriers to perfection at all.

While her description parallels holy asexuality, Gertrude's configuration of perfection is far less exclusive. Holy asexuality depends on exclusivity due to its ties to compulsory sexuality. While her hagiographer portrays her as having been naturally blessed by God prior to her achievement of spiritual perfection, Gertrude's own words highlight how her path might be more achievable to those who have yet to achieve spiritual feats such as hers, notably through her assistance. She emphasizes that God bore with her despite her inadequacies and uses gentler language to describe the path towards perfection. Of course she is performing sanctity in her own text just as the hagiographer constructs it around her in theirs, but the focus of these performances varies; in her own rendition, Gertrude's claim to this state is less individualized, leaving room for her to help elevate others to a similar state of holiness, one that is characterized by all of the chief virtues, notably chastity.

As with teasing out many of the experiences of premodern women, asexual possibilities are often either barely hinted at or are made visible through their absence. For both Gertrude of

[211] Gertrude of Helfta and Doyére, *Legatus divinae pietatis*, 300, "quae sapientiae benignitas maxime elucet in tolerando imperfectos, quousque illos per liberum arbitrium ducam ad viam perfectionis." (Translation: Barratt, 145).

Helfta's second book of *The Herald of God's Loving-Kindness* and for Margaret Ebner's revelations, two texts purportedly written by their subjects, the focus of their devotions and their own accounts of temptation have very little to do with lust, thus revealing very different priorities. Susanne Bürkle's interpretation of Ebner's revelations, that the first person narrator was invented by other Dominican nuns to depict the ideals of feminine sanctity, does complicate the text.[212] However, if sanctity is interpreted through the lens of performance, Gertrude similarly constructs her own holiness, and in writing from a first person perspective, both texts highlight the values that were perceived as important to perform, which do not necessarily align with the values that hagiographers imbued into their writings.

For Ebner, her temptations primarily lie in social interactions, food, and other bodily comforts. She often took a stance against gossip, finding the idle chatter of fellow nuns quite distressing.[213] After her caretaker died, she "made a resolution to live in greater suffering from then on. I resolved, in particular, never to claim anything I needed as mine by necessity."[214] She turns away from that which comforted her, her companion, thus rejecting this element of the world. Ebner further describes her experiences with worldly pleasures:

> Indeed I have lived thirty years without drinking wine and without taking a bath; indeed neither water nor soap have touched my head or body in these same thirty years. And I am so well accustomed to this by the help of God that I never had any trouble from it. I have also given up fish and meat. I took especially great delight in fruit. Then it was revealed to me with great joy, 'I want you to give it up for the sake of my love.' And I had the desire to give up all sweet things for the sake of the sweetness I received from God. I also had the desire to rest according to the custom of the Order. Then it happened that

[212] Bürkle, "Die Offenbarungen der Margareta Ebner."
[213] Ebner and Strauch, *Offenbarungen*, 4, "ich hort kain red gern dann diu von got was." (Translation: Hindsley, 86, "I did not like to hear any speech, except about God.")
[214] Ebner and Strauch, *Offenbarungen*, 12, "daz ich fürbaz immer mer in ellend wolte sin; sunderlich waz ich zuo der noturft bedörfte, daz ihc daz nimmer gevorden wölt, als ez mir von geordent wer." (Translation: Hindsley, 91).

> they sometimes placed a pillow beneath me because of my illness. After that, when I said my *Pater Noster* great sorrow overcame me and from that I received these words from our Lord, 'Should a spouse of Jesus Christ rest on pillows? And if she should die, she should not be found lying on a pillow.' Then I promised by the loving heart of Jesus that I would never do it again, even if I would be compelled by the command of my superiors.[215]

Baths, meat, fruit, and pillows were the worldly temptations that Ebner gave up. Nowhere within this statement, which centers around all that she gave up for the sake of her spiritual lifestyle, is there anything to do with the sexual. What "has drawn me away from delight in eating and drinking is the great delight and sweetness that I feel from God and which I await from Him in Christian love—to enjoy Him eternally in His divine clarity."[216] Ebner's enjoyment of Christ while not suffering from various illnesses or ascetic practices parallels the state of holy asexuality ascribed to Christina of Hane, Lutgard of Aywierès, and Margaret of Ypres, in that it pushed her away from temptations of the flesh and towards a state of greater holiness. But while her experiences parallel holy asexuality, Ebner does not actually espouse this restrictive value.

[215] Ebner and Strauch, *Offenbarungen*, 79–80, "ich bin gewesen xxx jar, daz ich nit wins getrunken han und auch in kain bat nie komen bin und wasser noch laug an minen lip noch an min haup nie komen ist in den selben xxx jaren. und hat daz mir as wol gezomen mit der helf gocz, daz ich kein gebresten nie gewan. ich han auch gelaun fisch und fleisch. sunder het ich lust ze allem obez: do wart mire geben mit grossen fräuden: 'ich will ez lauzzen durch mines liebes willen.' und allez daz suoz ist, daz han ich begird ze lauzzeent durch die süessiket, der ich uz got enphunden han. ich han ouch begird ze ligent nauch des ordens gewonhait. nu gescah daz, daz si mir etwenn von krankheit wegen ain küssin under leten. do ich dar nach min paternoster sprach, do kom mir ain grossez lait und dar in enphieng ich diu wort von unserm herren: 'sol ain gemahel Jhesu Cristi azo uf vedern ligen? und ob siu ouch sturb, so solt siu uf vedern nit funden werden,' und da verlopt ich uf dem minnenden herzen Jhesu Cristi, daz ich ez nimmer mer getuon wölt, ich wurde denne gezwungen von gebot miner maisterschaft." (Translation: Hindsley, 128).

[216] Ebner and Strauch, *Offenbarungen*, 79, "aber daz mich con dem lust gezogen hat essens und trinkens, daz ist der grosse lust und diu grosse suzzeket, der ich us got enphinde, in cristenlicher minne von ime warten bin ich ewiklichen mit im ze niezzen in siner götlichen clarhet." (Translation: Hindsley, 127).

She restricts in other ways, surely, but this text is marked by practically no concern for sexual temptation whatsoever, thus resonating with asexual experiences in the present.

Ebner's own associations of her bodily desires center primarily around food, in line with Caroline Bynum's formulation of the centrality of food to women's devotional practices.[217] In this case, food is what she renounces. After one of her mystical interactions with Christ, Ebner "experienced such an indescribably mysterious lightness of body; I did not even notice my body and it seemed to me as if I were floating upward. Jesus Christ, my wholly acceptable truth, knows this well. From that moment I never felt any desire for bodily food, no matter how long I waited to eat."[218] Furthermore, when she experienced these unions with Christ, she was "incapable of having any desire other than that which was given to me with Jesus and from Jesus."[219] Based on her previous description of the worldly temptations which plagued her, this means that she no longer missed baths, fruit, or pillows. Thomas of Cantimpré and Christina of Hane's hagiographer both made extremely similar statements in their writings, except that their subjects never experienced lust again after such a union with Christ. Ebner's revelations simply reveal a different set of struggles and different priorities. The marked absence of sexual temptation from Ebner's narrative of her holy transformation suggests that a life of chastity and virginity came easily to her.

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[217] Caroline Walker Bynum, Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).
[218] Ebner and Strauch, *Offenbarungen*, 24, "da von ich niht gereden kan, also daz ich mins libes niht enphant, und mir was als ich enbor gieng; ez waiss min aller genemstiu warhait Jhesus Cristus wol. Mir wart auch geben, daz ich kainer begird nach liplichem ezzen sider nie enphant, wie lang ich baittet." (Translation: Hindsley, 98).
[219] Ebner and Strauch, *Offenbarungen*, 152, "ich kain vermügen mag gehaben kainer begirde, denne diu mir geben wirt mit Jhesu und uz Jhesu." (Translation: Hindsley, 168).

Much like Ebner, the temptations that Gertrude self reports reveal that lust simply does not figure into her understanding and performance of sanctity. In Book II, Chapter 11, "An Assault by Temptation," Gertrude relays an incident in which a "loathsome creature" (*despicabilis*) attempted to force her into poisoning the wine during mass.[220] This was "followed by an immense outbreak of vainglory, so that I was permitted to understand clearly what deception the ancient Adversary uses in his fight against us, out of envy for your gifts."[221] The demonic creature that tempted her in this anecdote crucially does not come from within herself, but was externally inflicted. However, the remedy to such temptations is the "state of blessedness" that God can raise humans to after they "have remedied" their inadequacies—the same state that contains asexual resonances for many of the medieval authors in this chapter.[222] Gertrude does not define this state based on freedom from lust, however, and this absence reveals an asexual residence that touches more on lived experience than discursive construction of asexuality. Lust or unchastity never figure prominently into her self-presentation, either because she was unwilling to acknowledge them or because she simply did not struggle with them. Gertrude was the first person to note her own weaknesses, though. She highlights her temper and her vainglory, and devotes much space to delineating her temptations and struggles.[223] This gives the absence of sexual desire even more significance in her text, indicating that she was well-suited to the sexual demands, or lack thereof, of monastic life.

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[220] Gertrude of Helfta and Doyére, *Legatus divinae pietatis*, 278. (Translation: Barratt, 130).
[221] Gertrude of Helfta and Doyére, *Legatus divinae pietatis*, 278, "et mox tam ingens motus vanae gloriae secutus est, ut liquido daretur intelligi qua fraude hostis antiquus donis tuis invidendo nobis adversatur." (Translation: Barratt, 130).
[222] Gertrude of Helfta and Doyére, *Legatus divinae pietatis*, 280, "qua scilicet notificasti mihi quam benigna patientia defectus nostros supportares, ut vel sic emendatos nos posses beatificare." (Translation: Barratt, 132).
[223] Gertrude of Helfta and Doyére, *Legatus divinae pietatis*, 280, "cum enim quodam vespere in ira commota fuissem."

Silence can speak more to lived experience of asexuality than the abundance of language dedicated to holy asexuality in hagiography, particularly when reading for bodily and affective desires which are actively obscured by more dominant categories. In Gertrude and Ebner's own writings, their authorial choices highlight their actual struggles and temptations. No where in either of their works do they mention sexual temptation, nor do they subscribe to the category of holy asexuality. While their narratives parallel the spiritual journey of holy asexuality, they follow their devotional programs in order to combat the temptations that actually afflicted them. It is crucial when reading for lived experiences to read against the more prescriptive categories, such as holy asexuality. The possibilities of other asexualities subvert the more normative holy asexuality and compulsory sexuality, and thus are found in silences and absences.

Conclusion: Limitations and Liberations of Asexual Imagination

Holy asexuality exists in necessary tension with compulsory sexuality, with each bolstering the other. Holy asexuality satisfied the imagination and limited possibilities for the expression of the asexual impulse whilst under the conceptual umbrella of compulsory sexuality. Lust was not only required of Fallen bodies, but it was required for holiness. In order to achieve a state of spiritual perfection, there must have been worldly temptations which a person fought against. Holy asexuality was the christianization of what late medieval thinkers saw as the absence of sexual desire, their effort to fit these practices into their Christian worldview. In the process, they transformed a set of bodily and affective desires into a spiritually and culturally charged discourse which limited the expression of alternative asexualities.

Much like other categories of gender and sexuality, virginity and sanctity were citational and performed.[224] Hagiography as a genre played a substantial role in defining holy asexuality and normalizing the asexual resonances in the lives of holy women who did not quite fit into this narrative. However, in their own revelations, women conform to some aspects, such as the broader narrative structure, while repudiating others. Notably, even though holy asexuality was the prescriptive norm, neither Gertrude nor Ebner expressly claim it. This means that they did not subscribe to the demands of compulsory sexuality either, and did not claim to have experienced sexual desire only to be transformed. This is not to say that no holy women performed holy asexuality, nor that all of them all embodied asexuality. Rather, for the women in this chapter, holy asexuality was claimed *for* them and ascribed to their life trajectories instead of reflecting their self-understanding of their sexuality. Holy asexuality, though representative of broader cultural means of understanding asexuality, thus obscures its lived experience.

Holy asexuality is the means of imagining the opposite of the sexual within a framework that ascribed lust to all bodies. Asexuality, with its prefix -a, exists within a similar framework. Imagining asexuality apart from the sexual is almost impossible, but the medieval accounts of alternate experiences of sexuality, accounts in which asexuality is connected to divinity and deep, meaningful relationships with Christ, are fertile ground for imagining alternative futures. These texts also open up the possibility of defining asexuality as something other than absence. After being represented as reaching this state, or simply existing in it in any other capacity, these women devote themselves even more wholeheartedly to their devotional practices and are far more preoccupied with their rich, internal lives. As reading absences in holy women's revelations have shown, absences are never just that, and their possibilities brim over.

[224] Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 34.

CHAPTER 3:
COMPLICATING BINARITY: ASEXUALITY IN HOLY WOMEN'S PRESCRIPTIVE ADVICE

This chapter traces the dynamics of late medieval compulsory sexuality as articulated by holy women in their letters of advice to fellow religious people. This version of compulsory sexuality, in contrast with medical iterations, established asexuality as holy. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, holy asexuality, or the notion that asexuality, or rather the absence of sexual desire, was only possible after reaching spiritual perfection that allowed one to transcend the bodily limitations imposed by the Fall, depended on the logic of compulsory sexuality as a contrast that allowed these women to appear to have a vastly superior spiritual state. As these women understood it, holy asexuality was granted by God after a prolonged period of struggle. The texture of each portrayal of holy asexuality, however, differs greatly within the letters. Though holy asexuality was considered somewhat achievable within the broader cultural logic, and for some even synonymous with virginity, it was rarely considered one part of the range of 'natural' human sexual experiences. It could only exist in contrast with the base, sinful state of postlapsarian bodies.

Medieval letters were considered public documents and were frequently read aloud to the broader community.[225] Thus, letters allowed elite women to gain widespread reputations for holiness and to spread their salvific devotional programs. Upholding orthodox beliefs while also constructing rhetorical personae as holy asexuals were critical functions of these letters. The letters included in this chapter were written by Hildegard of Bingen (c. 1098–1179), Clare of Assisi (1194–1253), and Catherine of Siena (1347–1380). Each woman presents a differing understanding of sexual desire, asexual existence, and the process of reaching a state of holy

[225] Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrick Wiethaus, *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 4.

asexuality. Additionally, they each provide highly varied pieces of advice to help those who wrote to them achieve this state, ranging from intricate devotional meditations to simply avoiding sources of temptation.

