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# From Holy to Hunted: The Early Modern Witch Trials as a Catholic Response to Female Mysticism

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From Holy to Hunted:  
The Early Modern Witch Trials as a Catholic Response to Female Mysticism

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Senior Thesis  
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## **Introduction**

Christian mysticism was a spiritual movement within the Catholic Church which reached its peak in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The focus of mysticism was on individual attempts to achieve unmediated encounters with the divine through a variety of means, including prayer and meditation. While there were both male and female mystics, mysticism was an especially meaningful movement for women within the Church. Until mysticism, the religious lives of women were strictly overseen and controlled by the Church. Through mysticism, women were able to achieve unprecedented control over their own spiritual lives and unprecedented opportunities for spiritual authority while still being considered to be orthodox by the Church. Many female mystics were celebrated by the Church and their communities, and some were even made saints.

The early modern European witch trials primarily took place from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century. The purpose of the trials was to find and punish witches, individuals who had gained supernatural powers through a pact with the Devil. The trials were carried out by both civil and religious authorities. Of these authorities, the Inquisition played the largest role. Because the Church viewed the threat of witches to be so great, inquisitors were able to seek out witches anywhere throughout Europe and by any means, including torture. Once witches were identified, they were usually condemned to death and burned. The witch trials were extremely widespread, and the fervor with which people participated in the trials has resulted in it being branded as a craze. One of the most important things about the witch trials was that most of the people accused of being witches were women, making gender a key component in trying to understand how and

why they occurred. Over the course of the witch trials, approximately 100,000 people accused of being witches were executed, and 85 percent of those executed were women.<sup>1</sup>

In my thesis, I hope to show that these two movements, female mysticism and the witch hunts, should be considered to be elements of a singular narrative. A good deal of scholarship across many disciplines has taken place in the last several decades on female mysticism and the European witch hunts as individual subjects. Attempts to link the two, however, are scarce, with the works of Nancy Caciola and Dyan Elliott being the only truly compelling ones. Dyan Elliott is perhaps the most prolific scholar on the subject, with several books which examine different ways in which mysticism can be connected to the witch hunts. In her book *Proving Woman*,<sup>2</sup> Elliott attempts to explain why, in the centuries following the rise of female mysticism, female spirituality became more criminalized and women were increasingly persecuted by the Church. She explains the shift from mysticism to witchcraft by examining the idea of proof. She examines the methods and institutions used by the Church to prove that women were mystics and worthy of veneration or heretics and worthy of condemnation, focusing specifically on the processes of the Inquisition. She claims that the very institution which the Church used to discern the heretic from the saint actually caused the two roles to lose their distinction in the understanding of the Church, ultimately leading to the criminalization of female spirituality seen in the witch trials.

Nancy Caciola's attempt to connect the two subjects, *Discerning Spirits*,<sup>3</sup> also deals with the process of discernment between mystics and heretics. Her book looks at the physical indicators of possession and the ways in which the body was able to be used as a tool for discerning what

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Llewellyn Barstow, *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts* (San Francisco: Pandora, 1994), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Dyan Elliott, *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

kind of possession, holy or demonic, was occurring. She also focuses on the physiological reasons that women were the primary focus of the discernment process. Her analysis stops short of examining the witch hunts themselves, but it clearly explores the foundation on which they were built. Both of these sources have been influential as I develop my own narrative linking mysticism and the witch hunts. Like Elliott, I believe that the ways in which the Church constructed the identities of mystics and witches is important for understanding how the Church shifted from celebrating to killing women with power. Like Caciola, I believe that the Church's beliefs about women in general, especially their bodies, are a key link between mystics and heretics. Unlike Elliott or Caciola, I examine the witch hunts as being caused by mysticism in the sense that they were a reactionary response by the Church to the movement.

The witch hunts are almost universally accepted as having been an attack against women. In this thesis, I will be trying to prove that they were more than an attack on women in general; they were specifically a reactionary response by the Church to female mysticism. I hope to show that the Church's understanding of the nature of women during the late medieval and early modern periods both caused and facilitated its shift from celebrating mystics to hunting witches. I will begin by examining the key elements of female mysticism as presented by mystics themselves and as constructed by the Church through hagiographies. Next, I will lay out the concerns the Church held about mysticism. Through an analysis of the Church's understanding of the nature of women, I will explain why female mystics specifically were the targets of those concerns. Finally, I will illustrate through an analysis of the *Malleus Maleficarum* that the way in which the Church constructed the witch was a continuation of its characterization of the female mystic and its fears surrounding female mysticism and women in general.

## **Chapter 1: Key Elements of Female Mysticism**

If a singular goal can be said to have existed for Christian mystics in the late medieval period, that goal was to achieve some sort of spiritual encounter with the divine. This encounter between the soul of the mystic and God was understood to be unmediated, internal, and centered on a loving connection with God. The practice of achieving this encounter, like any religious or cultural practice, varied from region to region and from time period to time period. Additionally, the unmediated and internal nature of mysticism challenged the uniformity of experience provided by ritual and community found in many other Catholic expressions of faith, making it impossible to describe a single mystical experience. However, there were several characteristics of mysticism which were almost universally present in descriptions of the lives and deeds of mystics from the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries. One was the practice of meditation on the life of Christ and Scripture. Likewise, love was a central mystical element, with mystics understanding their ability to reach a state of rapture to be dependent on both their love for God and God's love for them. This rapture was often accompanied by interior phenomena, such as visions, and external phenomena like experiencing a lack of senses or levitation. Mystics also usually lived highly ascetic lives. Of the characteristics found in most representations of female mysticism from the time period, the unmediated nature of the relationship with God, the concern with the mystic's body and her physical manifestations of internal spiritual processes, and the usage of sexualized imagery are the most important in understanding the ways in which the Church's construction of female mysticism is linked to its construction of the witch.

These themes within mysticism are best illuminated by examining general trends as well as specific examples. The most useful sources for examining these trends and examples are the writings of the mystics themselves and the hagiographies written about them. The former offer

insight into the lived experience of mysticism and the most direct access to the thoughts and concerns of mystics, while the latter provide evidence of the Church's interpretation of mysticism at the time. Beatrice of Nazareth, Catherine of Siena, and Teresa of Avila are three mystics whose writings and hagiographies can be used to better understand the roles that an encounter with the divine, the physical body, and sexual imagery played in the Church's conception of female mysticism. Beatrice of Nazareth, a Flemish Cistercian nun who lived in the first half of the thirteenth century, wrote *There Are Seven Manners of Loving*, a work detailing her beliefs about the mystic's relationship with God. Additionally, there was a contemporary biography of Beatrice which contains a section corresponding to *There Are Seven Manners of Loving*. This makes it possible to perform a direct comparison between the beliefs of the mystic as she presented them and how Church officials interpreted and presented those beliefs. For Catherine of Siena, the influential fourteenth century saint, the most relevant texts are the *Dialogue of St. Catherine of Siena*, a work thought to have been dictated by her during a state of rapture, and her hagiography written by her confessor, Raymond of Capua. Teresa of Avila, who was a Spanish mystic from the sixteenth century, worked directly with her confessor to create an autobiography known as *The Book of Her Life*. In these works the key elements of mysticism are exemplified.

The most central tenet of mysticism is that through a combination of physical, ritual, intellectual, and spiritual practices it is possible for the individual soul of the mystic to achieve an encounter with God. In the medieval period, this encounter was often conceptualized as a kind of union. This understanding of the capacity of the human soul to unite with the divine developed as a part of larger religious and intellectual trends which were beginning to gain prominence in thirteenth century Europe, such as democratization, humanist optimism, and an emphasis on interiority. Democratization of religious life, assisted by increases in literacy within the public

and vernacularization within the faith, began to remove boundaries between what was possible for the clergy and what was possible for the laity, bringing “the goals of spiritual perfection and unmediated relationship with God before a wider public.”<sup>4</sup> Humanist optimism emphasized the almost unqualified capacity of the individual to achieve, and placed agency into the hands of the individual rather than authorities or institutions.<sup>5</sup> The trend of emphasizing an individual’s interior life helped to focus these other developments onto the practice of contemplation and spiritual achievement as seen in mysticism. These trends helped to make it possible for a wide variety of women, both lay and religious, to develop personal relationships with the divine without the Church acting as an intermediary.

For most mystics, this encounter was based on the idea of love, often taking the form of a union, sometimes referred to as a mystical marriage, between the soul and the divine.<sup>6</sup> Beatrice of Nazareth’s work *There Are Seven Manners of Loving* outlines one process of achieving union with God. Each step is a new form of love bringing the individual from longing for a relationship with God to having a closer relationship with God<sup>7</sup> to being pulled into divine union with God through God’s love for the individual.<sup>8</sup> Catherine of Siena claims that through her own interactions with the divine it was revealed to her that “the soul unites herself with God by the affection of love.”<sup>9</sup> The most common form that this loving union took for mystics was the state of rapture.

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<sup>4</sup> Edward Howells, “Early Modern Reformations” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 115.

<sup>5</sup> Howells, “Early Modern Reformations” 119.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Chapter 12 of the *Life of St. Catherine of Siena* is titled “The Mystical Marriage,” and Christ is sometimes referred to as her “Bridegroom” while she is called a “Bride.”

<sup>7</sup> Beatrice of Nazareth, “There Are Seven Manners of Loving,” in *Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 200.

<sup>8</sup> Beatrice of Nazareth, “There Are Seven Manners of Loving,” 204.

<sup>9</sup> Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue of St. Catherine of Siena*, trans. Algar Thorold (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 27.



Rapture literally means to be seized or taken away. That is exactly what was believed to happen to the mystic's soul during an encounter with God. Because of humanity's fallen nature, the flesh of humans is weak, making it dangerous for humans to have direct encounters with the divine. Therefore, a direct encounter with the divine, such as that experienced by mystics in rapture, would be impossible for a person to survive without their soul being taken away from the physical body.<sup>10</sup> Catherine of Siena describes the experience of encountering the divine as feeling as if her soul were on fire, claiming that the fire within her soul grew "to such an extent that it was no longer possible for the body to endure it without the departure of the soul; so that, had she not been surrounded by the strength of Him who is the Supreme Strength, it would not have been possible for her to have lived any longer."<sup>11</sup> Rapture thus requires a complete spiritual surrender to God.

