

Fluid Figurations: Images of the Divine in the Writings
of Gertrude of Helfta, Catherine of Siena,
and Teresa of Avila

by

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Introduction

The Lord who, though he inhabits the highest heaven, loves to impart his grace to the humble, seemed to send down a sort of golden tube, like a drinking-straw, from his heart which was hanging suspended like a lamp over the soul who was cowering the valley of humility. Through this tube he caused to flow into me in a wonderful way all that I could desire.
-Gertrude of Helfta, from the Herald of Divine Love¹

Gertrude of Helfta (A.D. 1256-1302), Catherine of Siena (A.D. 1347-1380) and Teresa of Avila (A.D. 1515-1582) rose to prominence during the medieval and early modern apogee of Christian mysticism. These women, like other figures aware of the presence of God and successful at communicating this awareness, were accorded deep respect by the surrounding culture. Gertrude's, Catherine's, and Teresa's testimonies present accounts of encounters with God filled with fluid imagery. Such watery metaphors are largely absent in patristic writings on the nature of God and do not appear, for the most part, in the works of medieval male mystics. Although living in different times and places, Gertrude, a thirteenth-century Benedictine nun in Germany, Catherine, a fourteenth-century Italian and tertiary of the Dominican Order, and Teresa, a Carmelite in sixteenth-century Spain, were all entrenched in the same culture of monasticism. Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa lived

¹ Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, trans. Margaret Winkworth (Paulist Press, 1993), 190.

in a world where the convent provided female religious aspirants with a viable, culturally sanctioned alternative to marriage. All three women devoted themselves to God, yearned for knowledge of the divine, recorded their personal experiences of mystical union, and at the end of their careers, achieved notoriety. The common use of fluid metaphors in their texts is illuminated by these similarities.

The women addressed in this study were admired by their male-counterparts at a time when the culture of Catholicism was highly patriarchal and when similarly outspoken women were accused of demonic possession, ridiculed, and tortured. Intellectual and cultural trends inspiring mystical behavior differed little between Germany, Italy and Spain, and the Cistercians, Dominicans, and Carmelites all embraced similar theological canons. Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa lived in different centuries, yet had enough in common to support an examination of their stories and unique writings as influenced by similar historical factors.

A new historicist approach to the study of Gertrude's, Catherine's, and Teresa's written works as products of cultural influences and theological trends will help answer the following questions: To what extent do Gertrude's, Catherine's, and Teresa's stories reflect the experience of religious women in medieval and early modern Europe? What details of their lives, as well as of their interactions with the Church, explain the degree to which the three women rebelled against established depictions of God? What were the similarities and differences of their cultural backgrounds? Considering the interior nature of mystical revelation, what historical evidence suggests that the psychological experiences of Gertrude, Catherine, and

Teresa were similar? Finally, why were all three women able to gain respect despite the potentially heretical implications of their testimonies?

Over the course of the last century and to the present day, the historiography of female mysticism has evolved from a devotional perspective on mystics, which arguably marginalized the voices of females, to one of feminist cultural studies privileging such perspectives. Medieval and early modern hagiographies of women mystics provided idealized versions of their subjects' lives. The next mode of historical scholarship on female mystics appeared in the form of less biased biographies. Many of these works embellished the hagiographies of women saints with factual, objective detail and little analysis.

Analytical studies of the acme of mysticism and of particular mystics developed side-by-side. Bernard McGinn's multi-volume *The Presence of God* provides a comprehensive, feminist guide to the development of mysticism from the early Middle Ages to the early modern period. *The Flowering of Mysticism*,² *the Growth of Mysticism*,³ and *the Harvest of Mysticism*,⁴ successive volumes in this series, chart trends in mystical behavior with special focus on particular religious individuals. Each work provides an exhaustive study on the historical climate behind the rise and long-lasting influence of mysticism in Europe. McGinn's series is the first synoptic treatment of the western mystical tradition in which a high level of attention is given to women's experience and influence.

² Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350)* (Crossroad, 1998).

³ Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1994).

⁴ Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany* (New York: Crossroad, 2005).

A wealth of secondary scholarship treats the life stories of specific mystics. Many such studies are psychological biographies. Erik Erikson's *Young Man Luther*, the first exhaustive psychological rendering of a religious character, inspired the methodology of subsequent psychologizations in religious history.⁵ Psychological historical studies of female mystics focus on the atypically fervent behavior of these characters. Helmut A. Hatzfel's *Santa Teresa de Avila*, the "first book written on Teresa from a straightforward psychological perspective," presents such a developmental biography, beginning with a Freudian interpretation of Teresa's childhood.⁶

One of the more recent psychological renderings of this kind is Rudolf Bell's *Holy Anorexia*, a "developmental" study of the same nature that medicalizes the self-abnegation of Catherine of Siena.⁷ *Holy Anorexia* was written at the same time as Caroline Walker Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, which stresses a contrasting, critically empathetic stance towards the study of behavioral trends in female mysticism.⁸ *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* helped center women in a newly understood medieval past. The corpus of Bynum's eminent and deeply influential work is marked by its new historicist approach, that is, the illumination of written works through their cultural and intellectual contexts.⁹ Bynum's methodology, which treats

⁵ Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: a study in psychoanalysis and history* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1993).

⁶ Helmut A. Hatzfeld, *Santa Teresa De Avila* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1969).

⁷ Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985).

⁸ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1984).

⁹ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1982).

the literature generated by mystics as products of a particular time and place, argues that “women’s behavior and women’s writing must be understood in the context of social, economic, and ecclesiastical structures, theological and devotional traditions, very different from our own.”¹⁰ Bynum’s contributions to the study of female mysticism have been widely embraced by subsequent works in gender studies.

Notably, Catherine Mooney’s *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters*, to which Bynum contributed the prefatory essay, adopts the new historicist methodology employed in all of Bynum’s prior works. The majority of female mystical testimonies were not recorded by the women themselves, but instead, verbally communicated to confessors. According to John Coakley, “even when a woman wrote in her own voice, a man very often stood between her and her readers, as editor or at least a scribe.”¹¹ *Gendered Voices* explores the ways in which the textualization of religious women’s voices by other (mostly male) persons, manipulates, indeed, changes the woman it has sought to render through a careful analysis of the language used in hagiographic texts. In it, comparisons of personal letters to dictated “autobiographies,” reveal instances of skewed, but often well-intentioned representation.

Gendered Voices acknowledges the cultural forces behind the portrayal of religious women, while searching for “common patterns prevalent among hagiographic treatments of female sanctity.”¹² Mooney’s project argues that the

¹⁰ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 9.

¹¹ John W. Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 2.

¹² Catherine M. Mooney, *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters* (Pennsylvania: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

“topos of the holy woman’s access to Christ through her suffering flesh appealed more to male hagiographers than to holy women themselves.”¹³ John W. Coakley’s *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and their Male Counterpart* utilizes a similar methodology, but to different ends: Coakley argues that the depiction of female saints by male confessors is generally trustworthy, for male hagiographers uniformly expressed the “conviction that the women possessed some essential spiritual gift lacking in themselves, and not infrequently they professed a subservience to these admired women that could seem to undermine their authority over them.”¹⁴

The study of female mystics fits into and is supported by the larger framework of gender studies in medieval and early modern Europe. A wide range of scholarship explores the experience of the female in the Catholic world. According to Lisa Bitel, “the study of medieval women and medieval women’s religious practices is now thoroughly mainstream, to the extent that some scholars argue that women are over-represented.”¹⁵ Bitel’s *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives* provides an analysis of the nature of life within medieval convents of different orders and argues that female mystics and lay women were alike subject to the Catholic world’s perception of femininity.¹⁶ Medieval and early modern women of every vocation were the same in the eyes of science. Thus, the study of female mystics can reference surveys of medieval scientific thought. Gerald J.

¹³ Lisa M. Bitel, *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 2.

¹⁴ Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power*, 2.

¹⁵ Bitel, *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe*, 2.

¹⁶ Bitel, *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe*, 3.

Grudzen's recent *Medical Theory about the Body and the Soul in the Middle Ages*, one such survey, describes Galen's perceptions of psychological and physiological masculinity and femininity operative in the medieval and early modern periods.

Another trend of scholarship presents still further means to assess the reading of female mystics. Feminist theorist perspectives of the experiences of women mystics emerged during the 1980s. Luce Irigaray's work points to the value of medieval mystical testimonies and their alternative perceptions of divinity,¹⁷ as well as the degree to which women's theological voices have been silenced.¹⁸ Scholarship on the gender fluidity of Jesus and its significance to the medieval world, including Phyllis Trible's *God and Rhetoric of Sexuality* and Amy Hollywood's *Sensible Ecstasy*,¹⁹ helps illuminate the ways in which the acme of female mysticism was a response to the sexist constraints of the religious and historical culture from which it arose.

This study of Gertrude of Helfta, Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila's metaphorical figurations of the divine will examine the primary documentation of each woman's mystical experiences. The analysis of these texts will honor the methodology of new historicism as informed by the works of Bynum. It will describe Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa's writings as part of a broad cultural context, theological and devotional discourse. In short, the testimonies of Gertrude, Catherine and Teresa reveal mystical encounters with a fluid God. For example,

¹⁷ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Translated by Gillian G. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1985).

¹⁸ Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*. Translated by Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

¹⁹ Hollywood, Amy, *Sexual Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demand of History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

Gertrude likens God to a sweet torrent of honey,²⁰ Catherine uses metaphors of bodily fluidity to illustrate union with divinity,²¹ and Teresa describes God as a rainfall.²² Although a number of secondary texts address the nature of female mystical testimonies, and some even discuss the gendered nature of God in these texts, few focus on the fluid/watery imagery of mystical testimonies placed within a larger theological scope. The cultural explanations behind these metaphors are also yet to be examined.

Critical perspectives growing from recent trends in biblical and, more widely, religious studies, offer still further means to assess these provocative medieval and early modern texts. For example, a wide range of scholarship suggests that the experience of the medieval and early modern female was shaped by a masculine gendering of God. A group of religious historical studies posit the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, which teaches that God created the world from nothing, as the foundation of God's hypermasculinization by the Church. Gerhard May's work on *creatio ex nihilo* traces the genealogy of creation from nothing throughout the centuries. *Creatio ex nihilo*, his text, provides an important background to the study of historical developments contributing to perceptions of God's gender.²³ Catherine Keller's *Face of the Deep*, a feminist theological and historical account of the

²⁰ Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, trans. Margaret Winkworth (Paulist Press, 1993), 22.

²¹ Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena* (North Carolina: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1960), 22.

²² Teresa of Avila, *Teresa of Jesus: The Autobiography of Teresa of Avila*, trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Image Books, 1960), 169.

²³ Gerhard May, *Creatio ex nihilo: The Doctrine of 'Creation out of Nothing' in Early Christian Thought*. Translated by A.S. Worrall (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994).

creatio ex nihilo doctrine and its often mystical proponents, highlights the disregard of God's feminine aspects in patristic treatments of Genesis.²⁴

How does the gendering of God through *creatio ex nihilo* specifically relate to the testimonies of Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa? All three women use fluid imagery in their descriptions of divinity. Keller argues that *creatio ex nihilo* masculinized God through the exclusion of a female, watery co-eternal, present in Genesis 1.2. Gertrude's, Catherine's, and Teresa's celebration of a fluid God can be viewed as a reaction to early Church dialogue on *creatio ex nihilo* and a revival of this watery co-eternal. Were these three women the first religious voices to celebrate, or at least, acknowledge an oceanic God?

The intellectual history of the fluid characterization of God begins in the second century, when the question of God's creation from nothing came to the forefront of a theological debate between Gnostic and Orthodox theologians. In Genesis 1.2, the spirit of God hovers over a primordial, oceanic substance:

And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.²⁵

Second century Gnostic renderings of the deep of Genesis, in particular, those by Marcion, generated centuries of creation exegesis.²⁶ This study will compare Gnostic representations of the deep as a feminine, active force to the depictions of Genesis 1.2 by Tatian,²⁷ Theophilus of Antioch²⁸ and Irenaeus²⁹ that exclude the

²⁴ Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003).

²⁵ Gen. 1:2 (Revised Standard Version)

²⁶ *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, trans. Werner Foerester (Oxford, 1972).

²⁷ May, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 149.

²⁸ May, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 160.

possibility of a feminine component in the creation story. The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* arose out of Orthodox indignation with heretical preachers. *Creatio ex nihilo* is, thus, historical in its origins and its study must account for the historical factors behind its long, ambivalent reception.