The letters balance presenting holy asexuality as achievable, hence why they provide advice for getting to such a point, while also maintaining their personae as holy women who are in the position to give such advice. Importantly, these documents are prescriptive in nature. They tell their fellow nuns how they ought to act and outline the best path towards their own holy state, thus defining holy asexuality to their juniors. Given that they were written by women who purportedly experienced holy asexuality, these texts present a different perspective than that which is represented in their hagiographies. Their own policing of asexuality and insistence on compulsory sexuality likely had many purposes, ranging from the desire to reinscribe their own holiness, to provide more relatable, helpful advice, or to remain orthodox. These texts also differ greatly from some of the medical and natural philosophical understandings of compulsory sexuality. The logic presented here focuses more on the reason why bodies are naturally sinful—the Fall—in contrast with a medical treatise like *De coitu*, for example, which does not search for a reason for the body's sexual desires apart from how it 'naturally' functioned. While medical texts helped to produce compulsory sexuality, these letters helped to produce, define, and police holy asexuality.

Asexuality depends on sexuality, both medieval and present. The very prefix 'a-' means "without," and the category thus defines itself as a lack, and as a category without positive social content.[226] This was certainly how many of the medical authors from Chapter One described asexuality, and, though they frame it positively, hagiographers hinge their understanding of holy

[226] Kadj Amin, "We Are All Nonbinary," *Representations* 158, no. 1 (2022), 116.

asexuality on the lesser, yet universal, experience of corrupted flesh. Asexuality had little 'content' to them apart from its perceived opposite. Sexuality, thus, had to be compelled for people to think outside of it. Even when they were thinking outside of it, it was within a narrow binary opposition. Though of course the medieval understanding of this category did not go by the same name, it too invoked a lack. What holy women were missing or transcending was Original Sin, which, according to the Augustinian tradition, yoked people to the experience of sexual desire.[227] The establishment of an innate, postlapsarian sexuality compelled the existence of its opposite.

Holy asexuality was thus defined by the very experience that it sought to transcend. The fact that the language of transcendence was even used indicates how tethered holy asexuality was to compulsory sexuality; there must be an innate experience for it to be transcended. However, as with other binaries, the dividing lines were rigid. The experiences described in these letters of advice resist binary classification. They hint at potential experiences of sexual desire, while also discussing the experience of holy asexuality. They suggest that choosing asexual embodiment is possible, and that sexual temptations from the devil do not spoil it. Their understanding of the categories shifts in each letter, which threatens the binarity imposed onto them by their hagiographers.

The women in this chapter attempted to fill the 'void' of such a lack, demonstrating how it was not experienced as absence but rather as a mutable site of spiritual possibility. By trying to fulfill the social role of 'holy asexual,' these women show how variant and unstable the category was. Instead of a fictive, idealized opposite to the sinful state of humanity, they depict its boons. From enabling mystical connections to Christ, to running freely amongst the virtues, they

[227] Elaine H. Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York, NY: Random House, 1988), 3.

imagine asexuality not as a holy impossibility but as brimming over with possibilities. Additionally, each of their experiences of chastity, virginity, and holy asexuality differ substantially. There is no singular picture of holy asexuality that emerges from their writings, unlike the more static portrayal of their experiences in hagiography. They thus reveal how people worked with and against the restrictions of binary categories, both subverting and embracing, to make sense of their bodily and affective desires within the confines of the cultural logic of compulsory sexuality.

The inconsistencies in the experience of holy asexuality, or any asexual embodiment during this period, are due to the misalignment between categories and lived experiences. Though medical texts and hagiographies attempted to establish authoritative boundaries and policed both the experience of compulsory sexuality and its presumed opposite, the different tones and textures in these letters reveal their inability to preserve the purity of these categories. The mutability in the logic of asexuality from Hildegard to Clare, and from Clare to Catherine, or even within their own individual understandings, are far more revealing than if their logic was identical, and these inconsistencies stem from the conditions of sexuality itself. The enforcement of binary categories by medical and religious categories made the 'true' embodiment of either near-impossible.[228] Asexuality in this period was 'good to think with,' and allowed these women to imagine the conditions of the Garden of Eden and how they might be able to lead holier lives. They worked with these logics, and with the uninhabitability of these categories to forge a place for their own experiences and to encourage others to do the same. In so doing, they made the category more expansive, yet again resisting the harshness of binary categorization. Whereas in hagiography holy asexuality was available only to the few, simply giving advice to other

[228] Amin, "We Are All Nonbinary," 114.

religious women about how to achieve it suggests a broadening of the category to even "normal" people rather than the exceptional saints. By toying with its characteristics of asexuality, making it more expansive, and relating it to their own experiences, they subtly resisted the programmatic enforcement of compulsory sexuality and made space for a variety of asexual experiences.

Hildegardian Asexuality and Monastic Enclosure

Hildegard of Bingen (c. 1098–1179), a German Benedictine mystic, composer, and philosopher, was frequently solicited for advice. She lived and wrote from Disibodenberg and Rupertsberg, composing a wide variety of texts, ranging from medical guides to liturgy, and from visionary literature to advice letters. Her advice letters are widespread and were sent to many different people seeking quite different counsel. For Hildegard, asexuality was associated with the choice of vocation. Once a woman chose to become a nun and bride of Christ, she chose to move towards the path of holy asexuality. However, her perspective on asexuality differs across her letters, and she provides slightly different views on compulsory sexuality, holy asexuality, and asexuality's achievability. Her differing notions on the body's ability to exist asexually across her works suggest her awareness of holy asexuality, yet also indicating that she toyed with the category, making it more expansive to encompass nearly all women residing within a monastic environment, regardless of whether they experienced sexual desire.

For many letters of advice written by holy women, only their responses survive. Hildegard's epistolary corpus is an exception. Fellow nuns primarily wrote to her asking for consolation or words of encouragement, without asking explicitly about a specific issue. Most commonly, fellow abbesses wrote to her asking for permission to abandon their burdensome administrative duties. Hildegard typically responded by encouraging them to persist and

reminding them of the nobility of such a duty. Given how much of Hildegard's correspondence survived, relatively few senders directly asked her how to avoid temptation, and even fewer asked about sexual temptation in particular. Despite this absence, on the rare occasion when she was asked explicitly, she responded by providing the path towards holy asexuality, or rather towards satisfaction with a life of monastic enclosure.

Subscribing to compulsory sexuality by presenting oneself as a paragon of humility and fallibility could also bolster holy women's claims of perfection. In Hildegard's earlier works, she frequently included self-deprecating remarks about their inferiority and unworthiness. The humility portrayed by deploying "particular gendered categories of feminine subjection" helped bolster their authority.[229] When she called herself a "poor little woman" (*paupercula*), her "rhetorical self-deprecation served only to illuminate her exceptionality and her capacity."[230] Thus, these turns of phrase highlighted her devotional practices and piety, thus putting her in a better position to give advice to people on all levels of society. Claiming to experience sexual temptation displayed the virtue of humility, and increased their authority and claims of holiness. Presenting oneself with humility, though often tied to compulsory sexuality, and thus women's 'inferiority,' could advance their own case for spiritual perfection.

Hildegard, expectedly, attributed the experience of lust to the Fall. In a letter to an unnamed Abbess, she wrote that Adam's temptation from the Devil led to a series of plagues, such as vainglory, deceit, idolatry, etc. The Abbess's duty was to guard against these seven

[229] Clare Monagle, Carolyn James, David Garrioch, and Barbara Caine, *European Women's Letter-Writing from the 11th to the 20th Centuries* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 53.
[230] Monagle, James, Garrioch, and Caine, *European Women's Letter-Writing*, 55; Hildegard of Bingen, "2: Hildegard to Pope Eugenius," in *Epistolarium*, edited and compiled by L. Van Acker (Turnhout: Brepols, 1991), 7. (Translation: Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrmann as *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, Vol I (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 32).

plagues to protect her flock. Hildegard attributed knowledge as the key driver of sin: "the second plague is a person's awareness that he has the power to sin, and thus treasures the delight of the flesh, and, once he has tasted it, embraces and kisses it."[231]This statement implies that, though Adam may have had the capacity to sin before his temptation, and thus perhaps the capacity for lust, because he never knew he could, he did not exercise it. Knowledge, in the Garden of Eden as on earth, was what produced sin. This complicates the logic of postlapsarian compulsory sexuality, which often put forth that people were inherently sexual and would act on it were there not morals and strictures to keep them in line. A 'naturally' occurring asexual existence was possible but only in ignorance. While this both supports the idea of an underlying bodily sexuality, it suggests that the mind's ignorance takes precedence over perhaps uninterpretable bodily desires, thus creating an asexual existence. Though cloaked in allegory, as was Hildegard's style, her advice boils down to keeping the congregation of nuns innocent of their capacity to sin. Removing sources of temptation and ensuring that a minimum level of piety was upkept could help keep temptation from the abbey. Later in the letter, Hildegard claimed that, "no person can be secure in this life on account of the first temptation of the devil to which Adam succumbed."[232] This assertion again reinforces the logic of compulsory sexuality that undergirds many of the letters of advice discussing sexual temptation. Though the temptations come from the Devil, and not necessarily from an internal inclination, this formulation suggests

[231] Hildegard of Bingen and Van Acker, "174r: Hildegard to an Abbess," in *Epistolarium,* 397, "Secunda autem est, quod homo sentit quod peccare potest et quod inde delectationem carnis sibi thesaurizat, ac quod de gustu ipsam delectationem amplectendo osculatur." (Translation: Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrmann, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, Vol. II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 135.
[232] Hildegard of Bingen and Van Acker, "174r: Hildegard to an Abbess," in *Epistolarium*, 397, "unde et nullus homo propter primam suggestionem diaboli, quam Adam suscepit, in hac uita securus esse potest." (Translation: Baird and Ehrmann, Vol. II, 135).

that people have an underlying, natural sexuality that, though it can perhaps be overcome, is innate to the human body and experience.

Hildegard distinguished between the body and the soul, but marks the will as property of the body. Other authors, such as Catherine of Siena who will be discussed later, do not make such a distinction. Hildegard's distinction was more binary, and she wrote in a letter to Elisabeth of Schönau:

> A person can teach herself that she ought not to give in to her own will, since she consists of two natures—body and soul—and they are continually at odds with one another, for what pleases the one displeases the other. Since this is the way it is, how could she consent to her will—a property of the body—and depend on it for the safety of her soul? A person who out of fear and love of God has despised her own will, and has subjected herself to the precepts and doctrine of the Rule and to her superiors by offering examples of good works to others in true humility, such a one makes herself a living tabernacle in the heavenly Jerusalem, and the Holy Spirit rests upon her.[233]

Hildegard positions the body and soul as opposites, with each desiring different things. Bodily desires, such as food, sex, and comfort, thus oppose the desires of the soul. This dichotomy suggests that the soul exists asexually; since it is apart from the body, it would have no need for the things that sustain or arouse the body. Hildegard thus advocates for choosing an asexual lifestyle for the sake of one's soul. However, this statement yet again supports the logic of compulsory sexuality. Though the body could be overcome, its will and desires are inherent to the embodied experience of the Fall. Simply relying on a binary tacitly harkens back to the asexual/sexual binary, yet instead of classifying individual people as sexual or asexual, she

[233] Hildegard of Bingen and Van Acker, "198: Hildegard to the Abbess Elisabeth," in *Epistolarium*, 451, "Homo etiam per seipsum doceri potest quod proprie uoluntati sue acquiescere non debet, cum ipse in duabus naturis corpus et anima consistit et illa ab inuicem dissentiunt, quia quod alteri placet, hoc alteri displicet; et cum hoc in ipso ita sit, quomodo posset ipse cum salute anime proprie uoluntati sue, que corporis est, consentire? Homo namque qui propter timorem et amorem Dei propriam uoluntatem suam contem- pserit et se preceptis et doctrine regule et magistrorum suorum in uera humilitate bonorum operum exempla alis prebendo subdiderit, ille seipsum uiuum tabernaculum in celesti Ierusalem facit, et super illum Spiritus Sanctus requiescit." (Translation: Baird and Ehrmann, Vol. II, 173).

classifies different characteristics or elements of people as holding opposing positions. The possibility for asexuality, thus, is in everyone.

Many scholars have productively analyzed the sexual and queer implications of mystical relationships with Christ, or have alternatively labeled their sexualities' as "absent," thus leaving little room for asexual possibilities. Sarah Salih has argued, though, that "enjoying erotic experiences with God can be one of the defining marks of virginity…eroticism which can be labeled as carnal and not mystical, however, can destroy virginity."[234] Separating the erotic from the sexual can help make sense of many mystical experiences that, because of their eroticism, read as intensely sexual to modern audiences. Audre Lorde, for example, centers her definition of eroticism around relationality, joy, and self-knowledge, with the erotic fueling sexual desire instead of sexual desire fueling the erotic, calling eroticism that exclusively centers around sexual desire only "superficially erotic."[235] She defines the erotic as "the creative energy empowered," and thus has no necessary connection to sex.[236] By de-centering sexuality from eroticism, asexual erotics and modes of relating become possible.[237] One can detect a similar logic of eroticism in Hildegard's writing. While praising a community of nuns, she declared:

> When a woman refuses, for God's sake, to take a husband, unwilling to join herself to a man, o how great is her nobility then! For since she has refused relations with carnal man, she is, therefore, suited for espousal to the King of heaven. And so she ought to embrace God and adhere to her Lord, because she does not have an earthly man. She ought to remain the way Eve was before God presented her to Adam, when she looked to God, and not to Adam. Let a woman who has refused a carnal man on account of her love for God act in this way: Let her look to God and not to an earthly man that she has already renounced. It is, to be sure, an exceedingly difficult and bitter thing, on account of the deceits of the ancient serpent, for the viridity of her flesh to remain chaste and untried. But when a woman is mightily armed so that she enters into the bridal chamber of the

[234] Sarah Salih, "When is a Bosom Not a Bosom? Problems with Erotic Mysticism," in *Medieval Virginities*, edited by Anke Bernau, Sarah Salih, and Ruth Evans (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 15.
[235] Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic*, 3.
[236] Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic*, 6.
[237] Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics*, 22.