During this unmediated encounter with the divine, mystics not only achieved spiritual fulfillment by encountering and participating in a loving union with God, they also often gained knowledge through visions and revelations. Beatrice of Nazareth,<sup>12</sup> Catherine of Siena,<sup>13</sup> and Teresa of Avila<sup>14</sup> all reference the desire for knowledge or truth as a motivation for their spiritual exercises. Usually this desire was fulfilled in some way. For example, Beatrice of Nazareth's seventh stage of love, union with God, is accompanied by a sense of "unshakeable truth."<sup>15</sup> Catherine of Siena's *Dialogue* is an entire book describing the revelations about Catholic doctrine

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<sup>10</sup> Dyan Elliott, "Rapture," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 193.

<sup>11</sup> Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue*, 62.

<sup>12</sup> Beatrice of Nazareth, "There are Seven Manners of Loving," 205.

<sup>13</sup> Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue*, 26, 28, 62, 125. Catherine discusses both the importance of self-knowledge in achieving union and the knowledge of the truth one gains in such a union in these and other passages.

<sup>14</sup> Teresa of Avila, *The Book of Her Life*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2008), 94, 177, 278, 303. These are just some of the times in which Teresa discusses the knowledge given to her by God through visions and the experience of rapture.

<sup>15</sup> Beatrice of Nazareth, "There are Seven Manners of Loving," 205.

which she received during states of rapture. In general these visions, the most common method of communication used by God, related to interpretations of the Bible or the Catholic tradition or to the mystics' "personal vocation as the bride of God and their salvific role for others."<sup>16</sup>

Rapture was not only a direct experience with God outside of the control and authority of the Church; it provided the mystics with their own kind of charismatic spiritual authority. Mystical encounters with the divine gave women the opportunity to write, teach, and interpret scripture without being denounced by the Church and society. The fact that their knowledge had come from a direct experience with God legitimized their activities and teachings. In *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, for example, Raymond of Capua describes a conversation between Catherine and Jesus in which Jesus appoints her as a "specially chosen vessel"<sup>17</sup> of strength and divine wisdom in order to test the humility and wisdom of learned men and priests. This kind of legitimization through the divine gave mystics authority to such an extent that both secular and religious authorities would consult visionary mystics on any number of topics, including "the whereabouts of the souls of the deceased, insight into God's view on ecclesial political issues, and the true spiritual meaning of disputed biblical passages."<sup>18</sup> Through their visions and relationship with the divine, mystics were also able to act as intermediaries between God, the living, and souls in purgatory.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, the authority of mystics "was considered by many to be equal to if not more valuable"<sup>20</sup> than the authority of priests because of the fact that it was held by the mystic through God's grace and

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<sup>16</sup> Veerle Fraeters, "Vision," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 186.

<sup>17</sup> Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena* (Charlotte: TAN Books, 2011), "Catherine's Divine Mission."

<sup>18</sup> Fraeters, "Vision," 184.

<sup>19</sup> In Elliott's *Proving Woman*, she discusses the role of the female mystic as an intermediary on behalf of souls in Purgatory. In the chapter "Between Two Deaths" she argues that some mystics were able to exist in a kind of grey area between life and death, which, combined with their personal relationship with the divine, made them the perfect intercessors for the souls of the dead.

<sup>20</sup> Fraeters, "Vision," 183.

direct influence rather than through the bureaucratic and mediated nature of Church appointments. Personal union with God therefore brought women knowledge and spiritual fulfillment without the mediation of the Church while simultaneously granting them the legitimacy necessary to become spiritual authorities and even intermediaries in their own right.

Despite the fact that the purpose of mysticism was an interior spiritual connection with God, the physicality of the mystic was central to the Church's construction of the female mystic. This tension between physical and spiritual states is best illustrated in how rapture was understood by mystics and the Church. As has been discussed, rapture was understood to be an entirely spiritual experience. The mystic's soul was literally taken away from her body and any visions or revelations were received as purely spiritual phenomena. At the same time, however, both mystics themselves and the writers of their hagiographies linked physical indicators to the spiritual experience of rapture. By virtue of the soul being taken away from the physical body, combined with the understanding that the imaginative power of the mind and the soul was directly linked to the senses, it was understood that senselessness would accompany a state of rapture. This suspension of the senses was necessarily absolute, making it one of the primary sources of proof of true mystical experiences available to mystics' contemporaries. Catherine of Siena's confessor recalls that her limbs "remained so numb while she was in a state of contemplation that it would have been easier to break them than to get them to move" and that "her eyes remained tightly shut, her ears could not hear the loudest noise, and none of her bodily sense performed its accustomed functions."<sup>21</sup> Where Raymond of Capua seems to have accepted Catherine's senselessness easily, others sometimes required further testing of the physical bodies of the mystics in order to confirm the veracity of their states of rapture. In one of the most extreme examples, Douceline, a thirteenth

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<sup>21</sup> Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, "Ecstasies and Revelations."

century mystic, was stabbed with nails and chisels and had molten lead poured over her feet to confirm that her raptures were real.<sup>22</sup>

The stigmata experienced by mystics was another example of the interior spiritual state of the individual being physically embodied. In this case it was not the departure of the spirit being signified by the physical body, it was the mystic's union with the divine being embodied. As their souls entered a spiritual oneness with the divine, their bodies physically reflected that unity by manifesting Christ's wounds. Through the stigmata mystics not only had dramatic proof of their connection with the divine, they also enhanced that union by taking Christ's suffering as their own. Stigmata thus served as signs of holiness and closeness to God, often increasing the reverence given to the affected person and increasing her authority as a spiritual leader. The experience of receiving stigmata ranged from having a singular sore to dramatically reenacting the Passion.

Catherine of Siena's experience of the stigmata, as related by her confessor Raymond of Capua, was an example of the latter. Directly following communion one day, Catherine went into a state of rapture, during which the following occurred:

We saw her little body, which had been lying prostrate, gradually rise up until it was upright on its knees, her arms and hands stretched themselves out, and light beamed from her face; she remained in this position for a long time, perfectly stiff, with her eyes closed, and then we saw her suddenly fall, as though mortally wounded... Then the virgin sent for me and said quietly, "You must know, Father, that by the mercy of the Lord Jesus I now bear in my body His stigmata."<sup>23</sup>

Catherine then proceeds to recount her own perspective of the events. She claims that she had received a vision in which she experienced Christ's passion, and Christ gifted her with stigmata. This example shows the drama often associated with receiving the stigmata, especially in terms of supernatural manipulation of the body. It also shows some of the extent of interior experiences,

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<sup>22</sup> Elliott, *Proving Woman*, 184.

<sup>23</sup> Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, "Ecstasies and Revelations."

such as rapture and visions, being made exterior experiences. Her physical body contorted to follow the experience of her soul in her vision exactly. Additionally, because it occurred directly following Catherine's consumption of the Eucharist, Catherine's experience of receiving the stigmata supports Caroline Walker Bynum's argument that female mystics in particular identified with the suffering body of Christ and that bodily imitation of Christ and the sacrament of the Eucharist were important to their religious experience.<sup>24</sup>

Both senselessness during rapture and stigmata were examples of physical signifiers of interior spiritual states and were present in accounts of mystics by the Church and mystics alike. However, the Church's descriptions of mystics and their experiences, as seen in hagiographies, were in some cases known to diverge from the ways in which mystics expressed their own experiences by emphasizing physical and somatic phenomena in instances where the mystics themselves understood their experiences to be purely spiritual. The inverse was almost never the case. The contrast between Beatrice of Nazareth's writings on love and her hagiographer's description of her writings offers a clear example of this inconsistency.<sup>25</sup>

Beatrice's own work is almost exclusively concerned with the spirit. She describes the journey that the soul takes to reach God and the impact the journey has on the soul. Beatrice's biographer, on the other hand, reduces the spiritual elements that Beatrice describes to physical

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<sup>24</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 246. The emphasis on the physicality of the connection to Christ held by religious women in the medieval period comes out of the body's dual role as flesh and food. Through the Eucharist, Christ's body is both flesh and (eternal) life giving food. A woman's body is her own flesh, but it also holds the potential to be food and nourishment through her role as mother. Bynum argues that this shared capacity of the body to be more than simply flesh was central to how medieval women understood Christ and their own spirituality, and that it made the Eucharist especially meaningful and spiritually powerful

<sup>25</sup> This comparison between Beatrice's work and the work of her hagiographer is borrowed from Amy Hollywood's chapter "The Religiosity of the *Mulieres Sanctae*" in *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995). She uses several other direct comparisons of the texts which act as further evidence for the tension between the spiritual and physical focus and which also provide evidence regarding whether both texts place Beatrice as the actor ascending through the manners of love or not.

experiences and bodily manifestations of the spiritual experience. The spiritual is shifted into the physical. For example, in the fourth manner of love, being conquered by love, Beatrice describes the soul being “so touched and overpowered by this great fullness of the heart that in spite of itself it spills and overflows.”<sup>26</sup> The corresponding passage in her biography claims that “she would undergo a kind of paralyzed trembling, or would be burdened with some other discomfort or illness.”<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Beatrice describes her soul feeling an “inward heat”<sup>28</sup> at one point in the spiritual journey towards love, while her biographer describes the same instance as “making her perceptibly hot.”<sup>29</sup> What was spiritual and invisible in her account becomes an empirical fact of her physicality in his interpretation. It is of course possible that both the spiritual and physical phenomena occurred. Even if that were the case, however, the lack of physical experiences in Beatrice’s work coupled with their prominence in her biography reveals that, at the very least, mystics and the members of the clergy writing their hagiographies had differing understandings of the importance of the bodily elements of spirituality. Whether these inconsistencies were the result of misinterpretations or misrepresentations, the result was the spiritual and emotional experiences of mystics being reduced to their physical indicators when presented by the Church.

From these examples it is clear that the Church emphasized the physical elements of mysticism, particularly those involving suffering, in addition to the spiritual ones. This focus on the bodily experience of the mystic by the Church reached such an extent that in some cases the bodily nature of mysticism was emphasized by the Church even above the spiritual nature of mysticism, as seen in the contrast between Beatrice of Nazareth’s writings and the account of her

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<sup>26</sup> Beatrice of Nazareth, “There are Seven Manners of Loving,” 202.

<sup>27</sup> Roger DeGanck, trans., *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1991), 304. I was unable to find a copy of a translation of *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth*. However, Amy Hollywood quotes DeGanck in her analysis, and I am using those quotations and citations here.

<sup>28</sup> Beatrice of Nazareth, “There are Seven Manners of Loving,” 203.