The character of the heretical threats changed over time, but *creatio ex nihilo* survived by means of its representation by loyal theologians. While Augustine of Hippo's approach to the subject both celebrates and nihilates the "deep" of Genesis, illustrating a pious man's discomfort with the abyss as well as its exclusion,³⁰ Anselm of Caterbury's *Monologion*, seven centuries later, aligns itself point blank with *creatio ex nihilo*, proving that the Church remained invested in the protection of the second-century doctrine.³¹ A detailed examination of this stream of thought in patristic texts helps contextualize the medieval perception of the character of God and the strength of the doctrine with which Gertrude, Catherine and Teresa's compelling descriptions of God are arguably incompatible.

By the time the Benedictine Gertrude of Helfta began to experience mystical raptures, *creatio ex nihilo* was as historically powerful a force and particularly relevant as the goal of union with God started to preoccupy religious men and women. Mystics of the middle ages who wished to know God were influenced by the mystical experiences of Bernard of Clairvaux,³² Bernard had great influence in all subsequent monastic communities. An acknowledgement of his legacy and

²⁹ May, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 164.

³⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (London: Oxford, 1998).

³¹ Anselm of Caterbury, *The Major Works*, trans. Brian Davies (London: Oxford, 1990).

³² Bernard of Clairvaux, *Selected Works*, ed. GR Evans (San Francisco: Harper, 2005).

writings, therefore, is essential to the depiction of the intellectual and cultural milieu in which Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa wrote.

Platonic writings bear similar importance to this depiction. The early twentieth-century historian of religion Rufus M. Jones claimed that platonic thought was deeply influential to European mysticism. In Plato's creation story, *Timaeus*, a demiurge interacts with a pre-existing formlessness.³³ Platonic thought also influenced medicinal practices during the Middle Ages and early modern periods and is embodied by the Galenic theory of reproduction.

The intellectual positioning of Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa requires an examination of medieval texts on gender. It also demands an exploration of patristic writings on the gendered nature of God, often framed in terms of the creation, which had a powerful influence on the medieval world. Such a genealogy of thought helps emphasize the extraordinary nature of Gertrude's, Catherine's, and Teresa's revelations.

This study will examine the testimonies of Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa within their intellectual historical framework. Fortunately, most of the writings connected to these women survive. The primary source on Gertrude most relevant to this study is *The Herald of Divine Love*, a semi-autobiographical work detailing the spiritual development of Gertrude inside the monastery of Helfta. *The Herald of Divine Love* is filled with reference to an abyssal God.³⁴ An analysis of such statements reveals the degree to which Gertrude conceived of God as a liquid, and herself as a vessel for his/her love.

³³ Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Donald Zeyl (Hackett Publishing Company, 2000)

³⁴ Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 94.

Catherine's autobiography, penned by her close friend and confessor, Raymond of Capua, uses similar metaphors, although Catherine wields the term "abyss" with less frequency in her descriptions of God, and focuses more on metaphors of bodily fluidity.³⁵ Teresa's *Autobiography*, modeled in part after Augustine's *Confessions*, uses metaphors of precipitation to communicate the experience of divine women.³⁶ Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa had male influences who, like the majority of medieval and early modern theologians, lacked these women's fascination with a watery God. All three texts are easily placed within the intellectual historical framework of creation theology.

The Herald of Divine Love, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, and *The Autobiography of Teresa of Avila* provide details about their respective subjects' childhoods and choice of monastic vocation. Informed by historical, philosophical, theological, and literary studies of female mystics, this study will use a historical contextualization of the hagiographies of these women to explain their use of metaphor and its meaning.

³⁵ Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena*.

³⁶ Teresa of Avila, *Teresa of Jesus*.

1. The Sacrifice of the Abyss: Renderings of Genesis 1.2

1.1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 1.2. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.³⁷

In the first two verses of the *Bible*, the Genesis of “Genesis,” heaven and earth are formed. In Genesis 1.1, God alone creates. In Genesis 1.2, God creates *from* a primordial, oceanic substance, a fluid formlessness: “the deep” (*tehom*). Before the turn of the second century CE., the Jewish presupposition that God alone made the world carried what Gerhard May calls “axiomatic validity.”³⁸ No one thought to investigate the presence of the deep in Genesis 1.2. The second century, however, witnessed an increase in theological speculation on the role of the deep as God’s creation material. What is the significance of this deep, and is there tension between Genesis 1.1 and Genesis 1.2, between a God who seems to create by himself and a God who creates out of something?

The abyss of Genesis became problematic for the second-century theological imagination as Gnostic renderings of the deep of Genesis 1.2 catalyzed centuries of abyssal exegesis. To counter the significance of the abyss, Christian Orthodoxy

³⁷ Genesis 1:1-2 (The New Interpreter’s Bible)

³⁸ Gerhard May, *Creatio ex nihilo: The Doctrine of ‘Creation out of Nothing’ in Early Christian Thought*, trans. A.S. Worall (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1994), 1.

established the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, which teaches that an omnipotent God created the world “from nothing.” As Catherine Keller has argued, however, this narrative seems flatly to contradict Genesis 1.2, where God interacts with a something. *Creatio ex nihilo* negates the possibility that *tehom* was coeternal with God. Abyss annihilated, the sole sovereignty of God remained intact under the shield of Orthodoxy’s creation theology.

Despite its association with the Byzantine Church, the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* actually emerged inside a series of Gnostic debates, with some Gnostics celebrating the deep and others reviling it. But where were these Gnostic theories of creation derived and why did they choose to focus on the abyss? Gnostic creation theology is closely bound to the Platonic idea of world formation. In Plato’s *Timaeus* (360 BCE), the universe is constructed from formless matter. Plato speculates that matter has “always been, without any source of becoming,”³⁹ and that during the creation of the world, an imaginative demiurge made all things good by taking “all that is visible—not at rest, but in discordant and unordered motion—and brought it from disorder into order.”⁴⁰ Here, Plato’s god imposes geometrical structure upon a pre-existing formlessness.

In the second-creation story of *Timaeus*, world formation is likened to childbirth: the pre-existent matter is a “receptacle” (*khora*) that “takes its form and activation from whatever shape enters it.”⁴¹ Through the process of creation, formless matter is structured, ordered. *Timaeus* does not assign abyssal adjectives to

³⁹ Plato, *Timaeus*, ed. Oskar Piest (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1959), 17.

⁴⁰ Plato, *Timaeus*, 17.

⁴¹ Plato, *Timaeus*, 138.

the formless matter of creation, but it does define “depth” in a later chapter as “that which does not have bodily form.”⁴²

The first-century Hellenistic Jew, Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BCE-50 CE), saw no discordance between Plato’s model of creation and Genesis.⁴³ His work demonstrates an uncritical acceptance of God’s creation out of pre-existing matter. In *De opificio mundi*, Philo describes God, or “*Nous*,” as the active principle of creation, while the matter of Genesis is the passive principle,” which is in no way an “ontologically equal principle alongside God.”⁴⁴ Here, although matter exists alongside God, God is still sovereign, for he presses material into his service. In Philo’s theory of world-formation, therefore, two principles participate in the initial creation, but the omnipotence of the active, Godlike principle, goes unquestioned. Moreover, God fits perfectly, if uncritically, into the structure of Platonist ontology.⁴⁵ Philo believed that “it was the ungrudging goodness of God which caused him to order and form the stuff that had no beauty or order of its own.”⁴⁶ Philo’s account does not address the origin of the matter of Genesis. But Gnostic curiosity over this origin would ruffle the feathers of second-century patristic writers, who sought to explain the matter of Genesis in relation to Plato’s formlessness.

Gnostic writings on the origin of matter link creation theology to theodicy. The Gnostics believed that “the question of evil is ultimately inseparable from the

⁴² Plato, *Timaeus*, 33.

⁴³ May, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 9.

⁴⁴ May, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 15.

⁴⁵ May, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 10.

⁴⁶ May, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 10.

question of the origin of the cosmos.”⁴⁷ Gnostics argued that evil could not have come from a perfect God, but instead originated through “heavenly beings of lesser rank.”⁴⁸ Some Gnostics claim that this evil comes from an alternative being, while others locate its source in the deep of Genesis 1.2. The Gnostic accounts of creation that celebrate the deep tend to portray the matter of Genesis an active character. Such texts contain a re-mythologization of platonic matter. The Gnostic Marcion’s (c. 85-160) “Antithesis,” for example, draws from the *Timaeus*’ first theory of creation, in claiming that a lowly demiurge built the world out of a feisty primordial material, which he maps onto *tehom* of Genesis 1.2. Marcion was expelled from his Roman congregation for this imaginative treatment of the deep, making him the founder of the Gnostics.

In subsequent Gnostic mythologies, far from effusively providing the substance of creation, the un-eternal deep plays a violent role in the formation of the world. In *The Seventh Tractate of the Corpus Hermeticum*, the pagan Gnostic Poimandres describes the emergence of the physical world as the outcome of a battle between a divine warrior of light and a chaos monster. In Poimandres’ story, the character of darkness is introduced after the character of light, but is “not to be regarded as created by light.” This darkness, an entity that exists without cause, is aggravated by the presence of something different.⁴⁹ Poimandres explains his vision of a moist, crying darkness that coils like a snake in the face of light:

⁴⁷ May, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 41.

⁴⁸ May, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 40.

⁴⁹ *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, trans. R McL Wilson (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1972), 326.

I saw an immeasurable view, everything is light, (a light) serene and gay, and I loved the sight. Shortly after there was a darkness, tending downwards, following in its turn, frightful and horrible, wound in a coil; it appeared to me like a snake. The darkness changed into something moist, unspeakably confused, giving off smoke as from a fire, and uttering an inexpressibly doleful sound. Then an inarticulate cry issued from it, such that I supposed it came from the fire. And from the light a holy logos (Word) came upon Nature, and pure fire shot up from the moist Nature to the height. For it was light, quick and vigorous all at once, and the air, being light, followed the spirit, as it ascended from the earth and water up to fire, so that it seemed to me to be hanging from it. But earth and water remained mixed together by themselves, so that I did not see the earth for water. But they were stirred through the spiritual Logos which stirred upon them (Gen. 1.2), so that I became audible.⁵⁰

Here, the abyss, confused, moist, and monstrous, is reluctantly overcome, stirred by the light of logos in the process of creation. Poimandres' creation story illustrates a Gnostic preoccupation with the oceanic substance of Genesis. In it, uncreated matter combats the coeternal power of light.

Of course, not all Gnostics described the material of Genesis as unoriginate. Some argued that the deep was neither creative nor destructive, but rather, secondary, passive and insignificant. One of these was the Gnostic Basildes, (c. unknown-138) who, as May points out, was the first theologian to construct the *ex nihilo* framework that Orthodoxy would come to adopt. This history reveals “the startling extent of dependency of orthodoxy upon its heretical Other.”⁵¹ Basildes states that “God’s creation cannot merely consist, as in the case of a human artist or craftsman, in the shaping of [pre-existing] stuff,”⁵² so God must have made the stuff to begin with. This is the argument that Orthodoxy adopts to defend the sovereignty of God.

⁵⁰ *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, 329.

⁵¹ Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 47

⁵² Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 47

Basildes' teaching is unlike that of the other Gnostics, for in tension with his Gnostic counterparts, who either lauded or demonized the deep, Basildes argued that everything was created through the simple act of God.⁵³ Basildes, then, was the first theologian to formulate the theory of creation from nothing. The Basildeans would reference Genesis 1.3, in which light does not come from a specified source,⁵⁴ to prove that the world was not the product of a source apart from God.⁵⁵

In order to defend God's omnipotence, Orthodox renderings of Genesis 1.2 likewise opposed the idea of world formation from unoriginate matter. May describes the central priority of second-century Orthodox thinkers as a reconciliation of "the idea of a God who creates freely and unconditionally with the concepts of Greek metaphysics."⁵⁶ In the *Apology*, for example, Justin Martyr (c. 100-165) marries platonist creation philosophy to scripture, but upholds God's independence as creator, thereby refuting Plato's claim that "matter has always been, without a source of becoming."⁵⁷ According to Justin, God created the formlessness of Genesis 1.2 first, then "changed shapeless matter and created the world."⁵⁸ In this way, Justin reconciled Genesis 1.1 with Genesis 1.2.

Other Orthodox writers used scriptural support from outside of Genesis, to prove that, in contrast to platonic thinking and pro-matter Gnostic assertions, God was the sole actor in the creation of the world. Such creation theologies reference 2 Maccabees 7:28, in which God is said to have made the world from nothing:

⁵³ May, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 70.