> heavenly King and embraces Him in sweetest love, refusing to worship at the altar of carnal lust but desiring to keep her soul's gaze on God, rejecting the desire of the body—when all this is true, let her, like the eagle, look directly into the sun, and, like the dove, gaze through her window, always ardently reflecting on how she can keep her soul from secular riches and delights and from any dealings with carnal man.[238]

Here, Hildegard describes a marital relationship between God and a virgin, but distinguishes between carnal lust and the embrace of "sweetest love" (*dulcissima caritate*) between herself and God within a bridal chamber. This language suggests a sexual relationship, yet Hildegard resists this sexual interpretation at every turn, clearly juxtaposing the purity of the relationship with God to the taintedness of a fleshly relationship, which suggests that the types of love are opposite. Hildegard's rejection of the body in this passage is clear. The distinction between sex and love parallels the distinction between body and soul, with the body capable of impure, carnal relations that challenge the divine potential of the soul. Hildegard critiques the connection between sex and love, framing it as superficially erotic but without meaningful substance, positioning love as an almost Lordean erotic that encompasses joy and intimate relationality without entailing sex. By using the term "viridity" (*viriditas*) of the flesh, which was crucial to Hildegard's theology and beliefs on monastic enclosure, she invokes the Edenic purity that enclosed virgins could

[238] Hildegard of Bingen and Van Acker, "250r: Hildegard to a Community of Nuns," in *Epistolarium*, 530–31, "Cum feminea forma subtrahit se a iunctura mariti propter Deum, nolens uiro copulari, oquam magna nobilitas in illa tunc est, quia ipsam decet desponsatio superni Regis, quoniam carnalem uirum recusauit. Et sic debet amplecti Deum et adherere Domino suo, quia terrenum uirum non habet. Nam ipsa debet sic permanere ut Eua fuit antequam eam Deus Ade representaret, cum illa tunc non ad Adam, sed ad Deum aspexit. Sic mulier faciat que propter amorem Dei carnalem uirum recusat: ad Deum aspiciat et non ad alium uirum quem prius habere nolebat. Sed ualde durum et amarum est propter dolositatem antiqui serpentis quod uiriditas carnis in seipsa semper arida sit. Attamen, cum mulier fortissime armata fuerit, ita quod in thalamum superni Regis se collocat et quod ipsum Regem dulcissima caritate amplectitur, nolens colere officium carnalis ardoris in concupiscentia, sed uolens uultum animi sui ponere in Deum, recusans uoluptatem carnis sue, tunc aspiciat ut aquila in solem et ut columba per fenestras suas, cogitans et studens quomodo animum suum abstrahat de diuitiis et deliciis secularibus et de consortio carnalis uiri." (Translation: Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrmann, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, III (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 48).

possess on earth.[239] Virginity thus had the potential for something far more transcendent and deeply erotic than choosing the path of carnality.

This passage also indicates the possibility that asexuality was a choice. Hildegard's argument hinges around choosing to step away from one's body and its fleshly nature and towards asexual modes of relating. This letter was addressed to a community of nuns in Zwiefalten, and Hildegard stressed the nobility of such a lifepath. Additionally, she hinges the monastic vows upon a refusal to marry. Choice is key to this passage since all of Hildegard's advice centers around actively choosing espousal to God and a refusal of the body. She admits that, due to the Fall and the temptations of a deceitful serpent, it is "it is extremely difficult and bitter because of the deceits of the ancient serpent that the viridity of the flesh is always dry in itself" to preserve one's chastity.[240] Because it contradicts the body's postlapsarian nature, choosing a state of asexual virginity was by no means simple, by Hildegard's estimation. However, success entailed a state of such purity that Eve had not yet met Adam, thus exceeding the purity of even the Garden of Eden, meaning that all of their desires were directed towards God and not to any sinful bodily desires. By using the feminine "itself" (*seipsa*), Hildegard genders the flesh and its viridity as feminine. In this way, Hildegard genders holy asexuality as a uniquely feminine religious experience. This passage suggests the possibility of choosing asexuality through one's profession. Choosing to become a nun, and thus espousing oneself to God, if done correctly, could lead to an erotically asexual existence.

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[239] Sara Ritchey, *Holy Matter: Changing Perceptions of the Material World in Late Medieval Christianity* (Cornell University Press, 2014), 72.
[240] Hildegard of Bingen and Van Acker, "250r: Hildegard to a Community of Nuns," in *Epistolarium*, 530–31, "Sed ualde durum et amarum est propter dolositatem antiqui serpentis quod uiriditas carnis in seipsa semper arida sit."

Hildegard's notion of vocational asexuality is further expressed in her correspondence with Sophia, Abbess of Altwick. Sophia wrote to Hildegard asking both for help with sexual desire and for permission to remove herself from her administrative duties. In this letter, she claimed, "no one is able to renounce the lust of the flesh and pant after the heavenly country with whole heart without Christ's help."[241] This quote reveals the common notion that the postlapsarian body, full of temptation, could not be fully overcome without divine intervention. This concept, of course, is indicative of compulsory sexuality, given that it naturalizes sexual desire as the 'natural' state of all human bodies. All of those who still reside in their sinful bodies after the Fall are assumed to experience sexual temptation; however, the letter describes the bodily transformation, wrought through spiritual means, as a form of holy asexuality. Under this understanding, asexuality was only possible through prolonged religious devotion, and ultimately, Christ's intervention. As discussed in Chapter 2, this moment of transformation, from a state full of fleshly desire to one without it, frequently appears in hagiography. It is unsurprising that these tropes appear across genres, given that such advice letters often rely on orthodox concepts in order to gain authority or legitimacy.

When responding to Sophia, Hildegard provided strategies to overcome the desire that Sophia naturalized. However, by presenting asexuality as achievable, she denaturalizes it. Instead of being an inherent bodily trait, she attributes it to God lending enough divine grace for a person to continue their vocation:

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[241] Hildegard of Bingen and Van Acker, "50: Abbess Sophia to Hildegard," in *Epistolarium*, 121, "Quia nullus hominum ualet mundanis concupiscentiis renun- tiare et ad supernam patriam omni intentione anhelare, nisi ei desursum datum fuerit Christi iuuamine, ideo religioni uestre intimare cupio quid, Deo instigante ét Spiritus sui gratia cooperante, conceperim in animo meo." (Translation: Baird and Ehrmann, Vol. I, 123, "Because no one is able to renounce the lust of the flesh and pant after the heavenly country with whole heart without Christ's help, I desire to impart to you, devout lady, the idea I have conceived in my heart by the prompting of God and the grace of his Spirit.")

> In a true vision of the mysteries of God, hear these words: O daughter born from man's side and formed by God as the type of the building up of His kingdom, why are you languishing, so that your mind is like the shifting clouds that the storms blow about, at times bright in the sunlight, at times dark in the shadows. This is true because of the cacophony of the morals of those who do not shine before God…Now then, rein yourself in, lest your mind become inflamed with the sweetness which is very harmful to you in the instability of secular life. But be true to your calling, because this is what the grace of God wishes. Beware, therefore, lest you lose that grace through the instability of your mind. May God help you to stay alert through pure knowledge.[242]

Supporting compulsory sexuality of course could have many benefits for Hildegard, yet since Sophia explicitly invoked compulsory sexuality, implying that she was struggling with lust, and since Hildegard responded directly to her concerns about monastic life and chastity, it would be unfair to characterize this response as upholding compulsory sexuality writ large. In her medical texts discussed previously, Hildegard crucially made room for people who experienced varying levels of sexual desire. Sophia, thus, could be a sanguine type or fit into some other category.[243] However, it is understandable that Hildegard's response may ring of compulsory sexuality in certain respects. When giving advice, she strove for it to be useful. Her letters could be lengthy and responded to specific concerns, which indicates her awareness of her audience.

For Hildegard, a believer in monastic enclosure, a Rule provided the structure that could assist in maintaining chastity, and the asexuality that could accompany it. She wrote:

> So it is with the spiritual life: it must be cultivated with great care, lest the tedium cause it to wither in a person's mind. In the beginning the labor because it prohibits the desire of

[242] Hildegard of Bingen and Van Acker, "50r: Hildegard to Abbess Sophia," in *Epistolarium*, 122–23, "In uera uisione mysteriorum Dei hec uerba audi: O filia de latere uiri orta, et figura in edificatione Dei formata, quare tabescis, ita quod mens tua in uicissitudine nubium uolat, quas tempestas circumducit, sic quod interdum ut lux lucet et iterum statim obscuratur? Sic est mens tua per strepitum morum illorum, qui non fulgent ante Deum. Sed tu dicis: Volo requiescere et locum requirere, ubi cor meum nidum habeat, ita ut et anima mea ibi requiescat. O filia, non est utile apud Deum ut onus tuum abicias et ouile Dei relinquas, cum illud lumen habes per quod ili luceas, ita ut ad pascua illud educas. Nunc autem te ipsam coerce, ne mens tua flagret per hanc dulcedinem, que ualde tibi nocet in uicissitudine secularis uite. Tu uero uiue, quia gratia Dei te uult. Caue ergo ne te ab ipsa abstrahas in uagatione mentis tue. Deus te adiuuet, ut in pura scientia uigiles." (Translation: Baird and Ehrmann, Vol. I, 125).
[243] Cadden, "It Takes All Kinds," 163.

> the flesh, the individuality of the will, other such matters, but contempt for the world is very pleasant and sweet when the spirit, sanctified, envelops itself in sanctity. Still, care must be taken, lest it wither.[244]

Hildegard's theorizing of the enclosure functioned to protect the women inside from temptation and desire. Simply following a Rule and working according to its demands had the power to quell desire. This advice is tangible, and provides a pathway towards the asexual state and holiness that it accompanied. This also involves choice, a key notion to Hildegardian holy asexuality. By choosing this lifestyle and embracing all that it had to offer, a person was well on their way towards a spiritual lifestyle, a lifestyle which naturally "prohibits the desire of the flesh." The very practice of monasticism, thus, compelled holy asexuality.

Hildegard's understanding of monasticism, or at least the possibilities entailed within monastic practice, included a notion of recreating prelapsarian asexuality. To Hildegard, "the practice of virginity compelled the world's viridity, making God materially present," and her monastic practices, which were sometimes quite unusual, re-constituted the Garden of Eden on earth within the walls of the monastery.[245] In a letter to Tengswich of Andernach, a nun who questioned how Hildegard dressed her nuns and their behavior, Hildegard responded by claiming that her virgins are already within paradise: "these [strictures on women's dress] do not relate to the virgin; but she herself stands in simplicity and in the integrity of beautiful paradise, which will never appear dry, but always stays in the full viridity of the virgin flower."[246] By claiming

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[244] Hildegard of Bingen and Van Acker, "162: Hildegard to the Congregation of Nuns," in *Epistolarium*, 363, "Sic etiam spiritalis uita cum multa sollicitudine custodienda est, ne hiems tedii eam in mente hominis aridam faciat. Et in initio in labore amara est, quia proprietatem et uoluptatem carnis et cetera similia prohibet; sed contemptus mundi ualde dulcis et suauis est, quando sanctissima anima in sanctitatem se implicat. Sed precauendum est ne arida fiat." (Translation: Baird and Ehrmann, Vol. II, 113).
[245] Ritchey, *Holy Matter*, 56.
[246] Ritchey, *Holy Matter*, 65–66; Hildegard of Bingen and Van Acker, "52r: Abbess Sophia to Hildegard," in *Epistolarium*, 128, "hec non pertinent ad uirginem; sed ipsa stat in simplicitate et

that her chaste nuns already reside in the Garden of Eden, because they were spiritually worthy of it, she also claims that they have achieved a prelapsarian state. Since these virgins were already within paradise, they assumedly had the traits of people from before the Fall, including the absence of sexual desires. By choosing enclosure and all the duties that accompany it, one could choose asexuality. The space itself equated to asexuality under Hildegard's framework. Of course, not all communities were perfect, and a letter survives in which she chastises the behavior of her own community. Her idealized understanding of a monastic community that she worked towards creating was one that mirrored the Garden of Eden on earth, and in which her virginal nuns had regained their asexual existences from before the Fall.

Hildegard's ideal of monasticism is reflected in another of the few letters written to her by someone experiencing sexual temptation. A nun, Gertrude, wrote to Hildegard asking:

> What more can I say? I ask you, beloved mother, to please pray for me to Him, in whose embrace you remain secure and in whose shadow you rest, like a young hart, from the heat of temptation and sin. Pray that He reveal himself to me, as I wander in search of Him, but, alas, without success. May He grant me to sit forever in the shadow of the one I desire.[247]

Gertrude reportedly experienced many temptations and wrote to Hildegard because she purportedly did not. Of course, Gertrude could not possibly know this; Hildegard's reputation and performance of holiness led to the nun's assumption.

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in integritate pulchri paradisi, qui numquam aridus apparebit, sed semper permanet in plena uiriditate floris uirge." (Translation: Baird and Ehrmann, Vol. I, 129).

[247] Hildegard of Bingen and Van Acker, "62: Gertrude, a Nun, to Hildegard," in *Epistolarium*, 144, "Quid plura? Rogo autem te, mater allectissima, ut eum, in cuius amplexibus iugiter commoraris et sub cuius umbra uelut hinnulus a feruore temptationum et uitiorum requiescis, pro me deprecari digneris, quatenus mihi adhuc erranti et eum perquirenti, sed heu! minime inuenienti, se inueniendum manifestet, et sub umbra illius quem desidero me quandoque sedere faciat." (Translation: Baird and Ehrmann, Vol. I, 141).

Hildegard offers little in the way of tangible advice in response to so direct a query. Instead, she praised Gertrude for her choice to enter the monastic life, insisting that such a choice would be enough to quell illicit desires:

> The voice of the turtledove is heard when, of our own free will, we give up the world for the love of God, for more than any other bird the turtle dove remains alone after it has lost its mate. This is what you did, O beloved daughter, when you gave up the pomp of this world. O how beautiful were your shoes, O daughter of the king, when, for the love of God, you entered the straight and narrow way of spiritual life. Therefore, rejoice, O daughter of Zion, because the Holy Spirit dwells at the center of your heart. Reflect that your consoler set you 'as a lily among thorns' when you chose the spiritual life, although you possessed the pomp and riches of this world, which the Son of God called thorns. And in your passion at your entry into the order, you glowed like the rosebush of Jericho. Now, I rejoice over you, for all the things which I have heard and desired have been fulfilled in you. So, you should rejoice with me, too. I hope with true faith that you will be a wall adorned with precious stones and pearls in the sight of God, and that you will be praised by all the heavenly host. Therefore, rejoice and be glad in your God, because you will live forever.[248]

These reassurances surely could have brought consolation to Gertrude. Hildegard claims throughout this passage that Gertrude's *choice* to give up the world to enter a convent was enough. Gertrude expressed the desire to forever be with God in her initial letter, and that desire was enough for Hildegard to console and celebrate her. Gertrude's choice to enter monastic life thereby granted her perfection. Her temptations do not matter, because they are precisely that—temptations from the devil. The temptations, coupled with her deep desire for God, signify her

[248] Hildegard of Bingen and Van Acker, "62r: Hildegard to Gertrude, a Nun," in *Epistolarium*, 145–46, "Et tunc uox turturis auditur, cum propter amorem Dei mundum cum uoluntate nostra relinquimus, ut etiam turtur pre ceteris uolatilibus solus manet cum socium suum amittit. Sic tu etiam, carissima filia, fecisti quando pompam huius mundi reliquisti. Oquam pulchra calciamenta tua, filia regis, fuerunt, cum propter amorem Dei artam et angustam uiam spiritalis uite intrasti! Vnde, o filia Sion, gaude, quia in medio cordis tui Spiritus Sanctus habitat. Considera enim quod consolator tuus sicut lilium inter spinas te constituit, cum pompam et diuitias huius seculi, quas Filius Dei spinas nominauit, habens, spiritalem uitam elegisti. Tu etiam sicut rosa in Iericho in passionibus conuersionis tue rutilabas. Nunc autem de te gaudeo, quia in te completa sunt que de te audiui et desideraui; et tu mecum gaude. Ego autem in uera optione opto ut murus pretiosis lapidibus et margaritis ornatus fias in conspectu Dei, et in laudibus omnis celestis exercitus fias. Gaude igitur et letare in Deo tuo, quoniam in eternum uiues." (Translation; Baird and Ehrmann, Vol. I, 142).

perfection. Holy asexuality, ironically, did not mean that a person never again experienced desire. It meant that the desires did not come from their own body. For Hildegard, simply choosing the "straight and narrow way of spiritual life" within a monastery was enough to live forever in Heaven. Hildegard's call for Gertrude to imitate the turtledove, a symbol of chastity in the "Song of Songs,"thus invokes bridal imagery and advocates for the contemplative *sponsa Christi* lifestyle, which could assist Gertrude as she chose the path of asexuality.[249] Much as she suggested the virgins in her monastery were resplendently adorned, and in fact actually adorned them to reflect their paradisiacal place, she stated that Gertude was worthy of a similar honor.