<sup>29</sup> DeGanck, *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth*, 308.

hagiographer. This emphasis on the body was initially something found predominantly in the Church's descriptions of mystics and their experiences and not in the writings of the mystics themselves. In fact, accounts of parapsychical experiences and bodily asceticism were rarely found in women's writings before the fourteenth century.<sup>30</sup> However, the instances of the descriptions of these phenomena in the writings of mystics did increase in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Whether that increase was due to actual increases in the experiences, an urge to conform to the Church's portrayal of the mystical experience, or some other reason has yet to be completely determined. It must also be noted that female mystics were far more likely to be associated with supernatural phenomena and bodily expressions of spirituality than male mystics.<sup>31</sup> The reasons for this focus on the embodied spirituality of mystics and the accompanying gender imbalances will be discussed in Chapter 2.

The final characteristic in Christian female mysticism to be discussed due to its importance as a link between the Church's understanding of mysticism and its understanding of the threat of witchcraft was the use of sexual imagery in works by and about mystics. The state of rapture was often the focus of this imagery. The word itself had sexual connotations, carrying the dual meaning of being taken away and rape. The state of rapture therefore not only got its name from the soul being removed from the body, it was also named for the fact that the individual was completely overpowered, although obviously not sexually assaulted, by God's power. Additionally, the descriptions used by both mystics and their hagiographers to describe their experiences of rapture could be erotic in nature. These descriptions could be mild and focused simply on desire, such as Beatrice of Nazareth's description of how the state of rapture would "prompt the soul to long for

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<sup>30</sup> Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, 28.

<sup>31</sup> Elliott, *Proving Woman*, 204.

the delight of love.”<sup>32</sup> Catherine of Siena is similarly described as wishing to “sweetly embrace Him, eagerly hold Him, and adore Him with ineffable devotion,”<sup>33</sup> a description with mildly erotic undertones. Other descriptions were more overtly sexual, like Teresa of Avila’s description of her vision which has since been made famous by Bernini’s sculpture *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*:

I saw in his hands a large golden dart and at the end of the iron tip there appeared to be a little fire. It seemed to me this angel plunged the dart several times into my heart and that it reached deep within me. When he drew it out, I thought he was carrying off with him the deepest part of me; and he left me all on fire with great love of God. The pain was so great that it made me moan, and the sweetness this greatest pain caused me was so superabundant that there is no desire capable of taking it away.<sup>34</sup>

This kind of sexualized imagery was often seen as a safe or pure expression of sexuality, a way of redirecting the erotic towards a higher power.<sup>35</sup> While the use of sexualized imagery was not the most prominent characteristic of mysticism, it is central to understanding the link between the Church’s understanding of female mystics and its construction of the identity of the witch.

Mysticism was an important movement within the Church, especially due to its impact on women and the ways in which they were able to exercise their spirituality. It offered them direct experiences with the divine as well as authority and opportunities which would have otherwise been denied to them. The Church’s portrayal of female mystics focused on these experiences and opportunities for authority as well as on the physicality and sexuality of the women involved in the movement. These elements – direct experiences with God, authority, physicality, and sexuality – played pivotal roles in the way that the Church described female mystics, in the concerns that

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<sup>32</sup> Beatrice of Nazareth, “There are Seven Manners of Loving,” 204.

<sup>33</sup> Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, “Catherine’s Divine Mission.”

<sup>34</sup> Teresa of Avila, *The Book of Her Life*, 200.

<sup>35</sup> Dyan Elliott’s *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999) offers a compelling investigation into the various roles purity, repression, and sexuality played in the lives religious men and women during the medieval period.



the Church developed about mystics, and in the ways in which those concerns influenced the beginnings of the witch trials of early modern Europe.

## Chapter 2: The Church's Concerns about Female Mystics

Many female mystics were able to live meaningful, productive, and fulfilling lives throughout the medieval period and were viewed as holy or authoritative by their communities and the Church. Other mystics, however, instead occupied an ambiguous space between safely orthodox and dangerously heterodox in the eyes of the Church and their communities. The Church had a number of concerns about the dangerous potential of mystics. While some of these concerns regarding mysticism were held about both male and female mystics, many of the concerns were amplified in regards to female mystics.<sup>36</sup> This amplification is directly linked to the Church's understanding of the nature of women, both their role in the natural order and their biological characteristics. Because the very things which the Church viewed as fundamental to female mysticism, that is, an unmediated relationship with the divine, an authority due to that relationship, and an emphasis on the body, could also be seen as threatening, the Church developed an apparatus with the ability to discern between the true mystic and the heretic or demoniac. These fears concerning mystics and the subsequent apparatus within the Church designed to address those fears, the Inquisition, are directly related to the rise of the witch trials in late fifteenth century.

Much of the Church's concern regarding female mysticism in the medieval period was related to the question of authority. Like any human institution, the Church wished to have power and control. Much of the Church's power came from its role as intermediary between the laity and the divine. There were two important elements contributing to this power. The first was the origin of the Church's authority, which came from the idea of apostolic succession, or a direct line of succession from the original apostles to bishops of the Church. This line of succession granted bishops both legitimacy and the ability to perform certain actions, such as the ordination of priests.

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<sup>36</sup> Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, 17.

This idea of apostolic succession also helps to explain the hierarchical and ordered nature of Church structure and the clergy, because it gave the Church strict control over who could and who could not become a religious authority and provided the proper means by which someone could gain religious authority.

The second element contributing to the power and control held by the institution of the Church was the fact that priests were necessary for the correct performance of certain sacraments. The sacraments of the Eucharist and confession in particular depended on the presence of a priest. Communion allowed members of the Church to have direct experiences with Christ, and confession allowed them to improve their relationships with God by paying penance for their sins. The possibility of forming connections with the divine through the sacraments made them important in the religious life of members of the Church. Additionally, with the decisions made at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, faithful members of the Church were required to participate in both sacraments at least once a year, increasing the centrality of the sacraments to their lives. This in turn made the clergy even more indispensable to the religious lives of parishioners.<sup>37</sup> There were also other attempts by the Church to maintain its tight control over the religious lives of its members seen in the canons of the Fourth Lateran Council. For example, the act of preaching itself was reserved for those who had been sent with “authority of the Apostolic See or of the Catholic bishop of the locality.”<sup>38</sup> This meant that anyone claiming to teach with authority must be appointed by an official within the Church or be condemned as a heretic. Additionally, the requirement of confession for all members of the Church allowed the Church to keep closer watch

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<sup>37</sup> *The Canons of the Fourth Lateran Council*, Canon 21.

<sup>38</sup> *The Canons of the Fourth Lateran Council*, Canon 3.

on its members in order to ensure that individuals and communities were maintaining their orthodoxy and to be better able to combat heresy.<sup>39</sup>

Threats to this monopoly on authority regarding religious life and connection with the divine were understandably viewed with apprehension and suspicion by the Church. No institution wishes to lose its power, and so, in the thirteenth century, the Church was taking active steps to maintain its authority. During the same period, however, democratization of religious life was leading to new models of religious life and authority. Female Christian mysticism was one of the new models. Within the model of mysticism, mystics, like every other member of the Church, relied on the clergy for the sacraments of the Eucharist and confession. Both of these sacraments were important to the experience of a mystic. The Eucharist created a personal bond between the mystic and Christ,<sup>40</sup> and sometimes, such as in the case of Catherine of Siena, consumption of the Eucharist would induce rapture. Furthermore, the confessional relationships between mystics and confessors were important because it was through those relationships, and the hagiographies created out of those relationships, that information about female mystics was recorded and disseminated.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, the relationship between a mystic and her confessor could help to validate and protect her against suspicion.<sup>42</sup>

In many other ways, however, mystics were not reliant on the Church. As was discussed in Chapter 1, the female mystic operated largely outside of the Church's hierarchical model of authority and control. The most obvious example of this would be their ability to have direct experiences with the divine without the Church serving as intermediaries. Women were

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<sup>39</sup> Elliott, *Proving Woman*, 1.

<sup>40</sup> Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* discusses this relationship extensively.

<sup>41</sup> Alison Weber, "Gender," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 322.

<sup>42</sup> Elliott, *Proving Woman*, 212.

sometimes also able to gain religious authority and the ability to teach due to their mystical encounters and visions. Therefore, mystics were able to fulfill some of the same roles as the clergy, but through a model of charismatic authority instead of the model of ordained authority.<sup>43</sup> This ability to circumvent one of the primary functions of the Church, directing experiences with God, and to have their own charismatic authority could be perceived as threatening to the Church's own authority, resulting in mystics being viewed with various degrees of suspicion by the Church.

However, it was not simply the selfish desire to maintain their control over the religious lives of its followers that caused the Church to have concerns about the rise of mysticism. They also believed that because it operated outside of the direct guidance and supervision of the Church, mysticism could result in incredibly harmful effects on the faithful. One fear was that without a set hierarchy and system of authentication to verify mystics, such as that found in the system of ordaining clergy, the public could be tricked by frauds. The Church's fear was that, because the authority of a mystic came from a physically indiscernible source, it was difficult for the general public to differentiate between those who actually had authority and those who did not. Therefore it was possible for women claiming to have authority through their mystical encounters with God to deceive the public and spread heretical messages under the role of a false mystic. They could also obtain false prominence religiously, socially, and politically. Both men and women were known to appropriate symbols of holiness for personal gain,<sup>44</sup> but a good portion of the suspicion about frauds was directed towards women, partially because women who gained authority through their mystical encounters with the divine had access to opportunities and influence that would

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<sup>43</sup> Deriving authority from direct experiences with the divine was not new in the Christian tradition. The Apostles gained their authority through their contact with Christ and through the influence of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Additionally, the second century movement Montanism was based on the idea of the Holy Spirit having the potential to inspire anyone to preach. Montanism featured two women, Maximilla and Priscilla, as prominent religious authorities. The direct inspiration model of the apostles was superseded by the idea of apostolic succession, and Montanism was declared to be heretical.

<sup>44</sup> Elliott, *Proving Woman*, 193.

otherwise be denied to them because of their gender. Without the ability to control who gained authority and how that authority was granted to mystics, the Church's ability to protect the public from frauds was weakened.

Even more than fraud, the Church feared that without their protection and supervision, mystics would be especially susceptible to demonic possession. If a person were possessed by the Devil or a demon instead of experiencing an encounter with God, they could be dangerous to themselves, their communities, and the Church at large. First, their own souls were endangered by proximity to the Devil. Second, the individual could cause physical damage to others through the power of the demons possessing them. Third, heresy could be spread by those who believed that a person actually possessed by the Devil had gained knowledge and authority directly from God, which could ultimately do extreme harm to humanity.<sup>45</sup> It is therefore understandable that gaining the ability to discern between women whose souls had been overpowered by a divine presence and women whose souls had been overpowered by the demonic presence was important to the Church when dealing with mysticism.