⁵⁴ Genesis 1:3

⁵⁵ May, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 77.

⁵⁶ May, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 2.

⁵⁷ Plato, *Timaeus*, 17.

⁵⁸ Justin, I *Apology*, 59: PG VI, 416.

So I urge you, my child, to look up at the sky and the earth. Consider everything you see there, and realize that God made it all from nothing, just as he made the human race.⁵⁹

They also appealed to Wisdom 11.17, which suggests that the world was constructed from a formless substance:

And indeed your all-powerful hand which created the world from formless matter did not lack the means to unleash a horde of bears or savage lions.⁶⁰

The formless matter of Wisdom 11.17 is ambiguous in its origin, and certainly passive. Rather than concede the eternity of this matter, however, Orthodox thinkers claimed it was made by God.

After Justin, other Christian apologists, like Tatian (c. 120-180), an Assyrian writing in Rome, and Theophilus of Antioch (c. unknown-181), responded to the threat of Gnostic creation stories through a series of polemics. Tatian, pressured “to deny the pre-existence of matter by reason of the demands of actual controversies within the church,”⁶¹ wrote against the Marcionite teachers with whom he interacted in Rome. His treatise on the creation of the world, *Oratio ad Graecos*, states that “the Lord of all things who was himself the foundation of the whole was alone in relation to the creation which had not yet come into being,”⁶² and that the matter of Genesis a “principle,” logically conceived by God himself. Like Justin, then, Tatian argues that the abyss of Genesis was actually created by God. Matter, Tatian states, must originate from a source. In this case, the source of all matter is the “sole creator.”

⁵⁹ 2 Mac 7:28 (The New Interpreter’s Bible)

⁶⁰ Wis 11.17 (The New Interpreter’s Bible)

⁶¹ Gerhard May, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 150.

⁶² Tatian, *Oratio Ad Graecos and Fragments*, ed. Molly Whittaker (London: Claredon Press, 1982), 11.

Tatian also differentiates between the matter of Genesis 1.2 and the “spirit” of God hovering over it, implying that the material of the verse is devoid of spirit.⁶³

Theophilus argues likewise that “God has created everything out of nothing into being.”⁶⁴ For Theophilus, God is unoriginate so matter must be originate, as it is inferior to God. The assertion that God constructed a cosmos from unoriginate matter was, in Theophilus’ view, heretical. Irenaeus (c. unknown-202), the Bishop of Lyons and architect of the *creatio ex nihilo*, argued that God the all-powerful created matter out of nothing because “the will of God must rule and dominate in everything, but everything else must give way to it, be subordinated to it and be servant to it.”⁶⁵ God’s sovereignty would be undermined by a co-eternal deep. Irenaeus’ statements echo and solidify the creation theologies of Justin, Tatian, and Theophilus. While Irenaeus’ predecessors were the first Christian theologians to claim that God created matter out of nothing, Irenaeus was the Church father who established the largely-uncontested doctrinal claim of *creatio ex nihilo*, an assertion loaded with implications about the nature of God and God’s relationship with humanity, as well as the rest of creation.

In her theological evaluation of the deep of Genesis, Catherine Keller suggests that the logic of *creatio ex nihilo* requires a defeminization of the act of creation, a sacrifice of the “co-eternal,” feminine deep. Certainly, a nihilation of the abyss and its creative potential took place within the Orthodox treatment of Genesis 1.2. But how can this nihilation be viewed as a defeminization of creation? We have learned

⁶³ N. Joseph Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo and the Theology of St. Augustine: The Anti-Manichaean Polemic and Beyond* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 9.

⁶⁴ May, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 156.

⁶⁵ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 54.

that Plato understood creation as a form of childbirth, with the participation of a womb-like receptacle,⁶⁶ adopted by Gnostic renderings of creation to describe a feminized matter's interaction with God.

Irenaeus himself acknowledged and was troubled by the femininity Gnosticism ascribed to the deep. In *Against Heresies*, he argues specifically against *Bythus*, an anonymous Gnostic text in which a woman, Sophia, cries over a miscarriage. Her tears give birth to the formlessness over which God hovers in Genesis 1.2.⁶⁷ Ridiculing this position, Irenaeus claims that Gnostics “do believe that their Mother, whom they style a female from a female, produced from her passions aforesaid the so vast material substance of creation....” The Gnostics’ failure is that “They do not inquire whence were supplied to their Mother.... so great an amount of tears, or perspiration, or sadness, or that which produced the remainder of matter.”⁶⁸ Far from existing co-eternally with God (or worse, existing before him), Irenaeus argues that the feminized matter of *Bythus* must have originated from God.

In short, Irenaeus, saw in the Gnostic humanization of Genesis’ abyss the threat of a feminine co-eternal principle--one that was, above all other descriptors, wet. In order to dry up this fluid threat, Irenaeus insisted that the watery deep of Genesis was the product of an all-powerful God, and of God alone. Irenaeus’ nihilation of the deep thus implicitly excludes the participation of a “female” actor in creation. Of course, the question of the deep was not resolved by Irenaeus, nor was it abandoned in the centuries succeeding the Bishop’s life. As Keller suggests,

⁶⁶ Plato, *Timaeus*, 138

⁶⁷ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 52.

⁶⁸ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 53.

“theology is always returning to its originative discourses,”⁶⁹ and so the deep resurfaces throughout the patristic, medieval, and early modern periods. But what explains the persistence of the deep in theological discourse? And is there a link between its persistence and its feminization?

According to Keller, the logic of *creatio ex nihilo* is based on dualisms: When creation emerges out of an almighty God and an absolute nothing, “one is either good or evil, corporeal or incorporeal, eternal or temporal, almighty or powerless, propertied or inferior.”⁷⁰ Indeed, as we have seen, Tatian defines the abyss of Genesis as the inferior product of a superior God and Theophilus distinguishes between the created abyss and its uncreated creator, which is to say that both Tatian’s and Theophilus’ arguments contain dualist designations. These dualisms persist into the medieval and early modern periods and acquire deeply gendered valences. In the times when Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa were writing, women were overwhelmingly identified with the corporeal, powerless and inferior while men were identified with the spiritual, powerful, and superior. The dualisms implicit in *creatio ex nihilo*, in other words, bore cultural relevance long after the second century.

In the *Confessions*, Augustine of Hippo (c. 354-430) wrestles with the logic of these dualisms and their origin in the division between God and *tehom*. Augustine’s treatment of the abyss is distinguished by its ambivalence and must be contextualized by its relationship to Manichaeism. Augustine himself studied and practiced Manichaeism, the last form of Gnosticism, for nine years of his life before refuting the religion through a series of polemics. In regards to creation, Manichaeism posited

⁶⁹ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 44.

⁷⁰ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 49.

the existence of an “ontological principle that is coeternal with God.”⁷¹ In its mythology of the beginning of the world, a Good Principle interacts with an Evil, watery Principle.⁷² As he grew older, Augustine came to understand that the independence of this watery character was irreconcilable with Orthodoxy’s *creatio ex nihilo*. His fullest refutation of Manichaean theology can be found in *De vera religione* (A.D. 390). Describing God’s true method of creation, Augustine writes,

Existence as such is good, and supreme existence is the chief good. From what did he make them? Out of nothing. That out of which God created all things had neither form nor species, and was simply nothing. Therefore, the world was made out of some unformed matter, that matter was made out of... nothing.⁷³

According to Keller, Augustine’s approach to the matter of Genesis is both “*tehomophobic*” and “*tehomophilic*,” meaning it both loves and hates, both requires and rejects the deep of Genesis. Augustine’s ambivalence is revealed in his calling the deep an “almost nothing.” For example, in the *Confessions* he describes the abyss as a “kind of formlessness without any definition.”⁷⁴ Books twelve and thirteen characterize the almost-nothingness of the abyss as devoid of light. The abyss of Genesis is, in Augustine’s view, lowly. Its formlessness has no intellectual proportions, nor is its matter apparent to the senses. To be sure, Augustine grants the depth a “prior existence.”⁷⁵ But to make it clear that the deep was not prior to (or even co-eternal with) God, Augustine explains that the spirit of God was indeed

⁷¹ Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, x.

⁷² Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, 69.

⁷³ Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. Henry Chadwick (London: Oxford University Press, 1992), 250.

⁷⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, 247.

⁷⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, 249.

“borne upon the waters,” but not “borne up on them as if resting weight on them.”⁷⁶

According to Augustine, God created heaven and earth from nothing in Genesis 1.1, but the heaven of the first verse differs from the heaven of the first day because it shares the almost nothingness of the deep:

This firmament you called ‘heaven,’ but heaven to this earth and sea, which you made on the third day by giving visible shape to formless matter which you made before any day existed at all. Already you made heaven before any day, and that is the ‘heaven of this heaven,’ because in the beginning you had made heaven and earth. But the earth itself which you had made was formless matter; for it was ‘invisible and unorganized and darkness was upon the abyss.’ From the invisible and unorganized earth, from this formlessness, from this next to nothing, you made all these things of which this mutable world consists, yet in a state of flux.⁷⁷

Here, Augustine accounts for the presence of the abyss in Genesis 1.2 by arguing that God created it himself. In Augustine’s reading, then, God is both superior and prior to this matter. The formlessness of Genesis indeed exists as a product of God and does not itself actively create.

In his *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, Augustine examines the meaning of the word “abyssus.” *Enarrationes* defines the abyss as “an impenetrable and incomprehensible depth, principally applied to a large body of water.”⁷⁸ Unlike the Gnostics, Augustine does not give the abyss powers that might resemble or rival God’s. His *Contra Faustum* reveals the logic behind this reluctance to divinize the matter of Genesis, criticizing the way that Genesis 1.2 is interpreted to mean that

⁷⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, 275.

⁷⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, 250.

⁷⁸ Bernard McGinn, “The Abyss of Love,” *The Joy of Learning and the Love of God: Studies in Honor of Jean Leclercq*, ed. E. Rozanne Elder (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 99.

“God was at some time covered with darkness.”⁷⁹ Augustine counters this interpretation with the assertion that God is light and cannot have been covered in darkness. Therefore, in Augustine’s reading, the abyss is not divine and has never rivaled the divine.

Most creation exegesis after Augustine follows his defense of *creatio ex nihilo*. Anselm of Canterbury’s *Monologion* illustrates the extent to which the negation of the abyss presents a challenge to Christian apologetics, but is easily overcome through the argument that God created the formlessness of Genesis 1.2. The *Monologion* argues that God is superlative and, therefore, omnipotent: “And since only that which is supremely good can be supremely great, it is necessary that there is something best and greatest—i.e. of everything that exists, the supreme.”⁸⁰ Anselm (c. 1033-1109) admits that *creatio ex nihilo* “gives us something of a problem. For when A is made out of B, B is a cause of A. And every cause contributes something to the essence of this effect.” According to *Monologion*, while the formless matter of Genesis is made by God, there is not “some thing from which it was made.” Rather, Anselm claims that God, the “greatest,” was capable of making something from nothing.” So creation is out of nothing, but not absolute nothing—“This is like using the expression ‘sad about nothing’ of someone who is sad without reason,”⁸¹ meaning that the cause of sadness is oftentimes as formless and unfathomable as the deep.

⁷⁹ McGinn, “The Abyss of Love,” 98.

⁸⁰ Anselm of Canterbury, *Monologion*, ed. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Press), 13.

⁸¹ Anselm, *Monologion*, 22.

An overview of the genealogy of *creatio ex nihilo* apologetics indicates two major themes of interpretation. First, the defense of *creatio ex nihilo* was based on the assumption that God produced the matter of Genesis 1.2. Second, matter was said to be logically originate because of its inferiority, mutability, and lack of spirit. Matter, it appears, had to be discredited, nihilated and othered to protect God's omnipotence. In Keller's opinion, *creatio ex nihilo* entails an othering of the abyss of Genesis that supports a framework of dualizations. Masculinity and femininity are dichotomized along with form/formlessness, spirit/body, superiority/inferiority, God/creation.

In this study of Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa, I would like to argue that the thirteenth-century flowering of mysticism in Europe unsettled *creatio ex nihilo* because of its privileging of abyssal adjectives in descriptions of God. The unfathomability of the abyss was a compelling concept to mystics seeking adjectives for their ineffable subject matter. Mysticism holds that "direct apprehension, or intuitive knowledge of God, is reserved for the future life after the soul is separated from the body," but that such apprehension "might, however, occur here on earth by the supernatural act of God."⁸² The mystic soul approaches God inwardly through a series of steps taken away from the sensory. The mystical destination is the "apex of the mind" which allows an encounter with the divine, a window, as it were, into the nature of God.