Demonic temptation helped to position the experience of sexual desire as unnatural, or as not originating from within oneself, thus making room for the experience of sexual desire within the category of holy asexuality. Hildegard's advice stresses tactics to make themselves less vulnerable to such attacks, and thus have a more peaceful experience of asexuality. When writing to a congregation of nuns, she stated, "now, listen again, my daughters, and hear the words of the Living Light, which has no darkness: Keep yourselves from evil in all things. For the whispers of the devil will come, and the whispers of many storms."[250] By using the term "storms" (*tempestatum*), Hildegard invokes her medical understanding of lust, which she described as "wind" (*venae*).[251] The devil thus had the power to bring on these unwanted desires or to draw nuns away from their spiritual duties, but staying singularly fixed on God could help prevent this distraction. In this letter, Hildegard makes no mention of God allowing the devil to tempt people, but again, since such thoughts did not originate from a person, they did not "undo" a person's

[249] Lasse Hodne, "The Turtledove: A Symbol of Chastity and Sacrifice," *Ikon* 2 (2009), 161.
[250] Hildegard of Bingen and Van Acker, "193: Hildegard to the Congregation of Nuns," in *Epistolarium*, 437–38, "Nunc iterum, filie mee, audite, et hec uerba a uiuente luce percipite, nullam partem illius fuscationis habente, et uos in omnibus a malo obseruate. Nam sibilus diaboli ueniet et sibilus multarum tempestatum." (Translation: Baird and Ehrmann, Vol. II, 164).
[251] Hildegard, *Causae et curae*, 69.

spiritual virginity as a thought originating from within themselves might.[252] In another letter, Hildegard cautions fellow mystic Elisabeth of Schönau to avoid immoderate asceticism because the harshness of such actions opened one up to the illusions of the devil:

> When that blackest of birds, the devil, realizes that a person wants to quell illicit desire and cease from sin, then, like a serpent in his hole, he entwines himself into that person's fasting, prayers, and abstinence, and to deceive her he says: your sins cannot be wiped out unless you crush your body underfoot with grief and tears and other immeasurable exertions so that it dries up totally.[253]

This passage suggests that it *is* possible to stop oneself from experiencing unwanted desires, at least according to Hildegard. This desire, the desire to be pure in both body and soul, was what could propel holy asexuality, and indicates the fluidity of sexuality, particularly when one transitions their life along the path of spiritual perfection. Choosing to work towards a path of holy asexuality, though, opened up a person to far more temptations from the devil, and thus perhaps far more illicit, unwanted thoughts. Seemingly paradoxically, the path towards holy asexuality entailed a vast series of sexual temptations that served to highlight their absence once achieving a higher spiritual state. These paradoxes reveal how contradictory the experience of sexuality was, particularly a regime of sexuality which was divided binarily. In order for these categories to be inhabitable, Hildegard made space for such inconsistencies, thus broadening the category and making it wide enough for the majority of women within a monastic community.

Hildegard's epistolary corpus reveals a 'democratization' of holy asexuality amongst enclosed nuns. Much like her medical texts, she resisted universalizing or binary understandings

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[252] Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell,* 121.

[253] Hildegard of Bingen and Van Acker, "198: Hildegard to the Abbess Elisabeth," in *Epistolarium*, 450–51, "Cum uero nigerrima auis, scilicet diabolus, senserit quod homo ab illicitis desideriis et a peccatis suis cessare uoluerit, tunc in ieiunia, in orationes et in abstinentiam illius hominis uelut coluber in cauernam suam se inuoluit, eique in suggestione sua dicit: Peccata tua deleri non possunt, nisi corpus tuum per tristitiam et lacrimas et per alios immensos labores ita conculces quod totum arescat." (Translation: Baird and Ehrmann, Vol. II, 173).

of sexuality, instead focusing on the unique complexion of each person. Crucially though, as her advice which was tailored to the specific needs of those writing to her, she does not exclude any of these nuns from the possibility of holy asexuality. In fact, she even grants it to people such as Gertrude, who wrote to her because of her struggle with lust and received the answer that her choice in vocation meant she already would "live forever." Hildegard's iteration of holy asexuality, which has space for women struggling with temptation from the Devil or with lust itself, rejects the binarity of postlapsarian states of sexual/holy asexual. The experience of sexual desire need not preclude a person from being a holy asexual, but instead could signify its embodiment. Ultimately, though she uses the logic of compulsory sexuality to her rhetorical advantage, Hildegard remained just as resistant to its demands as in her medical writings. However, the inconsistencies that pervade her letters also indicate that the experience of sexuality under these dominating cultural logics was paradoxical, and there were no tidy categories into which people could fit. Hildegard's response to the condition of sexuality, thus, was to expand the categories and reject their naturalizing impulses. She prioritizes choice and vocation instead, as the key factors that produced holy asexuality and the spiritual connection with God that it enabled.

Poverty and Asexuality in Clare's Letters to Agnes

Clare of Assisi (1194–1253), though born to a wealthy Italian family, abandoned that life for one of *imitatio Christi* in the footsteps of St. Francis. Though she initially desired to preach and live in poverty like Francis, she was repeatedly denied this and forced into monastic enclosure. She settled in San Damiano, a monastery outside of Assisi, where she developed her spiritual program. Despite her many negotiations with the papacy, which imposed the Rule of St.

Benedict onto her community, she struggled for the right to poverty. Her insistence on poverty was what distinguished her spiritual program from many other religious women around her time, and unnerved a papacy that strove to keep women under the yoke of monastic enclosure.[254] Clare's iteration of holy asexuality is inextricably linked with her understanding of poverty. Virginity was a necessary precondition for *imitatio Christi* and the extreme poverty which it entailed, and in turn led to the embodiment of holy asexuality. Asexuality was thus a key component of her spirituality and reflects its unique aims. However, by tying it to poverty and her particular spiritual program, her letters create a new path towards the category of holy asexuality, making it available to those following a similar program of virginal poverty.

The style of Clare's letters conforms to *ars dictaminis*, or the medieval art of letter-writing and rhetoric, despite Clare's supposed illiteracy.[255] However, regardless of these debates, as Catherine Mooney insists, Clare is "indisputably the 'intellectual author' of these letters."[256] Only four letters from Clare's personal correspondence survive, and they were all written to the Bohemian princess Agnes of Prague, who chose not to marry and to follow Clare's holy poverty and virginity. The letters were written during various phases of her spiritual career and her concerns shifted in concert. Much like Agnes, though to a lesser degree, Clare was pressured to marry due to her family background.[257] Many of these letters are devoted to praising Agnes's choice not to marry. Their relationship was not only spiritually beneficial, but politically. As the papacy struggled against German kings, Agnes's position as a princess of Bohemia gave Clare's

[254] Joan Mueller, *The Privilege of Poverty: Clare of Assisi, Agnes of Prague, and the Struggle for a Franciscan Rule for Women* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 2.
[255] Catherine M. Mooney, *Clare of Assisi and the Thirteenth-Century Church: Religious Women, Rules and Resistance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 90.
[256] Mooney, *Clare of Assisi and the Thirteenth-Century Church*, 94.
[257] Mueller, *The Privilege of Poverty*, 1.

movement more leverage.[258] The letters hinge upon their relationship, and throughout, Clare provides Agnes with encouragement and consolation to maintain this difficult path and to continue to cultivate virginity, asexuality, and poverty despite overwhelming pressure against this.

Even though specific queries about sexual temptation are lacking, several of these letters contain mentions of a universal struggle against fleshly weakness, which reveals how these religious women rhetorically upheld the logic of compulsory sexuality. In Clare's third letter to Agnes, she wrote: "neither is our flesh the flesh of bronze, nor our strength the strength of stone, but instead, we are frail and prone to every bodily weakness."[259] This statement has gendered implications, particularly given the common trope of feminine weakness, and since Clare does not generalize her statement beyond herself and Agnes, the universality of her claim remains unclear. Interestingly, though, Clare does not call Agnes to imitate her spirituality in all respects. This statement encouraged Agnes to practice more moderate asceticism, something which Clare herself did not do; Francis even asked Clare to practice less intense fasting.[260] In most other respects, Clare positioned herself as rhetorically paralleling Agnes, despite acknowledging Agnes's superior social position. In this regard, though Clare portrayed them both as experiencing frail flesh, her own practices contradict her advice. This suggests that Clare understood her own embodied desires as different from Agnes's. Though this could have many motivations, such as wanting her letters to be relatable and useful, or because of how such extreme fasting was viewed with suspicion, but what is crucial for the purpose of this chapter

[258] Mueller, *The Privilege of Poverty*, 3.
[259] Clare of Assisi and Joan Mueller, trans. and comp., *Clare's Letters to Agnes: Texts and Sources* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University, 2001), 80, "nec caro nostra caro aenea est nec fortitudo lapidis fortitudo nostra, immo fragiles et omni corporali sumus debilitati proclivae." (Translation: Mueller, *Clare's Letters to Agnes*, 81).
[260] Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 85.

was that Clare did not apply the logic of bodily desires, and the compulsory sexuality that this implied, to herself. Though perhaps she was attempting to argue for its universality in this passage, its contrast with her actual practices reveals that she may have seen herself as exempt from compulsory sexuality and other bodily desires. By positioning Agnes, someone Clare seems to have regarded as extremely holy, as still tethered to her body's demands, she both keeps the door open for Agnes to achieve holy asexuality whilst also shrinking the category. The logic of compulsory sexuality, therefore, was useful.

Despite this proclamation of weakness, Clare spends much of the letter praising Agnes's virginity, and thus her own, which rhetorically placed their perfection in opposition to their supposed weakness. This passage reveals Clare's perception of the imperfection of the body, at least for others. The image of an imperfect body invokes its opposite. If the imperfect body was imagined to be inherently lustful, then the perfect body, the one untainted by the Fall, would be without concupiscence. Following in the Augustinian tradition, which posited sexual sin as the reason for Adam and Eve's fall, It is not a stretch, therefore, to imagine Adam and Eve as asexual—or without the sinful 'taint' of sexual desire—much the same as angels were imagined as asexual, prior to their expulsion from the Garden of Eden.[261] There were many theological debates during this period about prelapsarian sex, and many argued that Adam and Eve simply did not have the time to have sex before their expulsion.[262] Despite various disagreements, lust was not understood as part of Adam and Eve's sexual experiences within the Garden.[263] Augustine even went so far as to say that "even the most saintly ascetic was not, in himself, capable of self-mastery; that all humankind was fallen; and that the human will was incorrigibly

[261] Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, 3; DeVun, *The Shape of Sex*, 21.
[262] Katherine Harvey, *The Fires of Lust: Sex in the Middle Ages* (London: Reaktion Books, 2022), 11.
[263] Harvey, *The Fires of Lust*, 11–12.

corrupt."[264] This viewpoint profoundly inflected Western Christian understanding of sexuality, according to Elaine Pagels, and this logic of course entailed compulsory sexuality. Clare thus mimics the predominating Augustinian tradition when discussing naturalized bodily imperfection. The trope of universal bodily weakness after the Fall invokes compulsory sexuality by positing sexual desire as a universal experience to fight against; by citing compulsory sexuality, Clare also invokes its asexual opposite, setting the goalpost within the realm of the imaginary, while simultaneously, and perhaps paradoxically, making room for its achievement on earth.

For Clare, humility was also crucial to her *imitatio Christi*, writing, "so, just as the glorious Virgin of virgins carried him physically, so, you too, following in her footsteps especially those of humility and poverty, can without any doubt, always carry him spiritually in your chaste and virginal body."[265] Humility and poverty, two virtues central to Clare's conception of Christ, provide the pathway towards perfection. This passage frames both virtues as dependent on virginity, however, which would enable the manifestation of divinity on earth. According to Catherine Mooney, "the poverty that Clare preached to Agnes was a vehicle for identification with God, who had become human and poor. Joining themselves to the poor Christ made God present on earth, within history, and among humans."[266] Clare's *imitatio Christi* depended on virginity just as much as humility. For Clare, virginity gave her "a spiritual identity for articulating the necessity for practicing poverty. Betrothed to Christ, the virgin must reflect

[264] Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, 89.
[265] Clare of Assisi and Mueller, *Clare's Letters to Agnes*, 78, "Sicut ergo Virgo virginum gloriosa materialiter, sic et tu, sequens eius vestigia, humilitatis praesertim et paupertatis, casto et virgineo corpore spiritualiter semper sine dubietate omni portare potes." (Translation: Mueller, 79).
[266] Mooney, *Clare of Assisi and the Thirteenth-Century Church*, 109.

her poor spouse's own humble material presence."[267] Without virginity, though, Clare and Agnes would have been unable to harbor Christ within themselves regardless of their other virtues. Virginity ultimately was the key to Clare's spiritual project, because it was through virginity that she could practice other crucial virtues and align herself with Christ. In her first letter to Agnes, she waxes at length about Agnes's virginity and her choice to reject marriage. She states:

> Therefore, dearest sister-or should I say, most venerable lady, because you are spouse and mother and sister of my Lord Jesus Christ, (13) and are most resplendently distinguished by the banner of inviolable virginity and holiest poverty-be strengthened in the holy service begun in you out of a burning desire for the Poor Crucified. (14) For all of us he endured the passion of the cross, rescuing us from the power of the prince of darkness-by whose power we were kept in chains because of the transgression of our first parent-and reconciling us to God the Father.[268]

Virginity, thus, was a means of reconciliation after the Fall. By comparing Agnes to the Virgin Mary, free from original sin, Clare implies that to carry Christ, one must be close enough to Mary's sinless state to do so. She thus invoked an asexual dimension to the chastity she described. Through encouraging these values—chastity and humility—these women advocated for the spiritual potential of holy asexuality. The lustless state was itself a goal, but only insofar as it yielded greater spiritual benefits and an elevated relationship with divinity. Imitating Christ and all of his virtues was one such strategy that Clare advised in order to achieve this state.