There were several reasons that the threat of demonic possession was such a prominent concern of the Church's in its dealings with female mystics in particular. To begin with, the threat of demonic possession was especially relevant to mystics because of the centrality of rapture in their experiences. In order to experience rapture or a personal encounter with the divine, the mystic's soul needed to be receptive to supernatural influence. Often the soul was made to be receptive and open through the practice of meditation and prayer. Unfortunately, the same passivity and receptiveness which allowed a mystic to experience an encounter with God also

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<sup>45</sup> Similar fears are listed by Pope Innocent VIII in the papal bull *Summis Desiderantes Affectibus* as possible consequences of the heresy of witchcraft.

made them more vulnerable to assaults on their soul from demons or the Devil.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, for outside observers, the physical effects were largely the same for individuals being divinely possessed and demonically possessed. Both kinds of possession could result in “trances, visions, convulsions, tears, frenzies, fasting” and auditory hallucinations.<sup>47</sup> Because both rapture and spiritual possession were internal experiences with such similar external physical markers, it was difficult to distinguish between the two experiences from an outside perspective.

Perhaps equally as troubling, the Church believed that it was difficult for the individual undergoing the experience to distinguish between real divine encounters and encounters with the Devil. Mystics who became possessed by the Devil were said to be fooled by “the wiles of the Enemy.”<sup>48</sup> The Devil was believed to have the ability to transform himself into the form of an angel of light and to deceive those who encountered him that they were really encountering an agent of God.<sup>49</sup> As a fourteenth century Dutch male mystic stated, it was possible for mystics hoping to encounter the divine to be “deprived of their external sense by means of a kind of light which is produced by the Devil and which surrounds and envelops them”<sup>50</sup> and to be shown visions, both true and false, making it difficult for the mystic herself to distinguish between a real encounter with the divine and demonic possession. It is important to note that this kind of possession was understood by the Church to be involuntary on the part of the mystic, contrasting it with the mystic’s encounter with the divine as well as the invited demonic possession that characterized witchcraft. Individuals who participated in religious life solely under the direction and supervision of the Church did not increase their risk of demonic possession in the same way

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<sup>46</sup> Weber, “Gender,” 321.

<sup>47</sup> Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, 314.

<sup>48</sup> Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, “Wonderful Progress in the Way of God.”

<sup>49</sup> P.G. Maxwell-Stuart, ed., *Witch Beliefs and Witch Trials in the Middle Ages: Documents and Readings* (London: Continuum, 2011), 41.

<sup>50</sup> Jan van Ruusbroec, *Adornment of Spiritual Marriage*, as quoted by Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, 48.

that mystics did through the state of rapture. These dangers associated with mysticism caused the Church to view mystics as a group with caution and suspicion, even as they celebrated and praised individual mystics.

Despite the fact that some of the elements of mysticism feared by the Church, such as direct experiences with the divine, potential for fraud, and potential for demonic possession, were present in the experiences of male mystics as well as female mystics, they rarely faced the same level of suspicion as female mystics.<sup>51</sup> The reason why women in particular bore the weight of the Church's suspicion surrounding mysticism is best explained by examining the Church's understanding of the place of women in God's created order and of women's biological nature. In the medieval period, the Church was deeply imbedded in a patriarchal tradition which placed men in dominant positions and women in submissive positions. Most women had no official role within the Church. Those who did have roles, such as women who joined holy orders, were at the bottom of the Church's hierarchy. Women in holy orders were not ordained, were often cloistered, were reliant on male members of the clergy for confession and the Eucharist, and were often directly overseen by male members of the clergy through the practice of *cura monialium*, or care of nuns.<sup>52</sup> This made sure that even religious women were subject to paternalistic relationships within the Church hierarchy.

This patriarchal reality was not just a matter of custom. The Church understood it to be a fundamental element of God's ordered creation, as revealed by Scripture. The story of creation found in Genesis 2-3 specifically places women in positions subordinate to men. The first woman

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<sup>51</sup> Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, 17. Approximately two thirds of suspected mystics were women. When men were under suspicion, they usually faced different kinds of accusations than women. When men faced suspicion from the Church, they were usually suspected of being in error. Women were suspected of being false mystics. While both sets of accusations could have the same consequences, the kinds of crimes women were accused of cast them as either manipulative or manipulated while the crimes men were accused of implied a greater autonomy and control over their actions.

<sup>52</sup> Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, 16.



is created because God decided that “it is not good for the man to be alone” and to fix that by making “a helper suitable for him.”<sup>53</sup> Woman is called into being by God not for her own intrinsic value but in response to the needs of man, making her very existence dependent on man. It is also significant that woman is called a helper of man instead of a more equitable phrase like companion. With the phrasing of Genesis, women are portrayed as being subservient to men even before they were actually created. In Genesis 3, the subservience of women is even further confirmed. In punishment for breaking God’s commandment, woman is cursed with being “ruled over”<sup>54</sup> by man. Therefore, as long as humanity remains fallen, it is ordered by God for woman to be ruled by man. Any other power dynamic would be as unnatural and inconsistent with God’s will as snakes walking. With this creation story, it appears that it is God’s plan and the natural order for women to be submissive and possibly even inferior to men. This ordered creation could be seen as not only justifying but demanding that women be placed lower on the Church’s hierarchy than men and that they perform different roles.<sup>55</sup>

This differentiation between genders and the accompanying hierarchy are further confirmed in Scripture through Paul’s letters. Because of Paul’s interpretation of Genesis, he is careful to maintain differentiation between the roles of men and women in the practice of Christianity. For example, when praying men should leave their heads uncovered, and women should cover their heads.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, women “should learn in quietness and full of submission”<sup>57</sup> and when in church they “are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Genesis 2:18.

<sup>54</sup> Genesis 3:16.

<sup>55</sup> It is important to note that this historical interpretation of Genesis and God’s creation required the Church to largely ignore Genesis 1. The Church could have focused its understanding of the created order on Genesis 1, which makes man and woman equal, but that would not fit its patriarchal power structure.

<sup>56</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:4-7.

<sup>57</sup> 1 Timothy 2:11.

<sup>58</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:34.

This shows that from the beginning of Christianity the ideal was for women to be silenced and made submissive. This ideal was justified by Paul's interpretation of the hierarchy of creation, which places God first, men second, and women third. Further, in Ephesians 5:23, Paul uses the analogy that "the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church." This analogy gives authority over women to both men and the Church. Paul's hierarchy is also seen in 1 Corinthians 11:3 when he claims that "the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God." Given the prohibitions against women speaking in regards to their religious experiences and Paul's hierarchy between God, men, and women, it was almost impossible for women, individually or as a group, to gain spiritual authority and influence in the Christian tradition.<sup>59</sup>

Scripture's portrayal of women as submissive and without access to authority as seen in Genesis 2-3 and Paul's letters is further reinforced by the language used to refer to God in the Bible. Although theologically God is without sex in the Christian tradition, the Bible often uses gendered language to describe God. When pronouns are used to describe God, they are almost always male pronouns. God is the Father. Jesus is a man. This male God-language means that God is associated with maleness, despite theological restrictions against identifying God with any gender. By associating God with a male image, men are given primacy in the relationship between humans and God. Women, however, are unable to see themselves in these images of God, requiring them to try to identify with male images in order to develop a relationship with God.<sup>60</sup> This causes a degree of alienation from God that men do not experience. Additionally, God is

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<sup>59</sup> Like with Genesis, this interpretation required the Church to ignore elements of Paul's writings that treat women as equal to men, such as Romans, which lists multiple women being prominently involved in early Christianity. Once again, this choice shows the Church's concern with maintaining its patriarchal hierarchy and system of power.

<sup>60</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 151.

seen as the apex of the universe, and it is believed that the physical world should reflect the order of the divine world. If a male image is made the apex through male God-language, it follows that men would be the apex of society.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, the male God-language used in the Bible helps to subordinate women within the Christian tradition, which, in turn, further decreases their ability to claim religious authority. Because of this understanding of God's ordered creation and the role of women within it, the idea of women having authority and influence was more difficult for the Church to accept than the idea of men gaining authority and influence, even in unconventional ways such as mysticism. Female mystics were upsetting the natural order of who could preach, teach, and have authority to a greater extent than male mystics, partially explaining why female mystics were met with greater skepticism and suspicion than male mystics.

The medieval understanding of female biology placed women and their bodies under increased suspicion from the Church as well. There were three ideas about women's biology which were largely accepted as truths during the medieval period that had a profound impact on the level of concern the Church felt towards female mystics. First, women's bodies were physically weaker than men's bodies. This biological inferiority was assumed to denote mental and moral inferiority as well. Because of these weaknesses, women were believed to be more easily deceived by demonic influences than men.<sup>62</sup> Women were known to be "the particular gender over which"<sup>63</sup> the Devil had control, being naturally morally weaker.

Second, women were understood to be porous by virtue of their reproductive systems.<sup>64</sup> During intercourse they were the receivers, but during menstruation, birth, and lactation, women

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<sup>61</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 155.

<sup>62</sup> Weber, "Gender," 321.

<sup>63</sup> Henricus Institoris and Jacobus Sprenger, *Hammer of Witches: A Complete Translation of the Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. Christopher S. Mackay (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 69.

<sup>64</sup> Elliott, *Fallen Bodies*, 36.

were the ones emitting. Because of this, women were associated with an openness and permeability not found in men, who were characterized by their sealed nature. Additionally, because of the belief held during the period that there was a close link between the physical nature and the spiritual nature of an individual, the porous physical boundaries of women was believed to correspond with porous spiritual boundaries. The permeability of the female body made them more receptive than men to spiritual encounters with the divine and to their souls being taken away from their bodies during rapture. That same openness, however, also allowed them to be more prone to demonic spiritual possession.<sup>65</sup>

Third, the Galenic theory of humors resulted in the belief that women were biologically lesser and more impressionable than men.<sup>66</sup> The constitutions of men were warm and dry, and they were associated with the “nobler” elements of fire and air.<sup>67</sup> Women, being cold and wet, were associated with the elements of water and earth. The association of women’s bodies with the element of water resulted in the belief that women’s constitutions were more humid, and therefore softer, than men’s. This softness made them more impressionable to outside influences, both divine and demonic.<sup>68</sup> It also made women more malleable than men and easier to manipulate, helping to explain why it was usually “some silly little woman” being deceived by the Devil’s tricks instead of men.<sup>69</sup> Finally, coldness was associated with purging, giving further evidence to the porousness of women’s bodies.<sup>70</sup> By combining impressionability, malleability, and porousness, the Galenic understanding of women’s biology both supported women’s access to divine influence and their susceptibility to demonic influence.