⁸² Rufus M. Jones, *The Flowering of Mysticism* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1939), 13.

According to historian of religion Rufus M. Jones, “the greatest single source of European mysticism,” was “the platonic stream of life and thought.”⁸³ So far, this study has examined how Plato’s creation story, a divine demiurge orders a preexisting, chaotic otherness. During the Middle Ages, *Timaeus* was the only work of Plato’s translated into Latin. Plato entered medieval Christian discourse through the works of Augustine. Augustine’s own ambivalence towards *creatio ex nihilo* was derived, in part from his platonist loyalties, so we can see how the platonic currents influential to Gnosticism might have intruded upon medieval mystical visions of God.

In “Abyss of Love,” the religious historian Bernard McGinn argues that mystics are philosophers as well as liberal biblical exegetes.⁸⁴ Mystics, McGinn claims, absorb the content of the scripture and investigate its meaning through personal experiences of divinity. The divine represented in Gertrude’s, Catherine’s, and Teresa’s testimonies has abyssal qualities. These works provide perspective on a creation theology alternative to the patristic norm, marking a constructive departure from the masculinized vision of God extolled by male apologists of *creatio ex nihilo*. According to Jones, theology on the nature of God and creation took place alongside a “flowering of mysticism” in Europe.

Mystics of the Middle Ages sought to know God intimately. No doubt these persons found inspiration in the recorded mystical experiences of St. Bernard of Clairvaux (c. 1090-1153), the French architect of the reforming Cistercian order and St. Francis (c. 1181-1226), the notorious ascetic whose hagiography was so influential for subsequent Europeans. Even the deeply rational St Thomas Aquinas

⁸³ Jones, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 26.

⁸⁴ McGinn, “The Abyss of Love,” 96.

(c. 1225-1274) ceased working on his *Summa Theologica* after a revelation that “made the writings of books seem a small and insignificant thing.”⁸⁵

Bernard of Clairvaux provides a valuable example of the way that male medieval mystics discussed the abyss in relation to God, which McGinn uses as an important point of comparison to female mystical treatments of the abyss. The word “abyss” appears sixty-three times in Bernard’s works. Repeatedly, Bernard refers to the abyss of sin and to the abyssal mystery of divine Incarnation. Bernard does not discuss Genesis 1.2, but references Psalm 41:8, in which “Abyss calls out to abyss in the voice of thy cataracts. All thy heights and thy billows have passed over me.”⁸⁶ Bernard interprets the “abyss of light” as divine, and as calling out to a human abyss of darkness. In his rendering of Psalm 41:8, Bernard, therefore, employs the dualism characteristic of *creatio ex nihilo* exegesis, polarizing the merciful abyss of light and the hopeless abyss of darkness.⁸⁷

This same text is interpreted in William of St. Thierry’s (c. 1075-1148) later *Exposition on the Song of Songs*, which reads the Psalm as depicting the saviour and his lover’s embrace of hands:

This abyss calls out to the other abyss; this ecstasy dreams of something quite different than what it sees; this secret sighs for another secret; this joy imagines another joy; this sweetness foretells another sweetness.⁸⁸

Here, William utilizes the image of the abyss to describe an intimate human interaction with Christ. His work shows how the language of the abyss attracted mystics in their “attempts to express the inexpressible.”⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Jones, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 11.

⁸⁶ McGinn, “The Abyss of Love,” 95.

⁸⁷ McGinn, “The Abyss of Love,” 100.

⁸⁸ McGinn, “The Abyss of Love,” 100.

In Bernard and William, then, we see two separate abysses. These abysses are bridged in women mystics where the abyss is connected to Genesis. In the “Abyss of Love,” McGinn relates the language of medieval female mystics to the abyss of Genesis. He credits female mystics for a new interpretation of the abyss of the soul as one in the same as the abyss of God. The language of these women relates a melding of fluidities through mystical union that McGinn attributes to a lack of female training in scriptural exposition. According to McGinn, women mystics in particular blurred the “boundaries between the Spirit’s biblical and personal revelations”⁹⁰ because of their more unconfined interpretations of scripture. McGinn does investigate the reasons women were predisposed to assign God and their union with him a fluid quality, but this investigation stops at his claim that women were less familiar with scriptural exposition.

While Bernard of Clairvaux and William of St. Thierry dualized the abyss of light and the abyss of darkness, female mystics of the thirteenth century understood mystical union differently, as “at least a union of indistinction between two equally incomprehensible abysses.”⁹¹ To these women, the soul was itself abyssal as “More and more union with God came to be described, not as a *unitas spiritus* of traditional Pauline origin, but as a *unitas indistinction* between God and the soul.”⁹²

Union was, for female mystics, the platform for a meeting of God’s abyss with the abyss of the soul.⁹³ To illustrate this phenomenon, McGinn examines the

⁸⁹ McGinn, “The Abyss of Love,” 96.

⁹⁰ McGinn, “The Abyss of Love,” 98.

⁹¹ McGinn, “The Abyss of Love,” 93.

⁹² McGinn, “The Abyss of Love,” 103.

⁹³ McGinn, “The Abyss of Love,” 103.

work of the Cistercian nun, Beatrice of Nazareth (c.1200-1268), whose *Seven Experiences of Love* describes mystical experience as a union of one abyss with another:

In this stage...Beatrice, because of such great abundance of spiritual sweetness, became totally celestial, as if she were absorbed into the abyss of charity. Like a little drop of water running down into the vast expanse of the sea, her whole heart's affection took on a kind of heavenly nature at the same time she was immersed in the ocean of eternity.⁹⁴

Here, Beatrice's description of union betrays an ambiguous distinction between God and the soul.⁹⁵ In *The Seven Experiences of Love*, Beatrice is compared to a "fish swimming in the vast sea and resting in its depths [i.e. abysses], and, like a bird, boldly mounting high in the sky, so that the soul feels its spirit freely moving through the vastness and depth and the unutterable richness of love,"⁹⁶ a passage that likens God to an abyss of love. McGinn acknowledges a similarity between Beatrice's description of union and the Beguine Hadewijch's conception of the "mutuality of the abyss." Hadewijch was from the Low Countries, and particularly disposed towards the use of fluid metaphors:

My soul melts away
In the madness of Love
The abyss into which she hurls me
Is deeper than the sea
For Love's deep new abyss
Renews my wound⁹⁷

Here, Hadewijch implies that everything flowing from God flows back through union.⁹⁸ The later Angela of Foligno likewise describes her 'abyssal absorption' into

⁹⁴ Roger De Ganck, *Life of Beatrice*, (Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1991), 304.

⁹⁵ McGinn, "The Abyss of Love," 105.

⁹⁶ De Ganck, *Life of Beatrice*, 316.

⁹⁷ McGinn, "The Abyss of Love," 107.

God, and later on, we will see how Gertrude's, Teresa's, and Catherine's testimonies provide persuasive examples of the female mystical trend of fluidity.

McGinn's study makes an important distinction between male and female mystical testimonies. In his treatment of Bernard, William, Beatrice, and Hadewijch, McGinn indicates that mystics of the Middle Ages were not describing encounters with the sovereign God of *creatio ex nihilo*, but rather with a divine fluidity. He implies that women were much more likely to play with the meaning of the abyss in their writings. According to McGinn, women were on the forefront of the identification of God with fluidity and alone in saying that union is a place in which the soul and God are indistinguishable, but this revelation leaves a number of historical questions unanswered.

For one, why were female mystics of the Middle Ages pioneers of this new description of God? What explains the time-specific attraction of these women to the abyss? If we read female mystical accounts in relation to Genesis 1.2 and its theologization, we see how such testimonies contain both an identification with and a divinization of the abyss, representative of a marked departure from the Orthodox treatment of *creatio ex nihilo* and the nature of God. Not only did the works of these women unsettle the notion of *creatio ex nihilo*, they also shook the dualisms it established, reconciling femininity and fluidity with divinity, Genesis 1.2 with Genesis 1.1, and the female mystic with God.

⁹⁸ McGinn, "The Abyss of Love," 109.

2. The Fluid Other: Medieval and Early Modern Perceptions of Femininity

Silence itself—the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within overall strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case.⁹⁹

Mystical experiences like the ones described by Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa, take place beyond the realm of material consciousness. Such experiences are, by definition, ineffable, for direct language falls short of their articulation. Nevertheless, the medieval church forcibly encouraged their documentation. While some mystics enjoyed the oxymoronic process of mystical testimony, most, like Teresa, shared their personal visions of God with reluctance.

If I were a person writing with authority, I would gladly describe, at greater length and in the minutest detail, the favors which this glorious saint has

⁹⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (London: Vintage, 1990), 27.

granted to me and to others. But in order not to do more than I have been commanded I shall have to write about many things briefly.¹⁰⁰ Here, Teresa makes a sly jab at her confessors and the very concept of mystical testimony. As we will learn, Teresa was well aware that the inevitability of her subject matter naturally precluded its perfect representation by all persons writings with and without “authority.”

Faced with the necessity of communicating the incommunicable, the vast majority of medieval and early modern mystics chose to represent God with metaphors. Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa used particularly watery/fluid metaphors. That the writings of Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa generate a particular image of God based on similar metaphorical choices is noteworthy because of the image’s resemblance to the abyss silenced by *creatio ex nihilo*. Ultimately, the testimonies of these three women articulate a unique perception of God that diverges from centuries of male-dominated discourse on and against Genesis 1.2.

The mystical writings of this study demonstrate a tendency towards metaphorical fluidity. In all three women, God takes a watery form. Of course, the task of unpacking such metaphors is complex. We must assume, for one, that the language chosen by Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa was reflective of medieval influence. If the same textual and cultural influences were accessible to female and male mystics alike, why then did women such as Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa come to imagine God so differently from their male predecessors and counterparts? As we will see, the medieval theological and scientific gendering of women inspired Gertrude’s, Catherine’s, and Teresa’s use of fluid metaphors.

¹⁰⁰ Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Teresa of Jesus: The Autobiography of Teresa of Avila*, trans. Allison Peers (New York: Image Books, 1960), 96.

Just as medieval theology describes women as carnal, weak, and emotionally fluid, medieval scientific texts emphasize their fluidity and weakness. Historian Caroline Bynum criticizes the assumption that female mystics expressed “some kind of inherent female “emotionalism” or “some kind of affinity between women and female imagery.”¹⁰¹ These generalizations do not satisfy Bynum, who asks why it took centuries for women to become mystics if “they are intrinsically more emotional, imaginative, religious, or hysterical than men.” This study does not assume that women are inherently fluid, inherently hysterical, or even more imaginative than men. Instead it argues, in slight tension with Bynum, that the female imagery of the Middle Ages was, in fact, inspirational to women mystics, but that in the works of such women, this imagery performed a constructive evolution of meaning. Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa appropriated the vocabulary used so frequently against their sex, and applied it to descriptions of God, thereby personalizing their relationship with the divine and simultaneously divinizing the medieval symbolic language for femininity.

The medieval world offered few opportunities for women outside of the household. “Neither the concept of marriage nor the law” acknowledged the medieval wife as a “complete individual.”¹⁰² While on the one hand, the Church provided women an alternative lifestyle, on the other it upheld a theology of femininity instrumental to the subordination of women. Monica Brzezinski Potkay and Regula Meyer Evitt argue that the medieval perception of masculinity and

¹⁰¹ Caroline Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 172.

¹⁰² Eileen Power, *Medieval Women* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 11.

femininity emerged from the Christian idea of the “relationship of the body to spirit.”¹⁰³ The medieval church, it appears, distinguished between the earthliness of the body and the divine character of the soul. Women, most often associated with the fleshy endeavor of childbearing, and thus, with the body, began to stand, according to Potkay and Evitt, for “all that the modern word carnal suggests: unlawful sexuality, sin, and death.”¹⁰⁴ Medieval nuns and anchoresses, though celibate, were just as subject to this bias as their secular counterparts were. In fact, one could argue that devout monastic women faced a heightened level of skepticism because female weakness was viewed as an impediment to piety. Later, we will see how this view was defended theologically by patristic thinkers. In *The Story of His Misfortunes*, Peter Abelard reveals his own skepticism towards female monastics, arguing that the impediments of womanhood extend to monastic settings, where women are naturally less efficient than men at carrying out the Rule:

And so I am much surprised that the custom should have long been established in convents of putting abbesses in charge of women just as abbots are set over men, and of binding women by profession according to the same rule, for there is so much in the Rule that cannot be carried out by women. In several places too, the natural order is overthrown to the extent that we see abbesses and nuns ruling the clergy who have authority over the people, with opportunities of leading them on to evil desires in proportion to their dominance, holding them as they do beneath a heavy yoke.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Monica Brezezinski Potkay and Regula Meyer Evitt, *Minding the Body: Women and Literature in the Middle Ages (800-1500)* (London: Twayne Publishers, 1997), 5.