One of Clare's prominent pieces of advice to Agnes was simply to avoid the counsel of those who disagreed with her lifestyle; this ultimately reveals the state of utter dependence on Christ that the state of poverty and virginity compelled. She wrote: "indeed, if someone tells you

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[267] Ritchey, *Holy Matter*, 101.

[268] Clare of Assisi and Mueller, *Clare's Letters to Agnes*, 32, "Ergo, soror carissima-immo domina veneranda nimium, quia sponsa et mater estis et soror Domini mei Iesu Christi, virginitatis inviolabilis et paupertatis sanctissimae vexillo resplendentissime insignita-in sancto servitio confortamini pauperis Crucifixi ardenti desiderio inchoato. Qui pro nobis omnibus crucis sustinuit passionem, eruens nos de potestate principis tenebrarum-qua ob transgressionem primi parentis vincti vinculis tenebamur-et nos reconcilians Deo Patri." (Translation: Mueller, 33).

something else or suggests anything to you that may hinder your perfection and that seems contrary to your divine vocation, even though you must respect him, still, do not follow his advice; instead, poor virgin, embrace the Poor Christ."[269] Here, Clare yet again emphasizes the necessity of poverty to perfection. Virginity and poverty parallel each other in this passage, with both featuring as the core elements of Clare's spirituality. Poverty created a condition of total dependence on Christ and thus erased self-will.[270] Chastity had a similar effect, particularly by linking a person to Christ through their rejection of worldly relationships. These practices enabled a union with Christ that was the culmination of her *imitatio Christi*. Poverty and virginity, when tied together inextricably, created the conditions for a Lordean erotic relationship with Christ that centered more around unification than a sexual union.

Clare rhetorically relies on a contrast between carnal and divine marriage to demonstrate the spiritual necessity of asexuality when advising Agnes to stay her course on the religious way of life. Given that both Clare and Agnes rejected marriage, and just how much space in the letters was devoted towards praising Agnes's turn towards the spiritual life, this emphasis on marriage in contrast with the turn towards religious life is to be expected. Her first letter, full of exaltation for Agnes's decision to turn away from the world and towards God, states:

> I rejoice because you, more than others, could have enjoyed public ostentation, honors, and worldly status having had the opportunity to become, with eminent glory, legitimately married to the illustrious emperor, as would befit your and his pre-eminence. Spurning all these things with your whole heart and mind, you have chosen instead holiest poverty and physical want, accepting a nobler spouse, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will keep your virginity always immaculate and inviolate. Having loved him, you are

[269] Clare of Assisi and Mueller, *Clare's Letters to Agnes*, 58, "Si quis vero aliud tibi dixerit, aliud tibi suggesserit, quod perfectionem tuam impediat, quod vocationi divinae contrarium videatur, etsi debeas venerari, noli tamen eius consilium imitari, sed pauperem Christum, virgo pauper, amplectere." (Translation: Mueller, 59).
[270] Mueller, *The Privilege of Poverty*, 5.

> chaste; having touched him, you will be made more pure; having received him, you are a virgin.[271]

Virginity is central here, unsurprisingly, considering one of Clare's primary purposes in writing such a letter of advice was to help Agnes remain unmarried, virginal, and pursuing a Christlike path. In this passage, it is love of Christ that enabled her purity, both of body and soul. This purity connotes perfection, which entailed an asexual dimension in order to leave spiritual virginity spotless as well. Loving Christ could be cultivated through devotion, so this letter reveals how devotional practices could stimulate virginity and purity, thus creating a state of holy asexuality. Clare was "clearly concerned with distinguishing her sisters as virgins and characterizing their spiritual work as unique to virgins."[272] Virginity was crucial to her project, as the values she sought to promote were both contingent on it, and were embellished with notes of holy asexuality. Clare's use of marriage imagery "sounds the dynamic Franciscan notion of following the poor Christ" rather than the *sponsa Christi* model, and thus focuses more on virginity, poverty and humility on earth, rather than on a heavenly meeting.[273] Her invocation of marriage was "not union with the divine, but union with the conditions of the incarnate Christ. She wished to encourage an identity of the virgins with the material conditions taken on by Christ, thereby forging an identity with Christ."[274] Practicing *imitatio Christi* and all of the

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[271] Clare of Assisi and Mueller, *Clare's Letters to Agnes*, 28–30, "Hinc est quod, cum perfrui potuissetis prae ceteris pompis et honoribus et saeculi dignitate, cum gloria excellenti valentes inclito Caesari legitime desponsari, sicut vestrae ac eius excellentiae decuisset, quae omnia respuentes, toto animo et cordis affectu magis sanctissimam paupertatem et corporis penuriam elegistis, sponsum nobilioris generis accipientes, Dominum Iesum Christum, qui vestram virginitatem semper immaculatam custodiet et illaesam. Quem cum amaveritis casta estis, cum tetigeritis mundior efficiemini, cum acceperitis virgo estis. Cuius possibilitas forior, generositas celsior, cuius aspectus pulchrior, amor suavior et omnis gratia elegantior." (Translation: Mueller, 29–31).
[272] Ritchey, *Holy Matter*, 101.
[273] Mooney, *Clare of Assisi and the Thirteenth-Century Church*, 106; Ritchey, *Holy Matter*, 102.
[274] Ritchey, *Holy Matter*, 102.

virtues that it entailed thus was central to producing holy asexuality, whilst also being dependent on the purity it wrought to have a mystical relationship with Christ.

In her letters, Clare puts forward a program of holy asexuality based on complete dependence on and unification with Christ. By relinquishing one's worldly identity and aligning with Christ, which, in the culmination of this spiritual program, entailed the experience of a Christ-like holy asexuality, a person could achieve similar bodily desires, or lack thereof as Christ. She did not go so far as to claim to actually *be* Christ, or to embody all of his virtues, but rather positioned both herself and Agnes as striving towards the condition of holy asexuality in their attempt of emulation. The imitation, coupled with the mystical relationship with Christ, eventually granted spiritual perfection and chastity that amounted to holy asexuality. Clare's careful self-presentation reveals that she understood this lifestyle was not, or could not, be for everyone. Clare does rely on the trope of compulsory sexuality and used it to imagine herself as transcending the postlapsarian condition and achieving a Christly condition while on earth. While this trope does limit the category of asexuality, Clare also provides a new path towards it through her practices of poverty and virginity. Though she shifts the goals of holy asexuality away from the image of chastely awaiting one's bridegroom and towards divine unification and perfection, she does not make the category more expansive as Hildegard did. Clare, however, does not explicitly restrict holy asexuality, nor does she claim that others cannot achieve this state. Rather she highlights it as a central component of her particular spiritual program. Thus, Clare adds another pathway towards holy asexuality, a path tied to the reform movements of which she was a part.

"Would a Woman Not Be a Senseless Fool"?: Catherine of Siena's Devotional Program and Holy Asexuality

Catherine of Siena (1347–1380), a Dominican penitent, political peacemaker, and spiritual counselor known for her mystical relationship with Christ and extreme asceticism. Much of the information about Catherine's life comes from the *Legenda maior*, her hagiography written by her confessor Raymond of Capua, which established her history with mystical visions and her vow of virginity that she made to Christ as a child.[275] Nearly 400 of her letters survive, written in the Sienese dialect, and some of her contemporaries reported that Catherine dictated multiple letters to multiple scribes at a time, thus adding a miraculous quality to their composition.[276] These letters, thus, "straddled oral and literate cultures" and this oral effect represented "a voice at work, eager to express often in the opening sentence a forceful statement of 'desiderio' or will."[277] Catherine's extreme resistance to marriage in itself suggests a sort of inclination towards holy asexuality, at least in her hagiography, but she further establishes this in her devotional program which distinguished between both body, will, and soul. The first two, had to be overcome in order to align oneself with divinity and be free from both bodily and mental desires. Thus, Catherine heavily relies on the logic of compulsory sexuality to illustrate the holiness of her state, as well as to advise others towards it. Though she rhetorically relies on the binary distinction between holy asexuality and postlapsarian compelled sexuality, the nuance she adds to this distinction complicates the neat binary. Catherine used the logic of compulsory

[275] Carolyn Muessig, "Introduction," in *A Companion to Catherine of Siena*, edited by Carolyn Muessig, George Ferzoco, and Beverly Mayne Kienzle (Boston: Brill, 2012), 1.
[276] Suzanne Noffke, "The Writings of Catherine of Siena: The Manuscript Tradition," in *A Companion to Catherine of Siena*, edited by Carolyn Muessig, George Ferzoco, and Beverly Mayne Kienzle (Boston: Brill, 2012), 296.
[277] Jane Tylus, "Mystical Literacy: Writing and Religious Women in Late Medieval Italy," in *A Companion to Catherine of Siena*, edited by Carolyn Muessig, George Ferzoco, and Beverly Mayne Kienzle (Boston: Brill, 2012), 161, 164.

sexuality to her advantage while carving out a place for varied experiences of asexual embodiment. Catherine's iteration of holy asexuality centers around self-will, and in so doing she rejects the simple binaries of body and soul, and sexual and asexual.

Upholding the logic of compulsory sexuality within letters of advice could have many benefits, ranging from increasing one's religious authority, sanctity, or even relatability. Letters such as these were often read aloud to many people, and thus had to be applicable to more than just one inquirer. Catherine of Siena, in particular, often tailored her advice to the profession of those who sought it, be they cloistered or lay.[278] This adaptability suggests that the authors might have wished for the advice to be useful or to provide the consolation sought by those who wrote to them. Yet another possibility is that holy women may have understood their own asexual inclinations from within the rubric of holy asexuality, since it was a cultural framework available to them.

Catherine establishes her iteration of holy asexuality when she describes two kinds of "perfect" (*perfetti*) people in a letter to the anchorite William Flete. The first kind "devote themselves entirely to chastising their body by performing severe and enormous penances. To keep their sensuality from rebelling against reason, they have set their whole desire more on mortifying their body than on killing their selfish will."[279] Though this desire might be misplaced, according to Catherine, given how much of her advice centers around taming one's

[278] Francis Thomas Luongo, "Catherine of Siena's Advice to Religious Women," *Specula*, no. 3 (2022), 115.

[279] Catherine of Siena and Antonio Volpato, trans., "A frate Guiglielmo d'Inghilterra de' Frati eremiti di santo Agustino," in *Le lettere* in *Santa Caterina da Siena, Opera Omnia, Testi e Concordanze* (Pistoia: Provincia Romana dei Frati Predicatori/Centro Riviste, 2002), 89, "ciò sono alcuni che perfettamente si danno a gastigare el corpo loro facendo aspra e grandissima penetenzia; e a ciò che la sensualità non ribelli a la ragione, tutto ànno posto el desiderio loro più in mortificare el corpo che in uccidere la propria volontà." (Translation: Suzanne Noffke, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, Vol. III (Tempe AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2008), 242).

self-will, this type of person still qualifies as "perfect," because they achieved bodily obedience through their ascetic practices, which likely entailed the cessation of sexual desires. In many hagiographies, as will be demonstrated in the next chapter, extreme bodily penitence was often represented as leading to an asexual state. Such practices led to a moment of transformation, particularly in cases where the holy women focused on punishing their bodies for the sexual desire that they reportedly experienced. These harsh practices, to the first type of perfect people, functioned as a form of consolation, allowing them to ignore the more difficult task of slaying the will, and the "odor of pride" clings to these practices, easily corrupting them, according to Catherine.[280] Since this method did not lead to total perfection and the ultimate quelling of the body's desires, it cannot be understood as holy asexuality, per what it meant to Catherine. To other medieval people, such as Thomas of Cantimpré or Christina of Hane's hagiographer, using force to tame the body was a perfectly legitimate means of achieving holy asexuality. However, even if it did not qualify as holy asexuality to Catherine, this group of people do fall under the rubric of chosen asexuality. Przybylo and Cooper emphasize that "choice is specious" when it comes to reading asexuality in the archive.[281] Catherine herself acknowledges that this method can be effective in eliminating bodily desires, and thus, she made space for alternate modes of existing asexually. Though not examples of holy asexuality, the first type of perfect people can still be understood as examples of medieval asexual embodiment.

The second class of perfect people represented a more ideal journey for overcoming the flesh and experiencing a state of holy asexuality, precisely because they focused on the will instead of the body. Catherine wrote:

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[280] Catherine of Siena and Volpato, "A frate Guiglielmo d'Inghilterra," 89, "l'odore de la superbia." (Translation: Noffke, Vol. III, 242).
[281] Przybylo and Cooper, "Asexual Resonances," 301.

> This is what those who do live in this sweet and glorious light, who are perfect whatever their situation. They hold in due reverence whatever God permits them, considering themselves deserving of sufferings and of outrages from the world, worthy to be deprived of consolation.[282]

Catherine uses more glowing language in her description of this second class, clearly preferring them over the first. This state is characterized by a passive acceptance of whatever suffering may come their way, and an acknowledgement that any perfection that they may have is not their own, but granted by God. This type of perfection similarly results in bodily obedience, but it more importantly results in the obedience of the will, which was the underlying source of human imperfection. With one's will abandoned and exchanged for acceptance of God's will, any temptation or struggle no longer comes from one's own body or soul. Furthermore, the temptations that God *does* allow no longer pose much of a challenge. If a person's desire is fully aligned with God, then their body could no longer experience postlapsarian features such as sexual desire. Of course they experienced suffering, but that suffering is gladly accepted by the second class of perfect people. Catherine may not have suggested the absence of sexual desire, but she did assert that sexual desire was no longer an issue for the second class of perfect people. The difference between the first and second types of perfect people reveals two methods for how Catherine counseled the attainment of asexuality. The first class might achieve willful asexuality, since they exercised their will in order to cease the demands of the body. The second, since they overcame their will, aligning themselves instead with God and God's desires, are more likely candidates for holy asexuals under Catherine's logic.

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[282] Catherine of Siena and Volpato, "A frate Guiglielmo d'Inghilterra," 90, "E vederebbe che ogni cosa dà per amore; e con amore e con reverenzia debba ricevere ogni cosa, sì come fanno e' secondi, che sono in questo dolce e glorioso lume, e' quali sono perfetti in ogni stato che sono, e in ciò che Dio permette a loro. Ogni cosa ànno in debita reverenzia, reputandosi degni de le pene e scandali del mondo, e d'essere privati de le loro consolazioni." (Translation: Noffke, Vol. III, 242).