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<sup>65</sup> Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, 151.

<sup>66</sup> Elliott, *Proving Woman*, 204.

<sup>67</sup> Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, 143.

<sup>68</sup> Elliott, *Proving Woman*, 204.

<sup>69</sup> Maxwell-Stuart, *Witch Beliefs and Witch Trials in the Middle Ages*, 42.

<sup>70</sup> Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, 144.

The duality of women's biological potential is perhaps best summed up in a statement from the *Malleus Maleficarum* that when women use the possibilities of their porous and impressionable natures in concert with the divine, they "are very good, but when they use it badly, they are worse."<sup>71</sup> Additionally, women were closely associated with the flesh while men were more associated with the intellect, helping to explain why the spirituality and spiritual experiences of female mystics were so often reduced to their physicality and physical experiences in the Church's portrayal of mystics.<sup>72</sup> These ideas about women's biology, which were understood to be truths during the medieval period, are key to understanding why the Church had greater concerns about the potential dangers of female mystics than they did about male mystics.

The consequences of the Church having concerns about mystics and those concerns being focused primarily on female mystics, specifically on their claims to authority and their bodies, were significant. The concerns held by the Church about female mystics resulted in the distinction between mystics and heretics often being ambiguous, making the Church's process of discernment, and all the fears and biases which accompanied it, vital to how individual women would be categorized. Marguerite Porete, for example, was a French mystic burned at the stake for heresy in 1310. Her book, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, which was published in vernacular French, claims that it is possible for the soul to be annihilated by becoming one with God through perfect union, and that in this union, the soul is no longer capable of sin. These beliefs were deemed to be heretical by the Church, and she was executed. After her death, however, *The Mirror of Simple Souls* was published anonymously throughout Europe without controversy, and male writers with similar ideas were praised rather than executed.<sup>73</sup> This implies that the ideas held by Marguerite

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<sup>71</sup> Institoris and Sprenger, *Hammer of Witches*, 164.

<sup>72</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 269.

<sup>73</sup> Petroff, *Medieval Woman's Visionary Literature*, 276.

Porete were not necessarily heretical themselves. Instead, it seems that she was considered to have insufficient authority to spread her teachings, most likely because she was a woman.<sup>74</sup> Cases such as hers reinforce the fact that the question of what kind of person could hold authority within the Church was important when mystics were being designated as either heretical or holy.

Christina the Astonishing is another example of a mystic who was considered to occupy an ambiguous role. In the hagiography of the twelfth century woman, Thomas of Cantimpre describes multiple occasions where Christina is feared by her community and her priest and is believed to be possessed by demons. For example, like a possessed person, she is able to levitate,<sup>75</sup> is able to be “kept in check by the priest with the sacrament of the Church,”<sup>76</sup> and is captured several times throughout her life based on the belief that she was possessed and dangerous. At the same time, however, she is greeted with amazement and faith by many in the community and is perceived to have authority as a prophetess and intermediary for the souls of the dead. Based on her behaviors and her community’s reaction to her, Christina could have been seen as either a holy woman or a demonically possessed woman. Only the validation of the Church, first through her confessor and then through Thomas of Cantimpre, was able to remove the ambiguity of her nature and make her holy rather than dangerous. It is important to remember that the fact that she was eventually accepted as the former was not automatic, and it does not reduce the ambiguity of her behavior and reception by her community. The case of Christina the Astonishing shows how vital the discernment and writings of the people given authority through the Church, like her confessor and hagiographer, were in creating narratives and reputations for individual mystics.

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<sup>74</sup> Marguerite Porete also refused to participate in the confessional relationship that characterized most other mystics, increasing the suspicion placed on her.

<sup>75</sup> Thomas of Cantimpre, “Life of Christina the Astonishing,” in *Thomas of Cantimpre: The Collected Saint’s Lives*, ed. Barbara Newman, trans., Margot H. King and Barbara Newman (Chicago: Brepolis, 2008), 130 and 136.

<sup>76</sup> Thomas of Cantimpre, “Life of Christina the Astonishing,” 130. This scene closely resembles descriptions of exorcisms of demoniacs.

The potential dangers that the Church saw in female mysticism and the ambiguity in the distinction between holy, possessed, or heretical women created a sense of institutional mistrust of female mystics within the Church. Beginning in the thirteenth century, female mystics were subject to increasingly formalized investigations.<sup>77</sup> This formalization began with the process of confession. As has been discussed, the Fourth Lateran Council made confession mandatory for all members of the Church. By allowing the Church to be able to track its members more closely, confession became the Church's first line of defense against heresy. For female mystics, confession became the most basic proof of orthodoxy and was the easiest way for the Church to determine if their actions were heretical or not.<sup>78</sup> At the start of the female mysticism movement, investigations of ambiguous mystics were usually confined to the confessional relationship and were usually controlled by the local clergy.<sup>79</sup> Over the course of the late medieval period, however, investigations of suspected mystics became more formalized and institutionalized as they were placed under the purview of the Inquisition.<sup>80</sup> Through the process of the Inquisition, mystics suspected of being demoniacs or heretics were officially investigated and put on trial by non-local Church officials, such as members of the Dominican order.

There are several possible reasons why the Church's suspicion of women, especially mystics, increased over the late medieval period and why the Inquisition became the Church's instrument of discernment. By the end of the thirteenth century, the Cathari and the Waldenses, some of the original targets of the Inquisition, were eliminated as a threat. This meant that the Inquisition had to either dissolve or investigate a new category of people.<sup>81</sup> Predictably, they chose

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<sup>77</sup> Elliott, *Proving Woman*, 119.

<sup>78</sup> Elliott, *Proving Woman*, 14.

<sup>79</sup> Elliott, *Proving Woman*, 119.

<sup>80</sup> Elliott, *Proving Woman*, 3.

<sup>81</sup> Nachman Ben-Yehuda, "The European Witch Craze of the 14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries: A Sociologist's Perspective," *American Journal of Sociology* 86 (1980): 9, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2778849>.

the latter. Another explanation for the increased attention paid to discerning true mystics from the demonically possessed could be the fact that cases of demoniacs were becoming more public.<sup>82</sup> As public awareness of the possibility of people being possessed by demons increased, people were more likely to consider possession to be an explanation for abnormal behaviors and to accuse others of being possessed by demons. Another explanation is that the Church recognized that mystics were gaining authority and power, and due to its patriarchal power structure, it wished to suppress the movement before it became too strong.<sup>83</sup>

Many female mystics continued to practice their spirituality and to be celebrated by the Church during this period, however, by the fifteenth century, the assumption became that women who exhibited the characteristics of mystics discussed in Chapter 1 were heretical or possessed by demons. This assumption placed the burden on women to prove their orthodoxy to the Inquisition.<sup>84</sup> The fears of the Church in regards to mystics, and women in general, discussed in this chapter and the growing role of the Inquisition in discerning between true mystics and dangerous women set the stage for the witch trials of the early modern period.

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<sup>82</sup> Barbara Newman, "Possessed by the Spirit: Devout Women, Demoniacs, and the Apostolic Life in the Thirteenth Century," *Speculum* 73 (1998): 733, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2887496>.

<sup>83</sup> Elliott, "Rapture," 198.

<sup>84</sup> Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, 314.



### Chapter 3: Constructing the Character of the Witch

The image of witches during the European witch trials was largely constructed by the Church. Until that point, witches were primarily understood by the general population to be individuals able to impact the world around them through sympathetic magic, which could be used for both healing and harming others. This folk understanding of magic and witchcraft was rejected by the Church in favor of the characterization of witches as having demonic powers which were necessarily used for evil. The Church's understanding of witchcraft became the official understanding of witchcraft, with its views diffusing downward to influence folk beliefs about witches.<sup>85</sup> Additionally, unlike in the case of female mysticism, there are almost no accounts of witchcraft by women themselves that correspond to the Church's portrayal of witches, excepting confessions made to the Inquisition, which are unreliable given the level of coercive power the Inquisition held. This means that there is very little proof that actual practices of witchcraft, as described by the Church, were taking place in early modern Europe at the beginning of the witch hunts. Therefore, the Church's understanding of witchcraft diverged from existing folk understandings and was likely not heavily influenced by actual practices. This means that the character of the witch found throughout the witch hunts was constructed by the Church itself.

In many ways, the character of the witch as constructed by the Church was a continuation of the pattern found in its characterization of the female mystic and its fears surrounding female mysticism. Female mysticism was an important movement in female Christian spirituality. However, the Church had concerns about mysticism, especially in regard to the question of who should have spiritual authority and the ambiguous nature of women's bodies. The characteristics of mysticism found in the writings of the Church seen in Chapter 1 and the Church's patriarchal

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<sup>85</sup> James Sharpe, introduction to *The Lancashire Witches: Histories and Stories*, ed. Robert Poole (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 10.

understanding of authority and women's bodies discussed in Chapter 2 were taken to their extreme negative conclusions in the Church's construction of the witch. The witch had the same potential for power and connections with the supernatural as the mystic, but that potential was realized in a completely negative and demonic way. The links between mysticism and witchcraft, as well as the fears about female mystics that were present throughout the movement, illustrate how the shift from celebrating women and behaviors to demonizing them occurred so easily in the Church in the late fifteenth century. The Church's portrayal of witches was rooted in the Church's preexisting understanding of women, how they gained power, and the consequences of that as seen in its response to female mysticism throughout the medieval period.

In 1484 Pope Innocent VIII issued *Summis Desiderantes Affectibus*, a papal bull which gave Inquisitors almost absolute authority to investigate and punish possible witches and which is often considered to mark the beginning of officially sanctioned witch hunts in Europe.<sup>86</sup> There has been a good deal of research and debate dedicated to understanding why the witch trials began when they did.<sup>87</sup> Some blame the witch trials on disruptions to the social order. As the late medieval period transitioned into the early modern period, changes in family life and structure, changes in gender roles and status, and changes in demographics occurred throughout Europe.<sup>88</sup> The witch trials could then be seen as attempts to restore the former social order and as a form of punishment for those who refused to conform. Environmental and economic concerns have also been used to explain the timing of the witch trials. The sixteenth century had a series of crop

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<sup>86</sup> Ben-Yehuda, "The European Witch Craze," 11.