¹⁰⁴ Potkay and Evitt, *Minding the Body*, 5.

¹⁰⁵ Peter Abelard and Heloise d’Argenteuil, *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), 209.

Here, Abelard implies that even chaste women are, by nature of their sex, inferior monastics. Yet where did the medieval world acquire this critical understanding of womanhood?

Certainly, theology had a powerful influence on the cultural perceptions of the Middle Ages. The medieval theology of gender can be traced back to Late Antiquity, when patristic commentaries on asceticism emphasized the carnality of women. In the fourth and fifth centuries, as Christianity assumed dominance in the Roman Empire, ascetic practices likewise flourished. St. Jerome's *Letter to the Lady Eustochium*, a treatise on virginity, defends the lifestyle of harsh obedience characteristic of this movement. In his praise of Eustochium's promise of chastity and consequent escape from "the drawbacks of marriage, such as pregnancy, the crying of infants, the torture caused by a rival, the cares of household management, and all those fancied blessings which death at last cut short,"¹⁰⁶ Jerome reveals his own preoccupation with carnal temptation. "So long as the flesh lusteth against the spirit and the spirit lusteth against the flesh,"¹⁰⁷ he claims, "the devil goeth about as a roaring lion¹⁰⁸ seeking whom he may devour."¹⁰⁹

The *Letter* claims that women, "betrayed by swelling wombs," are particularly carnal, and thus, particularly susceptible to sin.¹¹⁰ Whereas Jerome represents his own lust as a burning fire, he more frequently describes the lust of women as fluid. To Jerome, "natural heat inevitably kindles a man's sensual passion," but women are

¹⁰⁶ Jerome, *Letter 22*, 1.

¹⁰⁷ Galatians 5:17 (The New Interpreter's Bible)

¹⁰⁸ 1 Peter 5:8 (The New Interpreter's Bible)

¹⁰⁹ Jerome, *Letter 22*, 2.

¹¹⁰ Jerome, *Letter 22*, 3.

more subject to sexual inundation. The female body is a dangerously open vessel and female sexuality, a fluid force demanding enclosure.¹¹¹ With reference to a passage in the *Song of Songs*, he reminds Eustochium that to love Jesus fully, a woman must imitate “a spring shut up, a fountain sealed.”¹¹² The *Letter* commends the enclosure of women at a time when male monastics, Jerome included, escaped into desert solitude. Meanwhile, their female counterparts, by and large, sought enclosure behind the walls of convents. Jerome’s treatise on virginity thus emphasizes a negative view of female sensuality and an identification of the female body with a fluidity and openness that must be contained.

Jerome’s carnal anxieties are echoed in subsequent patristic works, all of which tend to conflate female sensuality with carnality, corruption, and fluidity in the same manner as Jerome’s *Letter*, but also attach masculinity to reason, thereby placing man and woman at opposite ends of the mind/body dualism. Augustine of Hippo’s *On Genesis Against the Manichees*, for example, identifies Adam with reason and Eve with sensuality.¹¹³ For this reason, Augustine states in the *Confessions* that woman must be “physically subject to him (man) in the same way as our natural impulses need to be subjected to the reasoning power of the mind.”¹¹⁴ Much later, Gratian’s *Decretum* (ca. 1140), the foundation of canon law, uses Augustine’s claim that women were not made in God’s rational image. The man, it

¹¹¹ Potkay and Evitt, *Minding the Body*, 10.

¹¹² Jerome, *Letter 22*, 10.

¹¹³ Augustine, *Two Books on Genesis Against the Manichees*, trans. Ronald J. Teske (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of American Press, 1991), 111-12.

¹¹⁴ Augustine, *Saint Augustine: Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondworth: Penguin, 1961), 344.

states through 1 Corinthians 11:17, “is the head of the woman and the woman is the body of the man.”¹¹⁵

- (XII) Man is the head of woman. From Augustine’s ‘Questions on the Old and New Testaments’. The image of God is in man so that there may be one created from which the rest may originate, having the power of God, as it were his deputy, because he has the image of the one God, and so woman is not made in the image of God.” Also the Apostle said “A man ought not to cover his head because it is the image and Glory of God; but a woman covers her head because she is not in the image and glory of God.”¹¹⁶

Patristic writings, such as Augustine’s *On Genesis*, complicate this male/female dualism, however, by suggesting that differences between the mental habits of rational males and sensual females do not constitute inevitabilities. Indeed, Augustine’s writings also speculate that a woman can “subject her “female” passions and body to the control of her “male reason,”” to “perform functions normally reserved for men.”¹¹⁷ In Augustine’s opinion, the most pious woman can negate her gender. Here, Augustine echoes Jerome’s claim from *Against Jovinian* that “As long as woman is for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called a man.”¹¹⁸ Both thinkers imply that monastic women who remain celibate can transcend gender-specific impediments to holiness.

While monasticism allowed women to escape their traditional roles, the bodily transcendence required by mystical practice further facilitated this escape, a trend discussed in the eleventh century by the Cistercian neoplatonist, William of Saint

¹¹⁵ *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, ed. Alcuin Blamires (London: Clarendon Press, 1992), 84.

¹¹⁶ *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, 85.

¹¹⁷ Augustine, *Two Books On Genesis*, 111.

¹¹⁸ Augustine, *Two Books on Genesis*, 112.

Thierry. William used gendered terminology to describe the journey of the mystical soul:

When the soul begins to be not only capable but also in possession of perfect reason, it immediately renounces the feminine gender... For as long as it is anima it is quick to slip effeminately into the carnal; but animus or spirit thinks only on what is virile and spiritual.¹¹⁹

Because the spiritual soul is masculine, the journey to mystical union requires a renunciation of femininity. The logic of this passage suggests that females who participate in the enterprise of bodily abnegation and prevent their thoughts from sliding “effeminately” toward the body, are just as capable of mystical union.

Just as medieval theological language for gender emphasized the inferiority of women, medieval scientific language likewise depicted females as weaker than males. In medieval science, women were discussed in terms of physiological and psychological fluidity. Various streams of ancient Greek thought influenced the medieval conception of female fluidity. Hippokrates, for example, claimed that “the female flourishes more in an environment of water, from things cold and wet and soft, whether food or drink or activities. The male flourishes in an environment of fire, from dry, hot foods and mode of life.”¹²⁰ Pythagoras constructed the following table of gender-related opposites:

male	female
limit	unlimit
odd	even
one	plurality
right	left
resting	moving
straight	curved
light	darkness

¹¹⁹ Potkay and Evitt, *Minding the Body*, 170.

¹²⁰ Anne Carson, *Men of the Off Hours* (New York: Vintage, 2001), 132.

good	bad
square	oblong ¹²¹

According to Jantzen, this particular table had a great impact on Plato.¹²²

Plato operated under the assumption that women were more bodily than men and in *Laws*, describes women's bodies as property.¹²³ Aristotle too spoke disparagingly of the sexual fluidity of women. Females were, in Aristotle's opinion, more susceptible to weakness¹²⁴ because of their inherent fluidity. The "female state" he deems a "deformity" that "develops slowly on account of its coldness, since development is a sort of concoction, concoction is effected by heat, and if a thing is hotter its concoction is easy; when, however, it is free from the mother, on account of its weakness it quickly approaches its maturity and old age, since inferior things all reach their end more quickly."¹²⁵

It is hard to overemphasize the significance of Aristotelian thought in the Middle Ages when Aristotle frequently appeared in important theological and scientific texts through reference and was a central figure of study at the University of Paris.¹²⁶ Aristotle's theory of reproduction reduces the role of the female to "prime matter," with the male providing the "form," or soul to the infant, and the woman the "body." According to this belief, women are unable to produce refined sperm

¹²¹ Aristotle, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), I. 5. 22.

¹²² Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 33.

¹²³ Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*, (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 39.

¹²⁴ Carson, *Men of the Off Hours*, 136.

¹²⁵ *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, 41.

¹²⁶ *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, 39.

because of the fluid coldness of their bodies. Menstruation is thus an indication of female bodily inefficiency. As Aristotle writes in *Generation of Animals*,

By now it is plain that the contribution which the female makes to generation is the matter used therein, that this is to be found in the substance constituting the menstrual fluid, and finally that the menstrual fluid is a residue... A woman is as it were an infertile male; the female, in fact, is female on account of inability of a sort. It lacks the ability to concoct semen out of the final state of nourishment... because of the coldness of its nature...¹²⁷

In Aristotle's interpretation of reproduction, men are able to produce sperm because of their natural body heat, while women's colder fluids accumulate as menses which must be purged,¹²⁸ an argument which ascribes an excess of fluidity to women and implicitly claims that male semen is less fluid. Here, Aristotle links female weakness to a lack of solidity in their reproductive matter, a deficiency that materializes in the fluid process of menstruation.

The Galenic theory of sexuality, transmitted through Arabic sources, was another a powerful force in the medical imagination of the Middle Ages and echoes many of Aristotelian claims. Galen differentiates male sperm from female sperm in much the same way as his predecessor, arguing that male sperm has a more "active nature" while female sperm provides the "prime matter" for procreation. Gerald J. Grudzen further elaborates the extent to which Galen's theory of reproduction was reflective of the scientist's differentiation between the male and female genders:

The hot/cold polarities found in male and female sperm reflect the fourfold division found in Galenic theory of the temperaments; the phlegmatic personality reflects coldness and moisture (female) and the choleric personality represents heat and dryness (male). In the Galenic theory, semen

¹²⁷ Aristotle, *Basic Works of Aristotle*, 109.

¹²⁸ Aristotle, *Basic Works of Aristotle*, 109.

must also contain pneuma (spirit), which provides the final transformation for the sperm to make it life-giving.¹²⁹

Galen's reproduction discussion identifies woman with water and man with heat. In it, we see a conflation of terminology: the female/moist/soft/cold/phlegmatic opposes the male/dry/hot/hard/choleric. Galen employs this dualism to emphasize the natural inferiority of women: "just as mankind is the most perfect of all animals, so within mankind the man is more perfect than the woman, and the reason for his perfection is his excess of heat, for heat is Nature's primary instrument."¹³⁰

In the Middle Ages, Aristotelian and Galenic theories of reproduction were used to complement the Church's identification of woman with flesh and man with spirit. Thomas Aquinas reconciled Aristotle with theology, fusing scientific and theological gender theories, much like Jerome, but this time through direct reference to the science of gender. In his *Summa*, Aquinas borrows the Aristotelian/Galenic claim that "in human generation, the mother provides the matter of the body which, however, is still unformed, and received its form only by means of the power which is contained in the father's seed," for discussion on the generation of woman:

Vis-à-vis the natura particularis, a female is deficient and unintentionally caused. For the active power of the semen always seeks to produce a thing completely like itself, something male. So if a female is produced, this must be because the semen is weak or because the material is unsuitable, or because of the action of some external factor such as the winds from the south which make the atmosphere humid. But vis-à-vis natura universalis the female is not accidentally caused but is intended by Nature for the work of generation.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Gerald G. Grudzen, *Medical Theory about the Body and the Soul in the Middle Ages* (The Edwin Mellen Press, 2007), 199.

¹³⁰ Galen, *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*, trans., Margaret Tallmadge May (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), 630.

¹³¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Selected Writings*, 112.

In Aquinas we find a marriage of scientific conceptions of women as psychologically and physiologically fluid with medieval theologies of gender.

As we have seen, even though monastic spirituality implies separation from the material world, its practitioners were not exempt from gender identification. Indeed, with such ubiquitous intellectual support for the differentiation between male and female qualities, the consistency of gender bias faced by Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa is easy to imagine. Most monks and nuns received a superior education, which suggests that such characters were, however indirectly, more aware than the average layperson of Greek and Christian currents of thought regarding the fluid nature of feminine identity. So the Galenic theory persisted, even in the monastic setting, where the images of watery fluidity, shape-shifting formlessness, and changeable mutability were attached to the notion of womanhood. The theological identification of women with carnality likewise endured.