Catherine linked the body's desires to virginity in her letter to Nanna, her niece, making explicit that one of the goals of her ascetic piety was to prevent her body from experiencing sexual desire. She stated that, to be like the five wise virgins from the "Parable of the Ten Virgins," "we must so subjugate and discipline our five bodily senses that we will never sin with them by using them (or any one of them) for immoderate pleasure or enjoyment. This is how we shall be five [holy virgins], by having subjugated our five bodily senses."[283] Thus, by subduing the senses, the ultimate goal was the elimination of bodily pleasure. By linking the body's sensation to virginity, Catherine suggests that desires that are likely to offend were those that went counter to chastity. Mollifying the senses could of course be done through harsh ascetic practices, as with the first class of perfect people, but since these practices were rooted in self-knowledge—knowledge of humanity's inherent sinfulness and desires—which came from many hours of meditative prayer, these wise virgins likely fell into the second class of perfect people. Both virginity, as well as the absence of sexual desire that accompanied it when bodily sensation was subdued, were both achieved through devotion and piety and facilitated spiritual perfection.

Much of Catherine's advice to others centers around "self-knowledge" (*cognoscimento di te*) and "self-will" (*volontà*), with the goal of finding divinity and God's goodness within oneself.[284] Self-knowledge was critical, because it meant that one understood the sinfulness of the body and the soul. Self-will—not the body—was the ultimate cause of unruly desires, and by controlling one's self-will and relinquishing it completely to God, one could achieve a deeper

[283] Catherine of Siena and Volpato, "A Nanna figliuola di Benincasa in Firenze, sua nipote verginella," 29–30, "noi soggioghiamo e mortifichiamo e' nostri cinque sentimenti del corpo, per sì fatto modo che noi non offendiamo mai con essi, pigliando con essi o con alcuni d'essi disordinato diletto o piacere. E a questo modo saremo cinque: cioè che aremo soggiogati e' nostri cinque sentimenti corporali." (Translation: Suzanne Noffke, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, Vol. II (Tempe AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2007), 559).
[284] Thomas McDermott, "Catherine of Siena's Teaching on Self-Knowledge," *New Blackfriars* 88, no. 1018 (2007), 642.

form of perfection, according to Catherine's devotional program. These imperfections merely manifested themselves in the body. Accompanying spiritual perfection was control of the body, or rather that the body's senses were muted so as not to experience uncouth desires, as reflected in her letter to Nanna. Carrying the oil, as the five wise virgins did, meant that their lamps were lit. Catherine frequently used staying within the light as a metaphor for spiritual perfection, mentioning to many people that she wished to see them in "true and very perfect light" when giving devotional advice.[285] In a letter to Monna Alessa, a widow-turned-Dominican penitent, Catherine describes her understanding of the two cells of self-knowledge. She wrote,

> My daughter, make yourself two dwelling places. The first is a physical dwelling place, your room. Don't leave it to be running here and there, except as required by necessity, a command of the prioress, or charity. The other dwelling place is spiritual, and you should carry it with you constantly. This is the cell of true self-knowledge, and there you will find knowledge of God's goodness to you.[286]

Here, Catherine describes the metaphorical home that she advocated building within oneself. This devotional practice led to abandoning self-will and carrying perfect light within oneself, and was itself a form of prayer.[287] Practicing self-knowledge could lead to perfection, and was critical to achieving the asexual state of Catherine's second class of spiritually perfect people.

Self-knowledge as a devotional practice led to the ability to discern good from bad, thus being able to flee from the impudent desires of the will. When writing to Eugenia, another of her nieces, she asserted:

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[285] Catherine of Siena and Volpato, "A Daniella da Orvieto vestita de l'abito di santo Domenico," 471, "con desiderio di vederti con vero e perfettissimo lume." (Translation: Noffke, Vol. III, 328).
[286] Catherine of Siena and Volpato, "A monna Alessa," 72, "Fa', figliuola mia, due abitazioni: una abitazione attuale della cella, che tu non vada discorrendo e' molti luoghi se non per necessità o per obedienzia della priora o per carità. E un'altra abitazione fa' spiritualmente, la quale porti continuamente teco; e questa è la cella del vero cognoscimento di te, dove trovarai el cognoscimento della bontà di Dio in te." (Translation: Noffke, Vol. I, 601).
[287] McDermott, "Catherine of Siena's Teaching on Self-Knowledge," 638.

> Therefore, like a prudent person, she looks with the light of most holy faith, which is in the eye of the mind, and beholds what is harmful and what is useful to her. And as she has seen, so she loves and condemns—holding, I say, her own fleshly nature and all the vices which proceed from it, bound beneath the feet of her affections. She flees all causes that may incline her to vice or hinder her perfection. So she annuls her self-will, which is the cause of all evil, and subjects it to the yoke of holy obedience, not only to the Order and its chief, but to every least creature through God.[288]

Invoking a sinful "fleshly nature" (*sensualità*) does reveal Catherine's underlying reliance on the logic of compulsory sexuality in order to explain her own experience of holy asexuality wrought through her devotional practices. This passage also suggests that situation has a large impact on the experience of desire. Not attending a banquet may make it easier to abstain from food, just as avoiding people whom one might sexually desire may limit or prevent such desires. This also reveals a sort of tenuousness to this form of perfection, since it can be undone by various temptations or situations. In another letter providing spiritual advice, Catherine provided one of the end goals of self-knowledge:

> When we are thus stripped of our every wish and clothed in God's will, we are very pleasing to God. Like an untethered horse we run swiftly from grace to grace, from virtue to virtue. There is no tether to restrain us from running because we have cut ourselves loose from every disordered appetite and desire for our own will, which are tethers and ties that keep the souls of spiritual persons from running free.[289]

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[288] Catherine of Siena and Volpato, "A suoro Eugenia sua nipote nel monasterio di Sancta Agnesa a Montepulciano," 32–33, "E però, come prudente, raguarda col lume della santissima fede, il quale lume sta ne l'occhio de l'intelletto, e raguarda quello che l'è nocivo e quello che l'è utile. E come ella à veduto, così ama e spregia: dispregia, dico, la propria sensualità, tenendola legata sotto a' piedi de l'affetto e tutti i vizii che procedono da essa sensualità. Ella fugge tutte le cagioni che la possino inchinare a vizio o impedire la sua perfezione. Unde ella annega la propria volontà, che l'è cagione d'ogni male, e sottomettela al giogo della santa obedienzia, non solamente a l'ordine e al prelato suo, ma a ogni minima creatura per Dio." (Translation: Vida Dutton Scudder, *Saint Catherine of Siena as Seen in her Letters* (London, New York: J.M. Dent and E.P. Dutton, 1905), 22).

[289] Catherine of Siena and Volpato, "A monna Giovanna di Capo, monna Giovanna di Francesco, monna Cecca di Chimento, monna Caterina dello Spedaluccio, mantellate di santo Domenico, da Siena, etc.," 193–94, "e allora l'anima, spogliata d'ogni sua voluntà e vestita della voluntà di Dio, è molto piacevole a Dio. E allora, come cavallo sfrenato, corre velocissimamente di grazia in grazia, e di virtù in virtù; e non à veruno freno che lo tenga, che non possa correre, però che à tagliato da sé ogni disordinato appetito e desiderio per propria voluntà, e' quali sono legami che non lassano correr l'anima delle spirituali." (Translation: Suzanne Noffke, *The Letters of*

Self-will, thus, was the cause of sinful desires, rather than the body alone being the source of sin. Chastity, likely, was one of the virtues to which Catherine referred, as it was significant to her elsewhere in her works. Once the soul was divested of its self-will, attending to each of these virtues would be a joy, particularly since the soul has no desires of its own. This "severing" (*tagliato*) of the self-will leads to a state without "inordinate appetite" (*disordinato appetito*), which can be read as a state without the desire for food, sex, or other comforts, hence as an asexual state, though not an asexuality resembling the modern category in which sexuality is often conceived of as a static, unchanging identity. This asexuality, though tied to the identity of spiritually perfect, does not originate from within oneself. Even though self-knowledge involves knowledge of God's goodness within oneself, which points to the capacity for asexuality as within oneself as well, it does not come from one's own body or will, but rather from removing one's selfhood by aligning oneself entirely with God. Though the first type of people could achieve a form of asexual embodiment because their "flesh may not rebel" any longer, according to Catherine, because their wills were still their own, they had not staunched desire at its source. Thus, their virtue was lower than those who had relinquished control over their will and experienced holy asexuality through a 'truer' union with God, under Catherine's logic.

Self-knowledge did not just mean knowledge of God's goodness, but also of humanity's inherent sinfulness. In her letter to Eugenia, mentioned above, she discussed how knowledge over one's fleshly nature could enable a person to rid themselves of its effects. In her letter to Nanna, she furthered this conclusion, writing:

> But we cannot attain this virtue of humility except through true self-knowledge. I mean we must know our own poverty and weakness, that of ourselves we are incapable of a single virtuous act or of freeing ourselves from any pain or struggle. For if we are

Catherine of Siena, Vol. I (Tempe AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000), 147).

> physically ill or are suffering or struggling spiritually, we cannot free ourselves of it or get rid of it. If we could, we certainly would. So it is indeed true that of ourselves we are nothing, nothing but shame, poverty, filth, weakness, and sins. This ought to make us always lowly and humble.[290]

Though Catherine puts forth a program to achieve an asexual state in other letters, her view of human nature, through its reliance on compulsory sexuality, practically excludes the possibility of an asexual existence. Frailty and sins, she argued, were inescapable. Catherine acknowledged, though, that dwelling in such an abysmal pit of self-knowledge would not be spiritually beneficial, arguing instead to meditate on God's goodness and humanity's salvation:

> Because we would become discouraged and weary, and from discouragement we would end up in despair. Now the devil wants nothing more than to lead us to discouragement, so that he can eventually bring us to despair. So we ought to dwell in knowledge of God's goodness within us, realizing that he has created us in his own image and likeness and has created us anew to grace in the blood of his only-begotten Son, the gentle Word incarnate, and that God's goodness is continually worked in us.[291]

This advice is about how to make use of one's self-knowledge. She also focuses on the re-creation of humanity, thus saving people from their sinful, postlapsarian state. The possibility to escape from one's inherent state of misery, frailty, and sin emerges through Catherine's call to focus on the more positive, and less human, aspects of self-knowledge. As the beginning of this passage shows, Catherine does not argue that salvation cured the blight of human imperfection.

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[290] Catherine of Siena and Volpato, "A Nanna," 29, "Ma a questa virtù de l'umilità non potremo venire se non per vero conoscimento di noi, cioè conoscendo la miseria e fragilità nostra, e che noi per noi medesimi non potiamo alcuno atto virtuoso, né levarci neuna battaglia o pena; però che se noi abiamo la infermità corporale, o una pena o battaglia mentale, noi non ce la potiamo levare: però che, se noi potessimo, subito la levaremo via. Dunque bene è vero che noi per noi non siamo nulla altro che obrobio, miseria, puzza, fragilità e peccati: per la qual cosa sempre dobiamo stare bassi e umili." (Translation: Noffke, Vol. II, 558).

[291] Catherine of Siena and Volpato, "A Nanna," 29, "però che l'anima verrebbe a tedio e a confusione, e dalla confusione verrebbe a disperazione; unde el dimonio non vorrebbe altro se non farci venire a confusione, per farci poi venire a disperazione. Conviensi dunque stare nel conoscimento della bontà di Dio in sé, vedendo ch'egli ci à creati alla immagine e similitudine sua, e ricreati a grazia nel sangue de l'unigenito suo Figliuolo, Verbo dolce incarnato, e come continovamente la bontà di Dio aduopara in noi." (Translation: Noffke, Vol. II, 558).

Rather, people have a choice, and choosing to dwell on God's goodness and submitting to God's will could lead to spiritual perfection, which included Catherine's formulation of holy asexuality.

Catherine's distinction between body, soul, and will correlates with the late medieval concepts of bodily and spiritual virginity. Beginning in at least the 12th century, virginity was conceived of as a state of mind, beginning within patristic logic and expanded upon by Peter Abelard and Bernard of Clairvaux.[292] There were various bodily tests for virginity as well, and physical virginity was certainly valuable, but virginity of the soul had greater spiritual connotations. Because these tests were impossible to conduct accurately, "the real test of virginity was a woman's modesty as detected in her gait, her speech, her behavior, her downcast eyes, but not her genitalia."[293] The performance of virtue and virginity mattered not just because the physical reality of the category of virginity was suspect, but also because these behaviors could indicate one's internal spiritual virginal state. Thus, since chastity was key to the identity of many holy women, performing the absence of sexual desire, or holy asexuality, was central to 'proving' that virtue. In this late medieval "climate of intentionality, it was believed that a virgin could be undone by wayward thoughts," which reveals how significant the absence of sexual desire was to the concept of virginity.[294] Though this attention to mental states could entail a person having extreme control over their thoughts to the point of preventing desire, this framework also privileged those who were able to completely overcome those thoughts, thus preserving both bodily and spiritual virginity. And to Catherine, given that spiritual virginity involved no longer experiencing sexual desire or temptation, virginity of the soul entailed an asexual experience in a way that physical virginity alone might not.

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[292] Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell*, 121.
[293] Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 21.
[294] Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell*, 121.

Catherine distinguishes between body and soul in her letters. Sexual desire might originate in the body, but the desires of the soul mattered more to her. In her letter to Nanna, Catherine wrote that the five foolish virgins, "who prided themselves (and emptily!) only on their physical integrity and virginity and lost their spiritual virginity by the adulteration of their five senses," explicitly delineating the distinction between virginity of the body and that of the soul.[295] Though both were important, that of the soul was clearly more significant to her, likely because it was more integral to the quality of someone's personhood. Catherine, renowned for her own harsh ascetic practices described in her hagiography, resists the body as a vehicle for communion with the divine in her letters of advice to others. Though she does not classify herself as one type of perfect or the other, nor does she even claim perfection, her focus on self-will and self-knowledge resists the historiographic trope that later medieval religious women focused on their bodies as means to the divine.[296] For Catherine, the body was merely a vessel to transcend. In her own words, she so much as states that it was insignificant in comparison to the soul. The purpose of her own ascetic practices were not body-related, yet rather mental. While Raymond presents Catherine's ascetic practices as a stereotypical example of feminine body-driven piety, Catherine herself resists such an interpretation. Her own theology rejects it, challenging both medieval and modern scholars who relegate her interpretation to tropes constructed largely by medieval men.[297] Her letters provide an open challenge to this historiographic mode of thought, illustrating how mollifying the will, and not the body, was the key to divine union. Catherine does not deny the necessity of asceticism, and later in the letter to

[295] Catherine of Siena and Volpato, "A Nanna," 30, "gloriandosi solamente e vanamente della integrità e verginità del corpo, perderono la verginità dell'anima per corruzione de' cinque sentimenti." (Translation: Noffke, Vol. II, 559–60).
[296] Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*.
[297] Elliott, *Proving Woman*, 6.

William Flete she comments that mortifying the body may be necessary in order to demolish self-will, but she centers it around the will instead of the desires of the flesh.[298] Spiritual virginity, which depended on pure thoughts, implies the absence of 'improper,' sexual feelings, thus suggesting the existence of an asexual state, which, through various devotional strategies, could be achieved and embodied.