<sup>87</sup> Anne Llwellyn Barstow's book *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts*, Nachman Ben-Yehuda's article "The European Witch Craze of the 14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries: A Sociologist's Perspective," and Hartmut Lehmann's "The Persecution of Witches as Restoration of Order: The Case of Germany, 1590s-1650s" are three works which examine the possible causes of the witch trials from gender analysis, sociological, and historical perspectives respectively, displaying some of the breadth of the debate.

<sup>88</sup> Ben-Yehuda, "The European Witch Craze," 18. Due to the increased urbanization of European society, marriage and birth rates decreased and more women were entering the workforce. These factors shifted the roles of women in families and in society.

failures and largescale livestock deaths, mostly caused by climate change.<sup>89</sup> This caused economic hardship throughout Europe, and witches, with their perceived ability to destroy crops and livestock, were convenient scapegoats.

Finally, the witch trials could be seen as part of the Church's reactionary response to disruptions within the Church itself. The fifteenth century began with the crisis of the Western Schism and the sixteenth century began with the Protestant Reformation, both of which shook the Church's authority.<sup>90</sup> Persecuting witches allowed the Church to exercise authority in the face of its dissipating control, to demonstrate that it was tough on heresy, and to legitimize the continued existence of controlling bodies within the Church such as the Inquisition.<sup>91</sup> Most likely these social, economic, and political circumstances were all factors in the timing of the witch trials. However, because of the fact that the witch trails coincided with the decline of what Bernard McGinn calls the "Flowering of Mysticism"<sup>92</sup> and because of the ways in which elements of mysticism were demonized by the Church to create the character of the witch, the Church's concerns about female mysticism cannot be overlooked as possible causes of the witch trials.

The *Malleus Maleficarum*, translated as the *Hammer of Witches*, is one of the most important sources for trying to understand the Church's beliefs about witches. Written in Germany in 1486 by two Dominican friars, Henricus Institoris and Jacobus Sprenger, the *Malleus Maleficarum* became a kind of text book for inquisitors investigating accusations of witchcraft. Not only was it widely circulated throughout Europe during the early modern period,<sup>93</sup> it was

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<sup>89</sup> Hartmut Lehmann, "The Persecution of Witches as Restoration of Order: The Case of Germany, 1590s-1650s," *Central European History* 21:2 (1988): 110, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4546114>.

<sup>90</sup> Ben-Yehuda, "The European Witch Craze," 10.

<sup>91</sup> Ben-Yehuda, "The European Witch Craze," 11.

<sup>92</sup> Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350)* (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

<sup>93</sup> Christopher S. Mackay, introduction to *Hammer of Witches: A Complete Translation of the Malleus Maleficarum*, by Henricus Institoris and Jacobus Sprenger (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 33. There were twelve reprintings of the *Malleus Maleficarum* in Europe within its first 30 years of publication.

several hundred pages long, making it perhaps the most detailed description of the Church's view on witches written at that point in time. These facts, combined with a preface consisting of *Summis Desiderantes Affectibus*, meant that it was viewed as an authoritative text on the question of what witchcraft was and how witchcraft should be addressed. All subsequent works about witchcraft throughout the European witch trials owed a large portion of their ideas to the *Malleus Maleficarum*, and its importance in creating a single unified approach to witchcraft in early modern Europe cannot be overstated.<sup>94</sup> The *Malleus Maleficarum* consists of three sections. The first provides the theological arguments in favor of the existence of witches, the second describes the behaviors of witches, and the third sets out a guide for inquisitors investigating witches. The descriptions of witches and their practices center on their relationship with the Devil, their powers, and the witches' Sabbath, all of which seem to correspond with key characteristics of the Church's portrayal of mystics.

In the same way that encounters with the divine were central to the experience of mysticism and the abilities of mystics, encounters with the demonic were central to the idea of witches and how they gained their abilities. In order to have power, a witch first needed to encounter and make a pact with the Devil. The *Malleus Maleficarum* compares the process of making a pact with the Devil to the signing of important legal documents.<sup>95</sup> The process begins with an individual, usually a woman, being convinced that the Devil and witchcraft offer them more than God and the Church. They then voluntarily meet with the Devil and participate in a ceremony which officially binds them to the Devil. In the ceremony, the new witch first renounces the Christian faith, the Church, and the sacraments in front of the Devil and witnesses. Then the witch swears fealty to the Devil, and would sometimes even sign a written oath. The ceremony concludes with the Devil demanding

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<sup>94</sup> Ben-Yehuda, "The European Witch Craze," 11.

<sup>95</sup> Institoris and Sprenger, *Hammer of Witches*, 120.

that the witch swear to “belong to him eternally in body and soul and be willing...to turn any other people...into the demon’s associates.”<sup>96</sup> Through this agreement, the witch gains powers, prosperity, and longevity, and the Devil gains a victory against God and the Church, access to a new body, and the potential to gain more followers.

These ceremonial encounters between the Devil and witches can be seen as a demonization of the mystic’s union with God. The behaviors themselves shared similarities. Both were encounters with the supernatural that were actively sought out by the women involved. Both kinds of encounters were personal encounters unmediated by authorities or other individuals. Additionally, the end results of the encounters were similar for both mystics and witches. Like mystics, who gained visions, authority, parapsychical phenomena, and the power to act as intermediaries for the dead from their direct and unmediated encounters with the supernatural, witches could not have any of their inhuman powers until they too had direct and unmediated encounters with supernatural. In the case of mystics, however, the supernatural was divine and they gained abilities used for good. When witches encountered the supernatural, they encountered demons and the Devil, not angels and God, and they were given the ability to perform malevolent magic, making their encounters dark reflections of the former. By centering the encounter on the Devil instead of God, the Church shifted supernatural encounters from being the holy behavior of the mystic to being the demonic behavior of the witch.

In addition to demonizing mystical union by shifting the focus of that union from God to the Devil, the ceremony binding the witch to the Devil was an example of the Church taking metaphors from its portrayal of mystics and making them literal in its portrayal of witches. The ceremony binding a witch to the Devil bore similarities to marriage ceremonies. In both, a woman

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<sup>96</sup> Institoris and Sprenger, *Hammer of Witches*, 283.

takes an oath before witnesses, giving herself, her service, and her body to another. The unions between mystics and God were sometimes described using the imagery of marriage as well, with the mystic being the bride and God being the groom. These mystical marriages were largely understood to be spiritual in nature, indicating the kind of relationship that existed between the mystic and God rather than any actual oaths. The ceremony between Devil and witch made that metaphor an actual reality. Additionally, cloistered nuns were considered to become the brides of God at their ordination ceremonies. Therefore, the ceremonial binding of the Devil and witches can be seen as an inversion of that relationship and traditional ceremony as well as an actualization of the metaphorical relationship of mystics.

Another way that witches encountered the Devil was through intercourse. Witches were believed to “persistently engage in the Devil’s filthy deeds through carnal acts” with demons and incubi.<sup>97</sup> Demons would appear to witches in different forms, such as a man or a goat<sup>98</sup> or an invisible figure, and the two would have intercourse. The witch usually experienced the act with all of her senses, but the demon itself was usually invisible to bystanders. While the witches would be able to see the demon, to others the witches would be “seen lying on their backs in fields or woods, naked above the navel and gesticulating with their forearms and thighs...while the incubus demons work with them invisibly in terms of bystanders.”<sup>99</sup> Witches’ intercourse with demons was meant to reaffirm the pact between the Devil and themselves and to “satisfy their lusts.”<sup>100</sup>

Sexual encounters with demons shared several parallels with mystics’ experience of rapture. Both kinds of encounters were direct and unmediated experiences with a supernatural being. Instead of being spiritually overpowered by a divine presence as in rapture, however, the

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<sup>97</sup> Institoris and Sprenger, *Hammer of Witches*, 120.

<sup>98</sup> Maxwell-Stuart, *Witch Beliefs and Witch Trials in the Middle Ages*, 144.

<sup>99</sup> Institoris and Sprenger, *Hammer of Witches*, 313.

<sup>100</sup> Institoris and Sprenger, *Hammer of Witches*, 170.

witch was believed to be physically overpowered by a demonic one. Both encounters were a form of union, one spiritual and one physical. In addition to shifting mystical union from the spiritual to the physical realm, the sexual encounter with the Devil was an actualization of metaphors used to describe mystical unions. In descriptions of rapture found in the writings of mystics and hagiographies, it was often described with sexualized terms. Through the use of sexual imagery in describing rapture, the sexuality of women was redirected towards God, removing its sinful connotations and making it a safe expression of sexuality. By portraying witches as actually having sexual encounters with the Devil, however, the sexualized descriptions of encountering God, such as Teresa of Avila's description of her rapture, became literal sexual acts. By changing the recipient of the sexual longing from God to the Devil and by making the acts literal instead of metaphorical, the expressions of sexuality were once again dangerous and sinful. Additionally, like during rapture, the individual experiencing the encounter experienced it fully while bystanders were unable to discern everything happening. St. Catherine of Siena, for example, had vivid visions of experiencing Jesus' passion and receiving the stigmata directly from him, but all that was visible to onlookers was the contortions of her body. Similarly, witches were able to see demons during intercourse, but others were unable to see the demons, restricting their understanding of the encounters to the behavior of witches' bodies.

Another parallel between the Church's portrayal of mystics and its portrayal of witches is that both groups were understood to have had a capacity for supernatural powers. The powers of mystics were considered to be miracles, actions which surpass "the order of the whole created nature."<sup>101</sup> The witchcraft was also described as surpassing "the order of the created nature known to us."<sup>102</sup> Therefore, the primary distinction between the two was the source of that ability to

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<sup>101</sup> Institoris and Sprenger, *Hammer of Witches*, 153.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

surpass the created order. Mystics gained their ability directly from God. Witches gained it through a pact with the Devil. Additionally, the miracles of mystics were not harmful.<sup>103</sup> The powers of witches were more malicious and included the ability to kill, maim, destroy crops, cause impotence, transform beings, and cause miscarriages.<sup>104</sup> Both mystics and witches gained power through their relationship with supernatural beings, but the different beings bestowing those powers and the different consequences of those powers made one group holy and the other group demonic.