The stories of Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa illustrate the persistence of these attitudes. The patronizing treatment of monastic women proves that even the most devout female mystic felt the skepticism of her male counterparts. Even though devout women were said to be able to become like men, the female body never actually disappeared in the eyes of the Catholic world. Women mystics were themselves preoccupied with their bodies, a phenomenon best illustrated in this study by the extreme asceticism of Catherine of Siena. Were medieval female mystics really engaged in a transcendence of gender, or was their mysticism one that actually centralized the reality of female physicality?

The testimonies of Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa indicate that female mystics did not forfeit their womanhood. On the whole, many such figures appropriated the Church's terminology for femininity, celebrating their bodies with the same adjectives so derogatorily assigned them by the medieval world. Caroline Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* provides an exploration of the degree to which these women somatized their religious experience, embracing their bodies through spousal and maternal metaphors.¹³² The mystic Julian of Norwich, for example, described her encounters with God as visions coming from her body.¹³³ Medieval women's mysticism, it appears, was primarily visual, employing rich bodily symbolism. This symbolism was attached both to the representation of God and the self-description of the mystic.

The bodily preoccupation of female mystics often manifested itself in acts of asceticism. Many of the better known women mystics deprived their bodies of necessary comforts, relishing the pain of "trances, levitations, catatonic seizures or other forms of bodily rigidity, miraculous elongation or enlargement of part of the body, swelling of sweet mucus in the throat... and ecstatic nosebleeds."¹³⁴ The body, therefore, was actually a point of extreme fixation, not renunciation, for women mystics. Bynum's study, which focuses on the somatization of mystical testimonies, does not extend to metaphors of fluidity. These metaphors can be treated as reappropriations of medieval female imagery.

¹³² Potkay and Evitt, *Minding the Body*, 24.

¹³³ Potkay and Evitt, *Minding the Body*, 167.

¹³⁴ Potkay and Evitt, *Minding the Body*, 169.

In line with Bynum, Grace M. Jantzen argues that religious women embraced the efflorescence of metaphor required by mysticism, developing language different from that of their male counterparts. Yet Jantzen's own study suggests strongly, that even though female mystics were still "deeply identified with the patriarchal thought patterns of their times in which the dominance of males and the lesser nature of women were taken for granted at every level by women as well as by men,"¹³⁵ they did not denigrate but rather celebrated themselves through this language. In Jantzen's opinion, the female, bodily imagery used in their descriptions of God was reflective of an empowering manipulation of existing symbolic language. While Jantzen argues that a manipulation of language took place in mystical testimonies, however, she only hints at the potential of this manipulation extending to fluid metaphors. These, she allows, could go all the way "back to Genesis, where the spirit of God hovers over the face of the deep."¹³⁶

Metaphors assigned to medieval women by theology and science appear inside the language of Gertrude's, Catherine's, and Teresa's mystical testimonies. While Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa apply fluid metaphors to descriptions of themselves, they wield the same adjectives in their depictions of God. An examination of the vocabulary of each woman must acknowledge two methodological challenges to the study of female mystics: the delicacy of metaphorical interpretation and the problem of textual/authorial reliability. Why were mystical writers so attached to the use of metaphor? As was hinted in the introduction to this chapter, metaphors provided mystics with a poetic, more flexible means of depicting the

¹³⁵ Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*, 291.

¹³⁶ Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*, 297.

ineffable. According to Jerome Kroll, author of *The Mystic Mind*, “there is no language other than the metaphorical for speaking of mental states, especially of a transcendental nature, and more specifically those that have characteristics referred to as ecstatic states.”¹³⁷ In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James designates ineffability the central characteristic of the mystical experience:

Ineffability. -- The handiest of the marks by which I classify a state of mind as mystical is negative. The subject of it immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others. In this peculiarity mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect. No one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it consists. One must have musical ears to know the value of a symphony; one must have been in love one's self to understand a lover's state of mind. Lacking the heart or the ear, we cannot interpret the musician or the lover justly, and are even likely to consider him weak-minded or absurd. The mystic finds that most of us accord to his experiences an equally incompetent treatment.¹³⁸

Here, James states that the mystical experience cannot be accessed indirectly and is thus, incommunicable. The outsider deals with this incommunicability by gleaning “hypotheses,” from the language used.¹³⁹

While Kroll and James deliver a modern interpretation of this phenomenon, religious voices of the past known to Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa also addressed the issue of God's ineffability. In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine states that the unknowability of God, however daunting a concept, must not restrict the efforts of the human voice to praise:

¹³⁷ Jerome Kroll and Bernard Bachrach, *The Mystic Mind: The Psychology of Medieval Mystics and Ascetics* (New York: Taylor and Francis, inc., 2005), 62.

¹³⁸ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (Michigan: Longmans Green, 1920), 380.

¹³⁹ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 428.

Have we spoken or announced anything worthy of God? Rather I feel that I have done nothing but wish to speak: if I have spoken, I have not said what I wished to say. Whence do I know this, except because God is ineffable? If what I said were ineffable, it would not be said. And for this reason God should not be said to be ineffable, for when this is said, something is said. And a contradiction in terms is created, since if that is ineffable which cannot be spoken, then that is not ineffable which can be called ineffable. This contradiction is to be passed over with silence rather than resolved verbally. For God, although nothing worthy may be spoken of him, has accepted the tribute of the human voice and wished us to take joy in praising him with our words.¹⁴⁰

No one word can properly describe God, but still the mystic is obligated to communicate her love as best she can, choosing vocabulary with care. When mystics of the Middle Ages were grasping for the appropriate words they selected vocabulary comprehensible to their culture and personal identity. And what is more central to a person's experience of the material world than her own body?

In a later discussion on metaphor, Richard St. Victor (d. 1173) theorizes on the use of bodily language in the depiction of unknowable things:

Everybody knows how difficult or almost impossible it is for the carnal mind still untaught in spiritual studies to raise itself to the understanding of unseen things and fix its eye upon contemplating them. For so far as it knows nothing but bodily things; nothing presents itself to its thoughts but what it is accustomed to thinking about, that is visible things. It seeks to see invisible things and nothing meets its eye but the form of visible objects; it desires to consider incorporeal things but dreams of images of corporeal things only.¹⁴¹

This treatment of mystical metaphor reveals that bodily, physical language is if not ideal or even well-suited for the task of countering God's ineffability, the language most accessible to the human mind. The fact that female and male mystics alike employed metaphors frequently in their descriptions of mystical encounters opens up

¹⁴⁰ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson Jr. (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), I.6.

¹⁴¹ Kroll and Bachrach, *The Mystic Mind*, 62.

a number of questions about the metaphors chosen in such testimonies and the extent to which these metaphors were reflective of the cultural milieu of the Middle Ages.

The study of metaphorical choices made by female mystics is further complicated by questions of authorial reliability. Oftentimes, women mystics did not write their own stories, while those who did were carefully monitored. For the most part, feminist studies of female mysticism argue that women saints and mystics were, in male-authored hagiographical renderings, “passive foils on which men projected their images of womanhood.”¹⁴² In her introduction to *Gendered Voices*, for example, Catherine M. Mooney warns her reader that “there is no saint without an audience,”¹⁴³ that confessors often obscured the utterances of female saints.

Mooney argues through French medievalist Simone Roisin that male hagiographers overemphasized the somatized nature of female mystical experience. *Gendered Voices* thus searches for disparities between female self-representations and “male representations of female sanctity.”¹⁴⁴ In particular, it highlights instances where women’s religious experiences are connected to bodily expression, and men’s refer more consistently to the mind. For Mooney, comparisons of female and male-authored texts reveal the extent to which the dualist perception of woman and man affected medieval mystical thinkers. *Gendered Voices*, then, argues that the dualism implicit in male and female representations of mystical experience skewed the testimonies of female mystics. This study examines texts emphasizing the bodily,

¹⁴² Wiethaus, *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics* (Syracuse University Press, 1993), 1.

¹⁴³ Catherine M. Mooney, *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), ix.

¹⁴⁴ Mooney, *Gendered Voices*, 3.

fluid, and feminine character of Gertrude's, Catherine's, and Teresa's mystical experiences written either by or for male confessors. That these women conceived of God as fluid is indisputable. That the conception of God as such was, in the case of some, potentially exaggerated, only supports the argument that the medieval perception of femininity influenced saints and confessors alike.

Gertrude's, Catherine's, and Teresa's works present different manifestations of a fluid divinity, but water is the most apparent metaphorical trend in their discussions of God. Each woman encountered the textual and cultural trends discussed in the first section of this study as relevant to the medieval and early modern perception of gender. The lives and testimonies of Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa provide microcosmal vantage points for the in-depth study of fluid metaphors in female mystic language. To what degree were each of these women exposed to streams of patristic thought regarding *creatio ex nihilo* and the gender of God? What specific cultural forces were responsible for shaping their respective conceptions of femininity? Finally, as a valuable point of comparison, how did the testimonies of these women diverge from those of their male contemporaries?

The study of Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa spans three centuries, from the day that Gertrude entered the monastery of Helfta in 1260, to the death of Teresa in 1582. Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa's language reflects a redeployment of fluid metaphor and should be read as a re-interpretation of the medieval theological and scientific gendering of women. Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa describe a fluid God. In their renderings of union with God's fluidity, water is divinized, the watery co-eternal of Genesis, redeemed. *Creatio ex nihilo*, we know, established a framework

of dualisms operative in the Middle Ages. Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa unsettled these dualisms in three ways, first through their divinization of fluidity, second through their identification with this fluidity, and third, through their discussion of fluidity as a vehicle for union with God. The biographies of Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa help explain each woman's particular affinity with fluid metaphor. The metaphors themselves can be read as responses to patristic treatments of femininity to which all three mystics had access. This study, thus, requires a combination of cultural and intellectual history.

3. Three Lives

Gertrude's Mystical Torrents:

The life of Gertrude of Helfta is shrouded in mystery; even the saint's birthplace is unknown. Gertrude's story, *The Herald of Divine Love*, reveals little biographical information, an absence reflective of its subject's deep humility. Unlike Catherine and Teresa, Gertrude had no family. Spirituality was chosen for, rather than by the young Gertrude, who, orphaned at the age of four, was fortunate enough to be taken in by the monastery of Helfta. Gertrude never left the world, for the world was never hers to know.¹⁴⁵ She was, thus, always enclosed, "a spring shut up, a fountain sealed,"¹⁴⁶ the ideal religious woman according to Jerome's discussed reading of *Songs of Songs*.

Unlike her favorite theologian, Augustine, Gertrude does not relate stories of personal temptation in her account of spiritual progress. Perhaps she never knew the feeling of temptation. After all, the prospects of marriage and vanity, both challenging issues for Catherine and Teresa, were never Gertrude's to contemplate. Gertrude claimed "that in her whole life she had never looked at the face of a man

¹⁴⁵ Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 6.

¹⁴⁶ Jerome, *Letter 22*, 10.

with sufficient curiosity to distinguish his features.”¹⁴⁷ *The Herald of Divine Love* states that Gertrude did not achieve a conversion experience until her twenty-fifth year, but even before the reward of conversion, directed all of her mental energies towards God.¹⁴⁸

In her introduction to Gertrude’s most complete theological treatise, *The Herald of Divine Love*, Margaret Winkworth describes Gertrude’s conversion as an interior phenomenon, where “the outward difference was not very great, but the inward difference was infinite.”¹⁴⁹ This analysis is telling, for unlike many other female mystics, Gertrude did not engage in an exaggerated or life-threatening level of asceticism. Though she suffered from head-aches, fevers, and liver problems for most of her life, she refused to exacerbate her physical distress through self-starvation or self-flagellation. Gertrude likely learned of women’s science through her medical treatments. Perhaps she was familiar with Galen and Aristotle, but no mention of science is made in her writings.

Because of her lack of interest in extreme asceticism, Gertrude was, at least on a technical level, the least bodily preoccupied of the three mystics of this study. What then explains her strong attachment to fluidity? Gertrude was always in the company of women and it seems that the communal as well as the educational environment of Helfta was responsible for molding her unusual perception of divinity. Gertrude’s story thus provides a controlled test space in which we can

¹⁴⁷ Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 66.

¹⁴⁸ Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*,

¹⁴⁹ Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 8.

analyze the effects of textual influence on a woman mystic's perception of her gender.