Much like Clare, Catherine too emphasized humility in her letters, a value which was intimately connected to virginity and chastity. Humility was often a stepping stone along the way to perfection, and was pivotal to the underlying theology. When relating "Parable of the Ten Virgins" in her letter to Nanna, she positions humility as one of the most important values to maintaining a relationship with God. The five foolish virgins "lost their spiritual virginity by the adulteration of their five senses. They did not carry along the oil of humility, and so their lamps went out."[299] Cultivating humility was crucial, under Catherine's devotional program, because it enabled appropriate bodily mortification in order to be properly unified with God. She critiqued ascetic practices done for the 'wrong' reasons, such as those who were too focused on taming the body instead of the will, but if the goal was humility, then a degree of harshness was permitted.[300] In another letter, Catherine wrote, "the soul cannot be perfected except on the two wings of charity and humility. Now humility she learns through the self-knowledge to which she comes in times of darkness. And charity is gained by seeing that in love I have sustained a good

[298] Catherine of Siena and Volpato, "A frate Guiglielmo d'Inghilterra," 90–91, "Essi ànno bene mortificato el corpo, ma non per principale affetto: ma come strumento che elli è ad aitare a uccidere la propria volontà, però che el principale affetto debbe essere, ed è, d'uccidere la volontà." (Translation: Noffke, Vol. III, 244, "they have mortified their body, yes, but not as their chief concern. (For their chief concern is and ought to be to kill their selfish will.")
[299] Catherine of Siena and Volpato, "A Nanna," 30, "perderono la verginità dell'anima per corruzione de' cinque sentimenti, perché non portarono l'olio de l'umilità con loro." (Translation: Noffke, Vol. II, 560).
[300] Catherine of Siena and Volpato, "A frate Guiglielmo d'Inghilterra," 89.

and holy will in her."[301] Self-knowledge, a devotional meditation, led to humility. As discussed earlier in this chapter, self-knowledge consisted of both knowledge of one's own fleshly nature and failings as well as knowledge of divinity within oneself. Humility, thus, hinged upon carnality. The other side of self-knowledge, however, allowed one to transcend this carnality in favor of holy asexuality and a mystical relationship with Christ.

Catherine's advice to fellow religious women reveals how she sought to produce holy asexuality via devotional practices. In a letter to Tora, a young widow-turned-Franciscan, Catherine advised her to: "dress yourself not in brown—that is, in the dark colors of selfish love and worldly pleasure—but in whiteness of purity by preserving your mind and body in the state of continence."[302] This reads as both a bodily and spiritual dress code. By writing this piece of advice, Catherine admits how crucial self-presentation and performance was to living a holy life. However, reducing this advice merely to its performative elements misses the spiritual effect that such a performance could have. The performance of holiness, in this case by wearing white clothes, not only signaled chastity to others but impacts the inner spiritual state. Wearing dark colors might invite worldliness, whereas white clothing helps preserve virginity. The performance and what it signals mutually transform one another. Performing holy asexuality was thus crucial to presenting oneself as holy, and could lead to its embodiment.

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[301] Catherine of Siena and Volpato, "A suoro Bartolomea de la Seta, monaca di santo Stefano in Pisa," 324, "Tu sai che l'anima non può essere perfetta, se non con queste due ali dell'umilità e della carità: l'umilità per lo cognoscimento di sé medesimo—nel quale ella viene nel tempo delle tenebre; la carità s'acquista vedendo che Dio per amore gli à conservata la buona e santa volontà." (Translation: Noffke, Vol II, 183).

[302] Catherine of Siena and Volpato, "A monna Tora, figliuola di missere Piero Gambacorti da Pisa," 380, "E vesteti non di bruno, cioè de la nerezza dell'amore proprio e del piacere del mondo, ma de la bianchezza de la purità, conservando la mente e il corpo tuo ne lo stato de la continenzia."(Translation: Luongo, 117).

Though Catherine's letter to Tora indicates how holy asexuality can be produced, her letters to Daniela of Orvieto, a Dominican penitent whom Catherine viewed as her spiritual protégé, gets to the heart of her spiritual program.[303] Her advice to Daniela differs from her advice to others, which entailed turning away from the world, wearing different clothing, or doing more penance; instead, she advised Daniela to choose to tame her will.[304] Catherine of course gave this advice to other religious women, but rarely to laypeople. According to F. Thomas Luongo, Catherine rarely advocated for her own lifestyle to others, recognizing its exceptionality.[305] Her advice to Daniela thus perhaps offers a better window into Catherine's understanding of her own spiritual path and qualities. She wrote to Daniela:

> He has granted us such grace and mercy as to number us among those who have passed from the ordinary to the special light, in making us choose the perfect state of the counsels. By this true light, therefore, we must follow perfectly this lovely straight way and let nothing make us turn back or go our own way.[306]

Since they both already exist in the perfect true light, they are not bound by the same strictures as typical postlapsarian bodies. This suggests that both Catherine and Daniela have achieved such a degree of perfection to experience holy asexuality and were unplagued by bodily desires. Though it required continual choices to maintain this status, this quote does suggest that Catherine, despite her humility, was willing to frame herself as perfect, and thus without bodily desires, to those closer to her. Sister Bartolomea, a cloistered nun from Seta, received similar advice, yet crucially Catherine includes an aside that rings of compulsory sexuality: "now reflect, my

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[303] Luongo, "Catherine of Siena's Advice to Religious Women," 110.
[304] Luongo, "Catherine of Siena's Advice to Religious Women," 111.
[305] Luongo, "Catherine of Siena's Advice to Religious Women," 105.
[306] Catherine of Siena and Volpato, "A Daniella da Orvieto vestita de l'abito di santo Domenico," 472, "Noi dunque, carissima figliuola e suoro mia dolce in Cristo dolce Gesù, poiché egli ci à fatto tanto di grazia e di misericordia che ci à messe nel numero di quelle che passate so' dal lume generale al particulare—cioè, che ci à fatto elegere lo stato perfetto de' consigli -, e però noi doviamo con vero lume seguitare con perfezione questa dolce e dritta via." (Translation: Noffke, Vol. III, 329).

daughter, that you who are a bride of Christ crucified should not be thinking about or wanting anything but him—I mean not consenting to such thoughts. I'm not saying that such thoughts won't come; neither you nor anyone else can prevent them"[307] Though this advice is similar to the advice that Catherine gave Daniela, it differs in that Catherine felt the need to encourage Bartolomea to resist the 'naturally' occurring thoughts. She frames these thoughts as innate and inescapable, yet this consolation was not necessary to encourage Daniela towards perfection. Catherine further states in her letter to Bartolomea: "for sin lies in the consent of the will, as does virtue; there is no sin or virtue that is not voluntary"[308] Choice becomes increasingly important under Catherine's late medieval logic of compulsory sexuality. It determined the state of one's virtuousness. Though Catherine's letter to Daniela does not include explicit mention of the purportedly innate desires of the body, her conception of perfection depends on a contrast with those who remain yoked to their bodies and fleshly desires.

Upholding compulsory sexuality, regardless of whatever bodily and affective desires a person may have had, was also crucial due to how sanctity, sin, and struggle were conceived. Struggling against temptation was key to being virtuous. Catherine admits this in a letter to her confessor, Raymond of Capua. Though not strictly a letter of advice, this passage does reveal her thinking about purity and assaults upon it:

> Now what sort of soul would refuse to endure any difficulty or temptation, from whatever source or in whatever way God would send it? Such a soul would have no proven virtue, for virtue is proved by its opposite. How is purity proved, and how is it learned? Through its opposite, that is, the temptation to impurity. For an impure person wouldn't need to be molested by impure thoughts. But if it seems that our will no longer consents to what is

[307] Catherine of Siena and Volpato, "A suoro Bartolomea de la Seta," 322, "Or così pensa tu, figliuola mia, che se' sposa di Cristo crocifisso: non debbi pensare altro che di lui, cioè di consentire a' pensieri. Ch'e' pensieri non venissero, questo non dico io, ché nol potresti fare né tu né creatura." (Translation: Noffke, Vol. II, 180).
[308] Catherine of Siena and Volpato, "A suoro Bartolomea de la Seta," 323, "è solamente la volontà, ché il peccato e la virtù sta nel consentimento de la volontà: altrimenti, non è peccato né virtù, se non è volontariamente fatto." (Translation: Noffke, Vol. II, 182).

> perverse, and is purified of every stain by a true holy desire to please our Creator, then the devil, the world, and the flesh will harrass us. So opposites always drive each other out.[309]

Therefore, in order to be holy and 'pure,' Catherine must have experienced a deluge of temptation. Another implication of this passage is that Catherine is far purer than most people precisely because of how much she endured; her tests of temptation are equal to her purity. Since these vexing thoughts do not originate within herself, but rather God allowed the Devil to tempt her, she therefore suggests that she was so pure as to naturally be without temptation, or perhaps to naturally ignore her body. Catherine thus suggests an underlying asexuality, or more precisely an underlying purity from tempting thoughts, otherwise she need not be given such temptations. Holy asexuality and compulsory sexuality depend on one another and are bolstered by the same logic. Asexuality only becomes holy when it is achieved after a period of struggle, hence it becomes necessary for these women to claim to have experienced sexual desire that they have since overcome. Catherine also situates temptation as a choice, much in the same way holy asexuality could be chosen. Regardless of whether a woman felt carnal desire matters less than that asexuality was a valued, spiritually superior state for them to occupy. Given that these letters are providing spiritual advice, they may need to frame compulsory sexuality as universal because they are encouraging others to overcome it.

[309] Catherine of Siena and Volpato, "A maestro Ramondo, in Vignone," 301, "Or da che sarebbe l'anima che non portasse delle molte fadighe e tentazioni, da qualunque parte e per qualunque modo Iddio le concede? Non sarebbe in lei virtù provata, però che la virtù si pruova per lo suo contrario. Con che si pruova la purità e s'acquista? col contrario, cioè con la molestia della immondizia, però che, chi fusse immondo, non gli bisognarebbe ricevare molestia dalle cogitazioni della immondizia; ma perché si vede che la volontà è privata de' perversi consentimenti, ed è purificata d'ogni macchia per santo e vero desiderio che à di piacere al suo Creatore, però il dimonio, el mondo e la carne gli danno molestia. Sì che ogni cosa contraria si caccia per lo suo contrario" (Translation: Noffke, Vol. II, 167).

Catherine's letters also reveal ways in which she used the logic of holy asexuality to bolster her own claims of holiness and to help others achieve it, and which have the effect of broadening the range of affective desires possible within the category of holy asexuality. One such example is framing the devil as the source of temptation. In a letter to the nun Bartolomea, Catherine wrote: "this, of course, is not what the devil intends. I [Jesus] allow him to tempt you in order to bring you to virtue, and he tempts you to bring you to despair. Realize that the devil will tempt those who are determined to serve me not because he thinks they will actually fall into this or that particular sin (for he already sees that they would rather die than actually sin)"[310] Thus, in order to have one's perfection tested, and to achieve true perfection, the devil's temptations were necessary. Though this temptation might lead to impure thoughts, those thoughts were a result of their proximity to spiritual perfection. Additionally, the experience of temptation was according to God's will, and did not come from any 'natural' failing of the bride herself. Furthermore, after a person has transcended desire, the lengths that they would go to maintain it suggests a deep alteration of being to the point of asexual embodiment. These letters also distinguish between desire and temptation. While temptation came from the devil, and typically beset those who were without desire, desire was conceived of as an innate property of the body. When a person was purportedly able to eliminate bodily desires and was on the path to perfection, God allowed the devil to tempt them so that they could prove and grow in their perfection. Thus, by attributing whatever bodily desires may have arisen to the devil, or by genuinely interpreting them that way, a person could perform or embody holy asexuality.

[310] Catherine of Siena and Volpato, "A suoro Bartolomea de la Seta," 324, "Ma la intenzione del dimonio non è così: io el permetto a lui che vi tenti per farvi venire a virtù, ed egli vi tenta per farvi venire a disperazione. Pensa che 'l dimonio tentarà uno che s'è posto a servire a Dio, non perché egli creda che egli caggia attualmente in quel peccato, però che già vede che egli elegiarebe inanzi la morte, che attualmente offendesse." (Translation: Noffke, Vol. II, 183).

The devil is not the only creature Catherine links to her understanding of holy asexuality, as angels figure prominently in her letters as well. The invocation of angels adds another dimension to the asexual logic within these advice letters. Angels were often conceived of as asexual and agender beings, so suggesting that her fellow religious women emulate them implies that they might emulate these traits as well.[311] When writing to Eugenia, she stated: "write to thee in His precious Blood, with desire to see thee taste the food of angels, since thou art made for no other end."[312] By claiming that Eugenia's purpose was to taste angelic food, she suggested that some people, by being naturally inclined towards worship and piety, were naturally inclined towards the asexuality that accompanied such a lifestyle. Later in the letter Catherine provided an answer as to what angelic food was, stating, "what is this food of angels? I reply to thee: it is the desire of God, which draws to itself the desire that is in the depths of the soul, and they make one thing together."[313] This statement yet again naturalizes the potential for holy asexuality for a select few people. If the deepest desire of a person's soul was the desire for God, which enabled them to feast on angelic food and to transform into holy asexuals, then the possibility of asexuality was an innate part of them. Instead of naturalizing asexuality as a trait of the body, Catherine naturalizes it to the soul, albeit not universally. She furthers her comparison to angels as the letter continues: "virtue is won by pain and weariness, casting down one's own fleshly nature; the kingdom of one's soul which is called Heaven because it hides God within it by patience, is seized with force and violence. This is the food that makes the soul angelic, and

[311] DeVun, *The Shape of Sex*, 21.
[312] Catherine of Siena and Volpato, "A suoro Eugenia," 32, "scrivo a te nel prezioso sangue suo, con desiderio di vederti gustare il cibo angelico: però che per altro non se' fatta" (Translation: Scudder, 22).
[313] Catherine of Siena and Volpato, "A suoro Eugenia," 32, "Quale è questo cibo angelico? Rispondoti: è il desiderio di Dio, il quale il desiderio che è ne l'affetto de l'anima, trae a sé, e fannosi una cosa l'uno con l'altro." (Translation: Scudder, 22).

therefore it is called the food of angels; and also, because the soul, separated from the body, tastes God in His essential Being."[314] Here, Catherine directly connected eating angelic food to actually becoming angelic. In order to achieve an angelic soul, the virtue that accords it must be hard-earned. Temptation and struggle over the desires inherent to the body, and choosing to abandon the body, was what makes the soul angelic. Thus, the asexuality that accompanied angelicism could only be won after a long battle against the body. Using the motif of angels directly invokes asexuality, and in so doing, Catherine indicates the possibility of living asexually, something which she thought some people were destined to do.