Prophecy is one example of how the powers of one group were made demonic in the portrayal of other group. Both witches and mystics had the power of prophecy. Because of their interactions with the divine, mystics were often granted knowledge and visions which allowed them to prophesize. St. Catherine of Siena, for example, was said to have been blessed with the gift of prophecy and was able to foretell a schism within the Church.<sup>105</sup> Similarly, Christina the Astonishing was said to have “illuminated with the spirit of prophecy” many things such as murders, apostasy, and famines.<sup>106</sup> According to the Church, witches could also tell the future, but in the form of divination, not prophecy. Divination was emphasized as a primary ability of witches in the *Malleus Maleficarum* and in other Inquisitional documents related to the witch trials, and, like prophecy, it was depicted as the practice of sharing information received through visions from a supernatural source. Like mystics, witches could predict death, famines, and sickness. The difference between prophecy and divination was that the source of the witches’ power of divination

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<sup>103</sup> Miracles of mystics included the ability to withstand physical hardships without injury and a form of harsh asceticism wherein they would only consume the Eucharist. St. Catherine of Siena is one famous example of a mystic who ate only the Eucharist, a practice which her hagiographer described as a “divine miracle” (Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, “Catherine’s Penances and Lapa’s Persecutions”).

<sup>104</sup> Institoris and Sprenger, *Hammer of Witches*, 62.

<sup>105</sup> Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, “Prophetess.”

<sup>106</sup> Thomas of Cantimpre, “Life of Christina the Astonishing,” 143.



was the Devil, not God.<sup>107</sup> The behavior of telling the future itself remained unchanged, with the Church simply changing the source of the ability. The inability to easily discern a difference between prophecy and divination through the outward manifestations of the ability is important because it meant that the word of the Church on the source of that power was the only proof available to distinguish the holy behavior from the demonic behavior.

Witches were also portrayed by the Church as inverting behaviors of mystics. For example, sacred objects and Sacramentals were used by both groups. By consuming the Eucharist, some mystics were able to put off starvation, and the Eucharist was often used as a means of entering a state of rapture. Witches, in an inversion of that behavior, would deliberately not consume the Eucharist at Mass.<sup>108</sup> Instead, they would steal the Eucharist and other holy objects and destroy them. They would then use the destroyed holy objects to work “their evil will.”<sup>109</sup> Both mystics and witches relied on the power within the Eucharist and other holy objects to influence their own abilities and experiences, but one through the process of consumption and the other through the process of destruction. This inversion implies that the Church understood that the same source could empower both mystics and witches, and thus in some cases it was the methods and consequences, not necessarily the source of the power, which could signify a witch. This example of the ways in which witches inverted behaviors of mystics in order for them to be made demonic is unusual. Most inversions transferred the source of mystical abilities and behaviors from God to the Devil. In this case, both mystics and witches were using the same source for their abilities. This indicates an understanding that women, evil or holy, could draw on some of the same

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<sup>107</sup> Institoris and Sprenger, *Hammer of Witches*, 117.

<sup>108</sup> Institoris and Sprenger, *Hammer of Witches*, 319.

<sup>109</sup> Institoris and Sprenger, *Hammer of Witches*, 317.

resources. The fact that the resource in question was the Eucharist ties in nicely the Bynum's argument that the body of Christ held particular significance and power for women.

Other fundamental elements of the Church's portrayal of witchcraft were not found in the *Malleus Maleficarum* but were found in documents from most other Inquisitional investigations of witchcraft. The most notable of these was the witches' Sabbath, a gathering of witches which took place in a secluded location.<sup>110</sup> At Sabbaths, in the presence of the Devil, the witches would feast on bread, meat, and wine.<sup>111</sup> The feasts were sometimes believed to have included eating human flesh.<sup>112</sup> Following the feast, the Devil would transform himself into some sort of figure, such as a dog or a goat, and the witches would show him "respect and reverence by kissing him on his anus."<sup>113</sup> Sabbaths would usually end with orgies. The purpose of these Sabbaths was to pay homage to the Devil through worship and ritual.<sup>114</sup> Like the preceding behaviors, Sabbaths can be seen as making traditionally holy behaviors demonic.

The closest equivalent practice to the witches' Sabbath was the Mass, a sacrament which was celebrated by all members of the Church, not just mystics. A Sabbath had most of the same elements as the Mass, but they were inverted and demonized. For example, Mass takes place during the day at a church, a central location within early modern communities. Sabbaths were at night and took place in secluded locations. The feast which begins the Sabbath can be seen as a mockery of the Eucharist. Instead of consuming bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ for spiritually significant purposes, a practice which was central to female mysticism throughout the medieval period,<sup>115</sup> witches would overindulge in food and wine simply for the purpose of

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<sup>110</sup> Mackay, introduction, 19.

<sup>111</sup> Maxwell-Stuart, *Witch Beliefs and Witch Trials in the Middle Ages*, 161.

<sup>112</sup> Maxwell-Stuart, *Witch Beliefs and Witch Trials in the Middle Ages*, 172.

<sup>113</sup> Maxwell-Stuart, *Witch Beliefs and Witch Trials in the Middle Ages*, 162.

<sup>114</sup> Maxwell-Stuart, *Witch Beliefs and Witch Trials in the Middle Ages*, 71.

<sup>115</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 4.

pleasure. Additionally, the consumption of real human flesh emphasized and made overtly sinful the existing cannibalistic elements of the sacrament of the Eucharist itself. Witches kissing the Devil's anus mirrored and mocked the practices of kissing the cross in church and the kiss of peace.<sup>116</sup> Finally, Sabbaths were often held according to the Church's liturgical calendar, appropriating feast days and holy days from Christianity for witchcraft. According to the *Malleus Maleficarum*, witches' practices would often appropriate or be negative mirror images of sacred and orthodox practices in order to cause greater offense to God.<sup>117</sup> The Sabbath was therefore purposely created as a demonization and inversion of the Mass.

The Church's portrayal of witches and their behaviors can easily be seen as the Church shifting its portrayal of mystics and their behaviors into something demonic. The means by which the Church represented this shift in behavior from holy to demonic is important because they were rooted in the Church's understanding of mystics and women in general. The Church's methods of demonizing the behaviors of mystics in order to create the character of the witch were continuations of existing concerns about mystics and women in general. The fears the Church had about female mystics, themselves based on a patriarchal understanding of women, were exaggerated and made definitional to its portrayal of witches. For example, the Church had concerns about mystics' claims to spiritual authority. One fear related to the challenge to authority represented by female mysticism was that, without the supervision of the Church, demonic possession could be mistaken for mystical experiences. Individuals would therefore believe that authority had been bestowed on individuals by God, when in reality, they were being deceived by the Devil and spreading heresy by accident. Through the pact with the Devil, witches were not being deceived in a quest for an encounter with the divine, but were "willing subordinating

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<sup>116</sup> Ben-Yehuda, "The European Witch Craze," 5.

<sup>117</sup> Institoris and Sprenger, *Hammer of Witches*, 311.

themselves to the demons” and purposefully spreading heresy in return for powers.<sup>118</sup> This can be seen as an extreme version of the danger the Church predicted in allowing individuals to have unsupervised encounters with supernatural beings or acquiring authority or abilities outside of the Church’s system of hierarchy and control. Witches would willingly turn from the source right authority, God, and embrace the wrong authority offered by the Devil.

Another concern of the Church was that the kind of charismatic spiritual authority held by mystics would undermine the Church’s own authority by providing an alternative method for gaining authority which was independent of the Church. Witches, like mystics, had an alternative means of gaining authority. Whereas mystics received authority over spiritual matters through a direct experience with God, witches gained authority over elements in the natural world through their pacts with the Devil. This authority over the elements gave individuals “not only solutions but also explanations” for hardships and suffering, times in life when individuals would otherwise turn to the Church for explanations.<sup>119</sup> This was attractive because it allowed the individual to exert control over their lives and the world themselves instead of relying on the Church as an intermediary, making witchcraft appear to be a viable alternative to the Church. The fact that the authority was given by the Devil, and not God, made witchcraft a more dangerous alternative to the Church’s authority than the charismatic authority found in mysticism.

Further emphasizing the fact that witches were threats to the Church, witches would actively reject and attack the authority of the Church. In their pacts with the Devil, they renounced their baptisms,<sup>120</sup> the sacraments, the saints, and the Church.<sup>121</sup> They attacked the works of the

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<sup>118</sup> Institoris and Sprenger, *Hammer of Witches*, 113.

<sup>119</sup> Scott McGinnis, “‘Subtiltie’ Exposed: Pastoral Perspectives on Witch Belief in the Thought of George Gifford,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 33 (2002): 673.

<sup>120</sup> Innocent VIII, *Summis Desiderantes Affectibus*.

<sup>121</sup> Institoris and Sprenger, *Hammer of Witches*, 283.

Church, such as when they would destroy sacred objects, like Sacramentals, in order to work magic or to simply offend the Church and God.<sup>122</sup> As has been discussed, the entire ceremony of the witches' Sabbath was a dark caricature of the Mass, which both undermined the Mass and insulted the Church and God. Finally, the initial pact with the Devil specified that the witch must try to lure more people away from the Church, weakening the Church's hold on the populace. By willingly submitting to the Devil and attacking the authority of the Church, witches made the Church's fears about the dangerous potential of female mystics gaining authority into an extreme reality.

The physical bodies of women also played an important role in how the Church portrayed them and the fears they held about them. Female mystics' bodies were considered to be central to their ability to be influenced by supernatural forces, both divine and demonic. This duality meant that the bodies of female mystics could be the cause of either their elevation or their condemnation by the Church. In its portrayal of witches, this ambiguous potential of women's bodies is removed. The Church's concern regarding the porous and weak nature of women's biology discussed in Chapter 2 is continued in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, which bases its belief that women were more likely to become witches on the "defective"<sup>123</sup> nature of their physical bodies. For example, drawing on the Galenic theory of humors, the *Malleus Maleficarum* states that the Devil had stronger influence over humans with melancholic inclinations.<sup>124</sup> It was understood that women were more melancholic than men, therefore the Devil was more likely to succeed in influencing them. The *Malleus Maleficarum* also references women's biological propensity for flux, which makes them more easily manipulated by demonic forces.<sup>125</sup> Additionally, recalling Genesis 2, the

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<sup>122</sup> Institoris and Sprenger, *Hammer of Witches*, 317.

<sup>123</sup> Institoris and Sprenger, *Hammer of Witches*, 164.

<sup>124</sup> Institoris and Sprenger, *Hammer of Witches*, 157.