Gertrude was first and foremost a nun of Helfta. Bynum's *Jesus as Mother* claims that the women of Helfta are "an obvious place to start in exploring female mysticism in the thirteenth century, for their reports of visions and inner experiences or meditations form the largest single body of women's mystical writing in the period."¹⁵⁰ Helfta, it appears, was a powerhouse for the religious expression of women. In "The Abyss of Love," McGinn designates the thirteenth century a turning point in women's treatment of the biblical abyss. Certainly, Helfta was a locus for such forward thinking, in part because its educational program was so intensive. Helfta provided an "intellectual" atmosphere inclined toward the study of Augustine, Richard and Hugh of St. Victor and William of St. Thierry.¹⁵¹

Clearly Gertrude received an excellent education, for her work suggests a rich knowledge of scripture and patristic texts. Augustine, who frequently appears in *The Herald of Divine Love*, was a particular favorite of Gertrude's. As a novice, Gertrude spent much of her time copying manuscripts and her intimate treatment of Augustine's works suggests that his were among the texts she copied word for word.¹⁵² As a young adult, Gertrude was particularly drawn to secular writings, a passion she relinquished only after converting. Gertrude does not identify the secular texts that most attracted her interests, but we can assume that these cultural products

¹⁵⁰ Caroline Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 174.

¹⁵¹ Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 175.

¹⁵² Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 25.

allowed the saint a rare glimpse into the outside world.¹⁵³ If Gertrude had not been exposed to the patristic depiction of female carnality, receptivity and fluidity through theology, it is likely she would have absorbed such depictions of femininity anyway through her intensive readings of secular literature.

Gertrude's writing resembles that of her similarly educated sisters at Helfta. According to Bynum, the language of Helfta is "descriptive, pictorial, laden with adjectives, comparisons, similes, metaphors, and various other rhetorical devices." In particular, it tends to emphasize the "individual's likeness to God."¹⁵⁴ Gertrude's own pictorial imagination and attachment to fluidity can be, therefore, understood as the product of an environment where metaphorical descriptions of God, and of the soul's relationship to God, were encouraged. Gertrude was as sensitive as her mystical predecessors to the deficiency of language used to describe God. According to Margaret Winkworth, Gertrude employed fairly common spousal metaphors to define her relationship with Christ, an indication that the saint "was not "singular"" and that "her mystical experiences do not appear in general to be very noticeable," or unique inside the corpus of female mystical writing.¹⁵⁵ But Winkworth's characterization of Gertrude does not acknowledge the mystic's other, more unusual metaphorical alliance with liquid, apparent in *The Herald of Divine Love*.

Indeed, Gertrude delivers her most noteworthy descriptions of God with metaphors of fluidity. Gertrude's text was written by a number of different people. We know that Book One was most likely penned by Gertrude's confessor, and books

¹⁵³ Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 7.

¹⁵⁴ Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 187.

¹⁵⁵ Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 55.

three, four, and five, compiled by other nuns of Helfta. Book Two is known to belong entirely to Gertrude, and will serve as the focus of this study, as it contains the most fluid imagery.¹⁵⁶ This book, “The Memorial of the Abundance of Divine Sweetness,” represents a pious woman fixated on a God who takes a number of fluid forms.¹⁵⁷ Gertrude describes God as a depth or an abyss, God as water enclosed by a vessel and God as rain. Often, Gertrude poeticizes God’s love with honey-themed metaphors. In Gertrude’s rendering, God is “sweetly flowing,” “mellifluous,” or simply “sweet.”¹⁵⁸ Neither Catherine nor Teresa represents God’s divinity so sweetly.¹⁵⁹ According to Winkworth, Gertrude’s representation of mystical union “impresses on our imagination spiritual ideas by means of beautiful images which excite our desires.”¹⁶⁰ Gertrude depicts mystical union as “the personal relationship to which the Creator is willing to stoop with his creature,”¹⁶¹ and the “beautiful images” she most often uses to represent this stooping are liquid. All forms of fluid representation in Gertrude’s text indicate that fluidity is inherent to divinity.

Gertrude’s preoccupation with God’s “depth,” or abyssal quality, is evident in the opening to Book Two. Here, Gertrude apologizes to God for her sinfulness and human depravity, asking from divinity the mercy of purification. Gertrude describes the depths of the divine flowing into her being like water into a valley:

¹⁵⁷ Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 22.

¹⁵⁸ Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 22.

¹⁵⁹ Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 14.

¹⁶⁰ Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 55.

¹⁶¹ Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 29.

May the depths of uncreated wisdom call to the depths (cf. PS 41:8) of infinite power, worthy of all admiration, to extol that marvelous goodness which, through your overflowing mercy, has flowed down into the valley of my misery.¹⁶²

Here, Gertrude references Psalm 41:8, in which “Abyss calls out to abyss in the voice of thy cataracts. All they heights and they billows have passed over me.”¹⁶³ We have seen how in William St. Thierry’s *Exposition on the Song of Songs*, Psalm 41:8 compares a mystical encounter to the handshake of a savior and lover.¹⁶⁴ In Gertrude’s depiction, however, God’s abyss does not reach out to the separate abyss of her soul. Rather, it cancels the distance, flowing into her being. This rendering of union suggests not only that God is fluid, but that the soul becomes one with this fluidity. Gertrude’s God is powerful, good, and merciful, but above all else, unfathomable. In this passage, Gertrude identifies herself as a receptacle and God as an un-defined liquid. The fluidity of God purifies Gertrude while the saint’s valley-shaped receptivity proves a blessing rather than a curse as it enables her enclosure of the divine.

When God next appears to Gertrude in the form of an abyss, union is further articulated as a meeting of two abysses. Gertrude becomes both the receptacle of God’s fluidity as in the prior passage, and the mirror image of divinity:

May my union with you be perfected through the virtue of this most perfect prayer, and may you draw me into the intimacy of your heart. So that when it happens that I have to give myself to useful exterior works for the sake of utility, I may derive from them the particular merits which they bring; and, having done them in the most perfect way, for your glory, I may once return to you, my universal Good, in the interior of my soul like water which, when no longer restrained by obstacles, falls with full force into the abyss.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 94.

¹⁶³ McGinn, “The Abyss of Love,” 95.

¹⁶⁴ McGinn, “The Abyss of Love,” 100.

¹⁶⁵ Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 23.

Here, Gertrude describes her own fluid capacities. When Gertrude is virtuous and contemplative, she withdraws into her watery interior and plunges into God.

Gertrude finds that once she is lost in the abyss she is one with divinity. Here, we see how Gertrude's description of union celebrates the abyss of the *Bible*, one nihilated by *creatio ex nihilo*, but revived as a divine character in Gertrude's testimony.

Gertrude's treatment of the abyss metaphorically undermines *creatio ex nihilo*, for in its depth is divinized.

Gertrude further collapses the dualisms established by *creatio ex nihilo* by employing metaphors traditionally assigned to females to positive ends. As we have seen, metaphors of receptivity, used in patristic texts to prove that females are excessively carnal, are redeployed in *The Herald of Divine Love* to illustrate the necessity of receptivity in understanding God. Here, Gertrude describes her heart as a vessel for God's love:

The heart has been created by God to hold delight, just as a vessel for holding water. Now if the vessel holding water lets it seep out through any small cracks, the vessel will gradually empty and become dry; so if the human heart that is filled with spiritual delight lets it seep out through the senses of the body, by seeing and hearing, or by allowing any of the other bodily sense to be freely indulged, it could leak out in such a way that the heart would become wholly emptied of delight in God.¹⁶⁶

In Gertrude's opinion, the capacity to receive and hold the divine is both a gift and a challenge. Gertrude celebrates the vessel-like capacity of her heart. In *Letter 22*, as we learned, Jerome describes his fear that women are particularly open. In Jerome's interpretation, women are dangerously exposed to carnal desire and, therefore, the

¹⁶⁶ Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 202.

religious lives of women should be characterized by enclosure.¹⁶⁷ Here, Gertrude's ability to contain God, to absorb and hold the water of his love, is celebrated.

In the most striking passage of *The Herald of Divine Love*, God sends to Gertrude "a sort of golden tube, like a drinking-straw, from his heart which was hanging suspended like a lamp over the soul who was cowering in the valley of humility. Through this tube he caused to flow into her in a wonderful way all that she could desire."¹⁶⁸ Here, God's heart is likened to a vessel filled with water, a reflection of Gertrude's own receptive heart. When Gertrude drinks from a tube sent from God's vessel, a reciprocal indwelling takes place between the saint and the divine. That Gertrude uses the same female imagery to describe herself and God represents an empowering manipulation of the female fluid imagery to which she undoubtedly had access. Not only is Gertrude receptive to God's love, but God is receptive to hers.

In Gertrude's description of her conversion experience, God manifests himself in a downpour. Gertrude, like Augustine, finds God in a garden. Her conversion experience begins the day before Easter, as she sits by a pond contemplating the love of God and taking delight in the clarity and texture of water. She is propelled by her vision of "flowing streams" into a mystical rapture, an experience that inspires her to center her life around "and give up wholly to God." From this moment onwards, "there was nothing in Gertrude's life but God; all that she did was for God's sake."¹⁶⁹

And then you, my God, source of ineffable delights, who, as I believe, did but inspire the beginning of this meditation to lead it back to yourself, made me understand that,

¹⁶⁷ Jerome, Letter 22,

¹⁶⁸ Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 190.

¹⁶⁹ Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 8.

if I were to pour back like water the stream of graces received from you in that continual gratitude I owe you; if, like a tree, growing in the exercise of virtue, I were to cover myself with leaves and blossoms of good works.¹⁷⁰

Here, Gertrude describes God's grace as a fluidity with life-giving capacity. In an imitation of God's watery nature, the saint feels herself pouring back. She uses her own naturally fluid capacities as a means of imitating her God who sends down "a shower of drenching rain." God and interior mystic are melded in a "stream of graces." Outwardly, Gertrude anticipates herself blooming. The Gertrude of *Herald of Divine Love* is herself the embodiment of water, as "it could be said that in her day the wells of water flowed out, for, in truth, no one in our time has given out streams of doctrine of salvation more plenteously than she."¹⁷¹

Catherine's Corpus of Divine Liquids:

Catherine of Siena, like Gertrude, employed fluid metaphors in her descriptions of God, but Catherine's attachment to fluidity extended to bodily liquids. What biographical details explain Catherine's attachment to bodily fluidity? Catherine was born the twenty-third child of Giacomo and Lapa Benicasa in 1347. Unlike Gertrude, Catherine affiliated with the Dominican Order. Giacomo, Catherine's adoring father, was a wealthy dyer, who desired his daughter to find a beneficial marriage alliance.¹⁷² Catherine beheld her first vision of God as a small child. From this moment onwards, she expressed a desire for chastity. As early as her seventh year, she vowed never to marry:

¹⁷⁰ Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 97.

¹⁷¹ Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, 54.

¹⁷² *Late Medieval Mysticism* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980), 263.

Guided by the Holy Spirit, she began to realize that it was necessary to be perfectly pure in body and soul if she was to do this, and it became her one desire to preserve her own virginal purity. The she was inspired by heaven to ponder the fact that the most holy Mother of God had herself instituted the life of virginity, and had dedicated her virginity to the Lord by vow. And so to her she turned. At the age of seven Catherine was able to meditate on this vow as profoundly as a woman of seventy. Continuously she besought the Queen of Virgins and Angels to mercifully help her, and to deign to obtain for her from the Lord a perfect directing of her spirit, which would enable her to perform that which was most acceptable to Him and most profitable for the salvation of her own soul; and she kept telling her of her ardent desire to live a virginal, angelic life.¹⁷³

Catherine was a very imaginative child and developed a “strong pictorial” vision of her encounters with God, one that would characterize her mystical testimonies.¹⁷⁴

Catherine’s first formulation of divine visions corresponded with a period of great bodily anxiety. Through her contemplation on the life of the Virgin Mary, Catherine decided that the marriage desired for her by her family would fully destroy her relationship with God. To protect her chastity, Catherine made herself unappealing to potential suitors. Following the advice of Brother Thommaso della Fonte, a Dominican, she cut her hair and practiced self-mutilation. Very early on, she limited her diet to the point that she was unattractively emaciated.¹⁷⁵

Catherine’s desire for purification through pain and emancipation from marriage was so strong that when her mother took her to the baths to heal her life-threatening wounds, she lay under a conduit of boiling water, “afflicting her body more than she had ever done.”¹⁷⁶ Catherine was, by the age of fifteen, so unsightly,

¹⁷³ Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena* (North Carolina: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1960), 30.

¹⁷⁴ Kathleen Jones, *Women Saints: Lives of Faith and Courage* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 16.

¹⁷⁵ *Women Saints: Lives of Faith and Courage*, 17.

¹⁷⁶ *Women Saints: Lives of Faith and Courage*, 18.

that her parents agreed her unfit for all but service to God. Because of familial tensions, and in a wider context, the expectations of medieval society, Catherine was made to think about and to dislike her body at a very early age. That the body appears so frequently in her descriptions of mystical encounter is reflective of Catherine's lifetime struggle against her physical self.