Compulsory sexuality was central to the concept of holy asexuality. Throughout her letters, Catherine consistently used the logic of compulsory sexuality to articulate her devotional program and experience of holy asexuality, and crucially, she denied the holiness of other forms of asexual embodiment, notably that of the first class of perfect people. The medieval language of asexuality depended on the precept that all Fallen bodies experienced sexual desire, and that sexual desire may have even been the reason behind the Fall.[315] Both medieval and modern, the language of asexuality depends on the presence of sexuality, with asexuality forming the negative condition. Catherine, however, imagined positive content for holy asexuality, describing it as a condition of total freedom and union with the divine. Her devotional program that built towards holy asexuality was so clearly the 'proper' choice to her, that she wrote, "would a

[314] Catherine of Siena and Volpato, "A suoro Eugenia," 32, "cioè che con pena e fatiga s'acquista la virtù, ricalcitrando a la propria sensualità; e con forza e violenza rapire il reame de l'anima sua, la quale è chiamata cielo, perché cela Dio per grazia dentro da sé. Questo è quello cibo che fa l'anima angelica: e però si chiama angelico; e anco perché, separata l'anima dal corpo, gusta Dio ne la essenzia sua." (Translation: Scudder, 22).
[315] Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, 3.

woman not be a senseless fool" to choose the path of bodily desires.[316] Catherine was perpetually defined by sexuality, the very thing that she sought to transcend. Holy asexuality, to Catherine, was an effort to make sense of the restraining, binary conditions of sexuality itself. She molded and tweaked and distorted the category to describe both her own experiences of asexuality and to guide people to what she perceived as an ideal state. Asexuality to Catherine, looked far different than the asexuality of centuries to follow, yet a commonality across time is the attempt to use a given cultural logic to make sense of bodily and affective desires, and to imagine its vast possibilities.

Conclusion: Cracks in the Binary

Ultimately, these letters reveal how holy asexuality and compulsory sexuality exist in necessary tension. One cannot exist without the other, and each becomes imaginable through this opposition. In these letters, these three holy women variously adopt strands of the logic of compulsory sexuality in an effort to guide others towards the state of holy asexuality, which they viewed as spiritual perfection. Rarely, if ever, in these letters do the writers ever address their own experiences of desire, though they hint at it when delineating their devotional practices and openly leverage their position as advice-givers to subtly highlight their own spiritual perfection and freedom from lustful thoughts. They balance their rhetorical perfection with relatability, produced through the orthodox assumption that postlapsarian bodies were naturally lustful. Despite this conundrum, each of the three women in this chapter used the logic of compulsory sexuality in different ways and each had varied understandings of the body, mind, and soul in

[316] Catherine of Siena and Volpato, "A monna Tora," 380, "E non sarebbe bene matta e stolta quella anima che può essere libera e sposa, ed ella si facesse serva e schiava - rivendendosi al demonio - e adultera?" (Translation: Luongo, 117).

relation to the source of desire and how to tame it. The differing deployment of compulsory sexuality across these letters, despite all utilizing some degree of postlapsarian theology, reveals the various ways that asexuality could be used to support a holy woman's claim of sanctity and the various ways that a person could make sense of asexual embodiment within these dominating cultural logics. The plurality of perspectives, and the plurality of advice given, disrupts the notion of a singular holy asexuality that predominated throughout this period. Additionally, the vast array of techniques for producing holy asexuality, reveals the wide variety of devotional strategies that could lead to its embodiment, or at least to the claim of its embodiment. Choice remains key in this body of letters, but unlike the present, where people are seen as having innate sexualities, the choice of lifestyle and the choice to commit to spiritual perfection had great bearing over the possibilities for embodying holy asexuality. Ultimately, these letters disrupt modern notions of the unchanging universality of sexual orientations.

Though these letters often rely on common hagiographical tropes regarding sanctity and perfection, they differ from hagiography in crucial ways. Notably, these letters do not rely on the hagiographical trope of the moment of transformation from a sexual to asexual state. John H. Arnold suggests that this trope presents a "fantasy of transcendence."[317] Arnold's statement precludes the possibility of more fluid sexualities, much less asexuality, since he suggests that if a person experienced sexual desire then it would be impossible for them to transcend it. However, the grueling trials required to reach a state of holy asexuality were likely not experienced as a single moment of transformation, based on how these letters regard the transformation from one experience of desire to another as a lengthy, drawn-out process.

[317] John H. Arnold, "The Labour of Continence: Masculinity and Clerical Virginity," in *Medieval Virginities*, edited by Anke Bernau, Sarah Salih, and Ruth Evans (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 111.

Additionally, devotional imagery such as Catherine of Siena's meditative staircase that she suggested to the nuns of Monte San Savino indicates that achieving this state was not an instantaneous transition.[318] The advice given in these letters, though likely extremely unhelpful to modern audiences, fits within the late medieval understandings of the Fall, desire, temptation, and the path to perfection. Even the advice that appears the most abstract was likely comprehensible and provided consolation, even if it could not be followed.

Another significant difference between the letters and hagiography is Catherine's use of bridal imagery. Catherine does use bridal imagery in her letters, but never directed it towards herself, as has been noted in many pieces of scholarship; she instead typically uses it for cloistered nuns.[319] Luongo notes that "Catherine's self-presentation in her own letters differs significantly from Raymond's stylization of her."[320] References to Catherine as a bride only appear in her hagiographies, suggesting that bridal mysticism was transposed onto Catherine as an expression of both compulsory sexuality and compulsory heterosexuality in an effort to make sense of the absence of sexual desire that she expressed. In these letters, the marital and sexual dimensions of her relationship with Christ, which make up large portions of her hagiography, are absent, and thus are not central to her performance of holiness. This absence indicates how insignificant expressing bodily desires was to Catherine, or at least expressing it hindered her self-presentation of sanctity. If anything, when Catherine mentions bodily desires that plague her, they typically centered around food. This absence is telling. It is far more revealing than Catherine's reliance on fairly orthodox beliefs about human sexuality, because it indicates that her own sexuality was not the bodily desire that vexed her, and was of little consequence to her.

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[318] Catherine of Siena and Volpato, "Al monisterio di Santo Gaggio a Fiorenza; Alla badessa e monache del monastero che è in Monte San Savino," 106.
[319] Cherewatuk and Wiethaus, *Dear Sister*, 116.
[320] Luongo, "Catherine of Siena's Advice to Religious Women," 91.

The difference between Hildegard's letters to men and women share this absence. She discusses virginity and chastity far more often in letters to and from men. Male clerics often praised Hildegard as a virgin and for her chastity, and, as Dyan Elliott argues, virginity and enclosure were often tactics of control.[321] In her letters to men, however, Hildegard flips this into a strength and uses it to increase her own power, notably through her understanding of women's enclosure as recreating the Garden of Eden on earth, thus earning more spiritual clout with which to achieve her aims. The absences in these letters, including the general lack of advice for how to pursue a chaste, pure life, indicate the rich possibilities for asexuality in the deep past.

These texts reveal how holy women made sense of asexual modes of being, thus suggesting how they may have been embodied and experienced. Because they contain actual voices of the women who may have experienced holy asexuality, they include more range for transitional, in-between states while someone pursues the path towards spiritual perfection, unlike medical texts and hagiographies which often rely on stringent binaries between sexual/asexual. Despite using the binary between holy asexuality and postlapsarian compulsory sexuality, none of these women exclusively rely on it. They add nuances and details that complicate and resist this binary, hinting at the multiplicity of asexual experiences and the deeply creative devotional practices that accompanied them. However, it is important to bear in mind that these texts present a prescriptive, normative vision of holy asexuality. The letters are often careful to stay within the bounds of orthodoxy, even as the women innovate with their own theological programs and iterations of holy asexuality. By telling other women how they *should* act, they reinscribe a holy asexuality as a category of exclusion. Additionally, their reliance on the logic of compulsory sexuality in order to heighten the holy status of their asexuality

[321] Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell*, 282.

reinforces the inferiority of those unable to pursue a life of holy asexuality for various reasons. While holy asexuality may have afforded Catherine the power to advocate for the papacy's return to Avignon or Hildegard's political maneuvering, it could also have been wielded as a weapon against others. While little was definitively proven about the actual experience of asexuality during this period, these letters reveal how the logic of asexuality could be deployed for the benefit of those elite women who were in the position to define holy asexuality to their juniors. Though the binary still dominated these letters, Catherine, Clare, and Hildegard hammered away at its cracks to carve out new spaces for the experience of asexual embodiment.

CONCLUSION: ASEXUAL PLURALITY

This thesis has sought to demonstrate the existence of late medieval asexual discourses, as well as the contrast of those categories with the lived experiences of holy women. Though they were entangled within these categories, their lived experiences do not match up to the definition of the categories. Though it is impossible to know exactly how these holy women felt and experienced sexuality, asexuality clearly inflected their lives in various capacities, be it in the performance of holy asexuality or resisting that category and living outside of its bounds. The theoretical lens of asexuality helps to better understand not only medieval women's sexualities, but also the broader structures in which they participated. Asexuality adds significant dimensions to monastic life, and to other instances of resistance to marriage. The queer asexuality which has been traced in this thesis helps to further "queer the queer," by decentering queer theory's focus on sex and resisting the normalization or categorization compelled by modern and medieval discourses on compulsory sexuality.

When trying to understand the actual experience of sexuality in the past, it is crucial to tease out the normativities that govern and restrict both our thinking, and the thinking of medieval people. Compulsory sexuality is one such normativity. Within medical discourses, sex was constructed as a 'natural' feature of the body. Women's bodies in particular were seen as having a practically inescapable degree of lust, which was justified under humoral theory and other medical explanations of the body such as the two-seed model of embryology. Those without sexual desire could be pathologized as "frigid" or "impotent," notions that turned the asexuality of those living outside of a monastic context into a medical defect. Hildegard of Bingen, whose vast array of bodily possibilities refuted the simple binary between purity and sin as well as the medicalized body's inherent lust put forth by both strands of compulsory sexuality.

These discourses, thus, were not universally accepted. Holy women's lived experience, in this case stemming from Hildegard's medical experience, stood steadfast in opposition.

Another strand of compulsory sexuality, intimately related to the first, was that all bodies were full of sexual desire as a result of the Fall. Because of the gendering of women's bodies as more lustful than men's in both sets of discourses, it was seen as far more miraculous for women to 'achieve' a state of holy asexuality, much less to simply maintain their virginity. This is how asexuality became 'holy asexuality,' in that it was christianized and imagined as an impossible experience without extreme devotion and God's grace. Compulsory sexuality generated a category of asexuality, but one that was practically impossible for Fallen, earthly bodies to occupy. These bodies instead had to be imagined as moving away from earth and towards Heaven in order to occupy this state. Holy asexuality depended on compulsory heterosexuality, and it also depended on the experience of sexual desire, at least within hagiographies. It was how asexuality could be imagined while still under the yoke of compulsory sexuality. While the medical and religious discourses constructed compulsory sexuality differently, they were founded on quite similar foundations. They provided different prescriptions about how to approach sex and sexuality, with different explanations for the naturalness of sex, but both are imbricated in the notion that women were more lustful and sinful than men. Holy women such as Gertrude of Helfta and Margaret Ebner's own revelations refute this, with sexual desire not featuring within their narratives at all. In order to understand the lived asexual experiences of past people, the logics that governed asexuality must first be understood.

In their glorification of virginity, hagiographies also reveal other medieval asexual possibilities. Virginity perhaps gave asexual people an ability to live out their bodily and affective desires, but it was by no means presumed as a possible experience in these texts, apart

from being labeled as a defect of the body. The distinction between bodily and spiritual virginity further bolstered compulsory sexuality, yet also made space for the asexual impulse within a given cultural logic. Holy asexuality, much like virginity, relies on the body as a signifier of holiness yet repudiates it as a site of spiritual possibilities. In this way, holy asexuality obscures the embodiment of asexuality, because holy asexuality relies on its binary relationship with compulsory sexuality, and the complementary binary of the body and soul. However, hagiographies also reveal just how fluid asexuality was, with people moving in and across sexual categories with greater ease than modern notions of sexuality presume. Christina of Hane's position as a holy asexual virgin, while reliant on a medieval compulsory sexuality, simultaneously challenges the degree of naturalness that we assign to sexuality in the present. Even in its more restrictive and prescriptive forms, medieval asexualities challenge modern fundamental assumptions about the working of sexuality.

The advice letters written by high-profile religious women reveal how they participated in holy asexuality and performed it, perhaps out of necessity, while also repudiating elements of it. In some ways, these letters produce, define, and police holy asexuality just as the medical discourses produce compulsory sexuality, but in others they resist the normalizing principle of discourses of sexuality. These letters yet again reveal how tethered holy asexuality was to compulsory sexuality. Holy asexuality was defined by the experience it sought to transcend. By trying to occupy the role of 'holy asexual,' these women demonstrate the variance and instability that threatened to topple both the category and the binary that supported it. While asexuality was imagined as a fictive opposite of the state of compulsory sexuality all humans were born into, these holy women instead emphasize the vast spiritual impact they gained from asexuality. Ultimately, in their divergence from the norms set out by hagiography, these letters of advice

reveal the misalignment between categories and lived experiences. Hildegard, Clare, and Catherine's experience of sexuality refuses the boundedness that categories like holy asexuality sought to apply to them. Crucially, they demonstrate the plurality of asexualities proliferating in this period.

Reading for a version of asexuality as something other than absence or apart from the more prescriptive category of 'holy asexuality' within late medieval medical and religious discourses runs the risk of reaffirming the medieval religious binary of purity versus sin. Virginity and holy asexuality were valorized categories, so it is understandable that people would perform these categories or desire to live within them. However, the iterations of asexuality reflected in holy women's own writings reject the strictness of these two binary categories even when they espouse some of the same logics. The normative iteration of asexuality must be teased from the subversive one, which is best seen in the contrast between discourse and lived experience, thus revealing the multiplicity of medieval asexual possibilities. Reading asexuality in medieval European sources treads this fine line, yet it is a line well worth treading.

Medieval asexualities can help to imagine an asexuality that is not defined by either its presupposed opposite, or by absence. The holy women examined in this thesis resisted the norms of compulsory sexuality living in categories defined by it, carving out queer, alternative modes of being for themselves. Asexuality to them was far more than absence. They establish their own sort of holy asexuality, which helped facilitate their relationship with the divine and the articulation of their unique spiritual aims. Though sexuality as a mechanism of bodily and social control did not function the same way in medieval Europe, compulsory sexuality and virginity were still certainly tools of control. The women examined in this thesis lived within these categories, yet were not defined by them. Examining the discourses that attempted to define their

lives helps to undo similar mechanisms in the present, thus opening up greater possibilities for alternate modes of being. Medieval asexualities can stoke our imaginations and compel us to question that which categorizes and constrains. Their resistance can help us see the "open mesh of possibilities" for queer futures in new ways, allowing us to imagine futures that are less restricted by the naturalizing impulses of compulsory sexuality.[322] Asexuality brims over with possibilities, both medieval and modern.

[322] Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," 8.

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