<sup>125</sup> Institoris and Sprenger, *Hammer of Witches*, 164.

fact that woman's body was formed from a curved rib is believed to be indicative of her nature. The spiritual state and the physical state of individuals were believed to be reflective of each other, so the contrary and twisted nature of women, which makes them more likely to accept the Devil's offer, is a direct result of the original formation of woman's physical body.<sup>126</sup>

In addition to using the nature of the female body to explain why women are more likely to become witches, the Church used the female body as a tool for determining whether a woman was a witch or not. This use of the women's body as a tool to be used by the Church to discern her spiritual nature was a continuation of how the bodies of mystics were used by the Church. As was discussed in Chapter 1, the mystic's encounter with the divine was primarily spiritual. In order to confirm the veracity of mystical experiences, however, Church authorities often relied on the physical and visible manifestations of internal spiritual experiences. Paraphysical phenomena, such as stigmata, were one way to confirm that mystics had actually encountered the divine. Another way that Church authorities confirmed that mystics were truly experiencing rapture was by testing to see that their senses were completely suspended. They did this by physically manipulating and abusing the mystic's body while she was in a state of rapture. The things done to women in order to confirm their rapture could be so extreme that, if the women had been able to sense them, they would have been considered to be forms of sadistic torture. Women were cut, were burned, and had molten lead poured on them to confirm that they were experiencing true raptures.

Suspected witches bodies were put to similar physical tests. For example, witches were known to exhibit physical indicators of their relationship with the supernatural and spiritual states, similar to the stigmata. After giving the Devil their souls, witches would often be physically

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<sup>126</sup> Institoris and Sprenger, *Hammer of Witches*, 165.

marked, and finding a Devil's mark was one of the easiest ways to confirm that a woman was a witch.<sup>127</sup> Unlike the stigmata, which were confined to a certain set of locations on the body, the Devil's mark could be located anywhere on the body, meaning that women's entire bodies were often searched for evidence of the mark. Because of the dual emphasis on women's bodies and sexuality by the Church, the search often focused specifically on women's genitalia. This sometimes resulted in suspected witches being subject to a form of sadistic sexual torture. Like a mystic in rapture, true Devil's marks were unable to sense pain.<sup>128</sup> Pricking suspected Devil's marks therefore became a standard method of discerning whether they were real or not. In general, stabbing suspicious spots on the body would be painful, but the focus on women's genitalia meant that those areas of the body in particular were subject to being stabbed.<sup>129</sup>

Other methods of torture used during Inquisitional investigations were similar to the tests of rapture found in the mystical tradition. The methods remained the same, but the purpose of the manipulation and abuse of the female body differed.<sup>130</sup> The emphasis on reading the physical body for signs of internal states and the manipulation of women's bodies, found in both the mystical tradition and the witch trials, indicates that, for the Church, the women's body was the primary tool available for discerning a woman's nature. Additionally, the way in which the Church made some of the behaviors of mystics demonic was by making them literal, and thus, physically discernable. The metaphor of marriage, sexual imagery, and even the cannibalistic undertones of

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<sup>127</sup> Barstow, *Witchcraze*, 129.

<sup>128</sup> Barstow, *Witchcraze*, 130.

<sup>129</sup> Barstow, *Witchcraze*, 131. Barstow compellingly argues that this test reflects the dynamics of a rapist and their victim and that this kind of sadistic sexual torture had as much to do with men having power over women in an unprecedented way as it did with real attempts to discover witches.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

the Eucharist were made literal in the Church's portrayal of witches. This is a continuation of a trend already found in the Church's portrayal of female mysticism.<sup>131</sup>

Related to the physicality of women, women's sexuality was also emphasized in the Church's conception of witches. The sexuality of mystics was considered to be safe because it was directed towards God. At the same time, the Church had fears about women being more sexual than men and how that increased their capacity for sinfulness. This belief about women's sexuality was then used by the Church to explain why women were more likely to become witches than men. The Devil, because it delights in what is sinful, was associated with carnality and sexuality. Along with their physical weakness, women's "insatiable"<sup>132</sup> sexuality was used to justify the Devil's greater influence over them than men. One of the things that the Devil offered to individuals in order to convince them to become witches was sexual pleasure.<sup>133</sup> Women, because they were "governed by carnal lusting," were more likely than men to be tempted by that offer.<sup>134</sup> These understandings of witches' motivations and behaviors confirmed the Church's fear that women were naturally more sexual and sinful than men, placing them in greater danger of being influenced by the Devil than men. Sex was also used in order to indicate the extent of witches' depravity and sinfulness. Witches were said to have sex with demons and the Devil in many forms, including that of a man, a dog, and a goat. The bestiality involved with the latter two forms would make witches seem even more insatiable and sinful to faithful members of the Church. Similarly, Sabbaths often ended with an orgy, where women were taken "in animal

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<sup>131</sup> As seen in the discussion of Beatrice of Nazareth in Chapter 1, the Church sometimes took mystics' metaphors and made them literal in their own writings. In a similar manner, as a part of the process of demonizing elements of mysticism in order to create the character of the witch, the Church shifted spiritual and symbolic elements of mysticism into being physical and actualized.

<sup>132</sup> Institoris and Sprenger, *Hammer of Witches*, 170.

<sup>133</sup> Institoris and Sprenger, *Hammer of Witches*, 311.

<sup>134</sup> Institoris and Sprenger, *Hammer of Witches*, 170.



fashion.”<sup>135</sup> Once again the kind of sex associated with witches, animalistic and unrestrained, was meant to disgust those who were told about it and to portray the depravity of their sexual practices as an example of their sinful nature.

The parallels between elements of mysticism and elements of the Church’s portrayal of witchcraft indicate that the latter tradition likely drew its understanding about how women gained and exercised power from the former tradition. The way in which those behaviors were demonized, as being against the authority of God and the Church, as being centered on the physical body, and as being dangerously sexual, was by making the witch embody the fears that the Church already held about female mystics and women in general. This demonization of mystical behaviors, combined with the vehement misogyny found throughout the *Malleus Maleficarum*,<sup>136</sup> makes it clear that the witch trials were about more than an eschatological crisis or explanations for crop failures. They were also a response to female mysticism. The Church already had an increased suspicion of female mystics, as seen in its Inquisitional investigations of them, and with the social, economic, and political turmoil of the period, the potential dangers of female mysticism became too great to ignore. The Church needed to reassert its authority over women who subverted its power and understanding of gender roles. By creating a character which embodied every potential negative consequence of female mysticism, the Church gave themselves the ability to portray any woman claiming to have power or authority, as mystics had been doing for several centuries, as a demonic force in need of destruction. Because it was no longer safe for women to

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<sup>135</sup> Maxwell-Stuart, *Witch Beliefs and Witch Trials in the Middle Ages*, 162.

<sup>136</sup> The authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum* seem to revel in their misogyny. According to the authors, women are “superstitious in larger numbers than men” (p.164), “have loose tongues” (p.164), are “always deceptive” (p.165), “lying in speech just as [they] are in nature” (p.169), and insatiable in their lusts. Men, on the other hand, surpass women in “natural strength of reason” (p.414), and God had “preserved the male kind from such disgraceful behavior, and clearly made man privileged since He wished to be born and suffer on our behalf in the guise of a man” (p.170).

claim to have spiritual authority in the only manner which had been accepted by the Church at that point in history, the former patriarchal model of the Church was restored.

## Conclusion

The rise of the witch trials in early modern Europe should be understood as being directly related to female Christian mysticism in the late medieval period. In this thesis, I hope to have shown that it was not an accident that one of the greatest opportunities for women to gain autonomy, authority, and power in Christian history was immediately followed by the executions of thousands of women who displayed autonomy, authority, and power. Because the Church was either unable or unwilling to revise its patriarchal structure and understanding of women, the character of the witch was developed by the Church in such a way that it undermined a movement which had allowed women to spiritually thrive.

Mysticism was an incredible opportunity for women. Through mysticism, women had the ability to examine and control their own spiritual lives, largely outside of the patriarchal structure of the Church. By interacting directly with God, they gained spiritual fulfillment, religious authority, and permission to act outside of traditional gender roles by remaining unmarried, writing, and teaching. According to the feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, mysticism was “the only place in Western history where woman speaks and acts in such a public way.”<sup>137</sup> For example, the many texts written by female mystics allowed them to define themselves and describe their experiences to others without relying solely on male writers. Additionally, sexual differences and gender roles were theoretically irrelevant to mystical experiences, making mysticism the most prominent spiritual experience within the history of the Church, perhaps since martyrdom, which was equally available to men and women.<sup>138</sup> The opportunities for women found in mysticism were many and varied, making it an important movement in the spiritual history of women, as well as in the political, social, and intellectual history of women.

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<sup>137</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 191.

<sup>138</sup> Weber, “Gender,” 315.

Despite the potential for mysticism to be a movement in which gender was irrelevant, in reality gender played an important role in the experience of female mysticism. Constraints due to gender still existed. Male priests needed to confirm the orthodoxy of female mystics, there were some differences in the practice of mysticism between men and women, much of what we know about female mystical experiences has been preserved by hagiographies written by men, and the individuals discerning the true nature of women, whether they were holy or heretical, were male priests. Because gender was not irrelevant to mysticism, the study of female mysticism, more specifically, the Church's concerns surrounding female mysticism, can help reveal the ways in which the Church understood and portrayed women in general. There were questions about if women could hold spiritual authority, and, if so, what kind of authority that would be. Women's physical bodies were both emphasized and feared. The sexuality of women was also a concern for the Church. These concerns and fears were grounded in a patriarchal, bordering at times on misogynistic, understanding of women, their role in creation, and their bodies. Because the nature of women was ambiguous and difficult to discern, the line between safe mystics and dangerous heretics was often thin and blurred, making the Church's response to mysticism and individual mystics uneven.

The character of the witch, as constructed by the Church, removed those ambiguities. The patriarchal understanding of women seen in the Church's response to female mysticism became fully misogynistic. Women, when given power, necessarily used it for evil. Women were not only in danger of being manipulated by evil forces, they actively invited those forces into their lives. Women were defined by their physical bodies. Women were lustful, weak, devious, and sinful. If these beliefs were accepted as truths, as they were in the *Malleus Maleficarum* and by the Church during the witch trials, it would seem absurd that women would be able to gain

authority through encounters with the divine or that any women behaving in ways similar to mystics would be doing anything but harm. Therefore, through the creation of the witch, the female mysticism movement of the late medieval period, and all the opportunities for women within that movement, was destroyed.

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