Along with chastity, Catherine desired complete enclosure, a space of her own where she could suffer and pray. Before joining the Dominican order, she occupied a small room in the Benicasa household where she practiced the severest forms of penance. Catherine's desire for enclosure extended well into her late adolescence, when she asked that God give her a "secret cell which she vowed she would never leave for anything in the world."¹⁷⁷ So while Gertrude reveled in the enclosure provided by her monastic existence, Catherine obsessed over the idea. Both understood enclosure as a spiritual blessing rather than a curse.

Catherine's intellectual development was more hampered than Gertrude's, for she received no intensive formal education. Catherine was, however, familiar with many of Gertrude's favorite texts. According to her biographer, Raymond of Capua, Catherine was able to read, for "she taught herself" "with the aid of a simple ABC. She read Holy Scripture, the Psalms, the Divine Office, and the works of the early Fathers."¹⁷⁸ It is likely that Catherine discussed these works with Raymond, himself a particular admirer of Thomas Aquinas. Confessor and saint had long theological discussions, and Catherine impressed Raymond with her superior wisdom.

Raymond's *Life of St. Catherine of Siena* describes Catherine as an exception to

¹⁷⁷ Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine*, 43.

¹⁷⁸ *Women Saints: Lives of Faith and Courage*, 19.

Aquinas' thought "that the nature of womanhood is a deficient form of human nature." Raymond's work suggests that in "Catherine of Siena grace had actually overcome all that was deficient in human nature and produced an extraordinary occurrence: "an angelic maiden," who "in a way surpassing all human reckoning penetrated into the abyss of divine wisdom as deeply as any soul who is still a pilgrim here below may do, and opened up and unfolded its mysteries to the rest of us."¹⁷⁹ Here, we see the notion of gender transcendence through extreme piety and mystical union, carried out in the life of Catherine.

Catherine must have been aware that to Raymond and her other acquaintances, she was anomalous, an exception to idea that women were less capable of achieving divine grace than men were. Throughout her lifetime, she did her best to distinguish herself as a living exemplar of personal piety. But Catherine was also the subject of constant skepticism.

But the tortuous old Serpent could not see these great gifts of God without a feeling of furious hatred, and he incited everyone against Catherine, spiritual men and worldly men, religious and secular alike.¹⁸⁰

Praise and censure of Catherine as female mystic and ascetic must have, above all else, impressed upon the saint medieval conceptions of femininity. Catherine was always treated as an exception to the deficiency of womanhood. Her texts can be read as a response to the concept of female deficiency.

A close examination of Catherine's hagiography must acknowledge that Catherine dictated, rather than wrote, her own story. Of the three mystics addressed by this study, Catherine best illustrates the challenge of authorial reliability. Catherine

¹⁷⁹ Robert Boenig, *The Mystical Gesture*, (Sydney: Ashgate, 2000), 55.

¹⁸⁰ Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine*, 157.

worked closely with Raymond to communicate her visions, and the product of this effort is the entire *Life of St. Catherine of Siena*. Catherine's personal letters are less relevant to this study because they place so little emphasis on mysticism, a fact that is in itself troublesome, as Catherine's ghost-written autobiography is filled with descriptions of mystical encounters. In Raymond's work, Catherine is often described a vessel for God's love. Lisa M. Bitel argues that Raymond's gendered perception of Catherine as the "humble receptacle of God's power and strength," colored his treatment of her story and that the well-intentioned biographer could very well have exaggerated the saint's emphasis on the body.¹⁸¹

Bitel tries to prove that Catherine did not perceive herself as a receptacle, and that Raymond's gender bias is instead responsible for Catherine's metaphorical depiction as such. Bitel contrasts "the 'dead' female recipient of supernatural power Raymond described" with "the lively and assertive apostle and socially-oriented mystic Catherine presented herself to be" in her letters.¹⁸² The metaphor of the vessel is, of course, essential to this study's exploration of Catherine's testimony because it relates to the mystic's representation of God as fluid. Why then should we trust the metaphors wielded in Catherine's hagiography? As we saw in Gertrude's own book (Book 2) in *The Herald of Divine Love*, the female mystics who authored their own mystical testimonies discussed receptivity willingly. Such metaphors, then, were not regularly the invention of male confessors.

Furthermore, John Coakley states that *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena* reveals as much about the psyche of its author as it does about its saintly subject. In

¹⁸¹ Mooney, *Gendered Voices*, 139.

¹⁸² Mooney, *Gendered Voices*, 141.

the *Life*, Raymond's admiration for Catherine is obvious. Raymond "leaves the impression of having been a truthful man, incapable of inventing stories or straining the evidence."¹⁸³ According to Coakley, "precisely as the clerics claimed ecclesiastical authority over the women who by definition lacked it themselves, they tended to invest those women with the potential to symbolize, and to provide for them, if only vicariously, what remained beyond that authority—what the men themselves wanted but found to lie beyond their grasp."¹⁸⁴ In the case of Raymond and Catherine, the male hagiographer likely emphasized the female, bodily quality of Catherine's spiritual experience, but did not manufacture statements unuttered by the woman he so admired and adored, for Catherine's own knowledge of God was so far beyond his own that he always privileged and revered her authority on the subject. No words of his own choosing could rival Catherine's descriptions of divinity.

Gertrude's and Catherine's respective fluid metaphors overlap in terms of their emphasis on the abyssal quality of divinity, the advantage of receptivity in union, and the image of God as rain. We will begin with Catherine's treatment of the abyss. Catherine describes her longing for God as that of a soul desiring a "fountain of living water."¹⁸⁵ In a passage that resembles Gertrude's plunge into the depths of God, Raymond describes Catherine's similar dive as a movement of detachment from the world and alignment with divinity:

It is a known fact that an act of understanding does not require any object of sense for its instrument except as a means to the representation of an intelligible object; now, if Almighty God by a special grace presents such an

¹⁸³ Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine*, 13.

¹⁸⁴ John M. Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 3.

¹⁸⁵ Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Catherine*, 326.

object to the intellect in a supernatural way, the intellect, finding its own perfection in Christ, immediately leaves the body behind and endeavors to unite itself with it. But God, in His excellent wisdom, first by revelation of His light draws up the intellect that he has created, and then permits some affliction to plunge it down into the depths, so that, drawn thereby into the middle of the knowledge both of the divine perfection and of its own defects, it may soar in safety, passing freely over the sea of this world, to arrive safe and sound at the gates of eternal life.

Here, Raymond explains how Catherine, plunged into the image of an abyss, was able to find God. The nature of the “sea” of this passage is described in a speech of Catherine’s to the “abyss,” “eternal deity,” and “unplumbed sea” of God:¹⁸⁶

“Truly this light is a sea that feeds the soul, until it is entirely immersed in you, O Sea of Peace, Eternal Trinity! The water of this sea is clear and calm, and so it brings, not fear, but knowledge of the Truth. This water is transparent and reveals things that are hidden: and so, where the most abundant light of your faith abounds, the soul is as though made certain of what it believes. This sea, as you, Eternal Trinity, have made me see, is a mirror that the hand of love holds up in front of the eyes of my soul and shows me in you, as your creature. In the light of this mirror you are shown to me, and I recognize you, the supreme and infinite good: the good above all goods, blissful and incomprehensible, beyond price; the beauty above all beauty, the wisdom above all wisdom, for you are wisdom itself.¹⁸⁷

Here, Catherine addresses the sea of God as a mirror through which she can see her own abyssal reflection. The water of divinity is the “infinite good.” If we reflect back on Anselm’s justification of *creatio ex nihilo*, through an argument of superlatives, where the abyss is described as necessarily lesser than God the best,¹⁸⁸ Catherine’s own description of God is all the more impressive, for in it, the abyss is a reflection of “beauty above all beauty.”

As in Gertrude, Catherine’s metaphors of fluidity change the meaning of other metaphors traditionally assigned to women. For example, the theme of the vessel

¹⁸⁶ Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Catherine*, 326.

¹⁸⁷ Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Catherine*, 327.

¹⁸⁸ Anselm, *Monologion*, 22.

appears more than once in Catherine. According to George Lamb, one of Catherine's central tenets was that faith resembled a water jug. "Taken from its source for drinking, it soon empties. Held plunged in the water, it remains ever full, to be drawn on always."¹⁸⁹ Catherine, like Gertrude, alluded to the containment of water in her descriptions of God. In Catherine's writings, this metaphor extends to Christian faith. Once again, we see the notion of containment as a positive force in spirituality.

Raymond says that for Catherine, God also takes the form of rain, another metaphor of Gertrude's. God urges Catherine to remember that "the zeal for souls which I planted and watered in your soul in the days of your infancy grew."¹⁹⁰ Catherine describes the soul as a plant that must grow strong roots, likening the process of root development to a person's watery submergence:

He therefore caused it to be hidden under the ground for a while to deepen its roots, so that it could spread its branches higher in the sky and bear fruit at the topmost point of perfection. As water which desires to shoot up high first descends to the depths, so it is usually with plants, which reach up higher into the sky the deeper their roots go."

Here, both soil and water enable Catherine's union with God. Just as Gertrude describes the reception of God's graces as a plunge into the abyss, Catherine once more calls upon the depths, gladly submerging herself in God's unfathomable love.

Catherine's attachment to the bodily affects her discussion of fluidity, and in this sense departs from Gertrude's treatment of God as water or as honey. More than Gertrude or Teresa, Catherine thought that self abnegation facilitated mystical union. The most jarring of her ascetic acts connects the saint's real-life interaction with a bodily fluid to a mystical experience of God's own bodily fluidity. According to

¹⁸⁹ *Late Medieval Mysticism*, 265.

¹⁹⁰ *The Life of St. Catherine*, 108.

Raymond, Catherine chose to care for a woman with a tumor in her breast. One day, her disgust for the odor of the woman's wound inspired her to do the unthinkable:

When the maiden of Christ had removed Andrea's bandages in order to wash and clean the sore, at once, thanks to the Devil rather than nature, she was assailed by a stench so unbearable that her inside turned over, and a great sensation of nausea convulsed her stomach.... She collected up into a bowl the fetid stuff that had been used to wash the sore, along with all the pus, and going away a little, gulped it all down. When she had done this, the temptation to feel repugnance passed away.¹⁹¹

Later on, and in a reflection on this moment, Catherine envisions herself drinking from Jesus' own pierced side:

I therefore say to you that since with that act you transcended your own nature I will give you a drink that transcends every human nature and expectation. And putting His right hand on her virginal neck and drawing her towards the wound in His own side, He whispered to her, Drink, daughter, the liquid from my side, and it will fill your soul with such sweetness that its wonderful effects will be felt even by the body that for my sake you despised.

Catherine drinks fluid from Jesus' wound in a movement that parallels her encounter with the ailing woman. The sweet liquid of her vision fills her ailing soul. Catherine thus extends bodily metaphors of fluidity to descriptions of the absorption of divinity. Here, we see that even carnality is divinized as a reflection of God for carnality was for Catherine a major hurdle as well as a point of fixation.

Teresa's Garden:

Teresa's sixteenth-century writings contain fluid metaphors similar to those employed by Gertrude and Catherine. Her testimony reflects the endurance of fluid language in female mystical testimony. Whereas Gertrude is understood to be one of

¹⁹¹ Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine*, 147.

the earliest female mystics of her kind, Teresa is one of the latest. What in Teresa's life inspired the use of fluid metaphor? Born in 1515 in Avila, Spain, Teresa spent her childhood under the watchful eye of her mother, Beatriz de Ahumada. As was the case for women of aristocratic lineage in early sixteenth-century Spain, Teresa received no formal education, and instead devoted her time to religious charities.¹⁹²

Teresa was educated for a life of pious domesticity at an Augustinian convent. With the support of her family's significant financial means, the young Teresa had two lives from which to choose: the household, and the convent. In other words, she could become a wife, "consigned to virtual slavery by her husband (about which Teresa the prioress had something to say later on) and the unceasing agony of childbirth, until perhaps, like her own mother, she died young,"¹⁹³ or she could devote herself to loving God. Teresa, inspired by a close reading of the aforementioned *Letters* of Jerome, chose the convent. Teresa's attachment to Jerome's *Letters* reflects the context of sixteenth-century Spain, in which "in spiritual as well as domestic life, a Castillian woman was supposed to crave enclosure."¹⁹⁴ Teresa had the advantage of choosing the convent. She did not grieve, as Catherine did, over a lack of parental support. In fact, Teresa was in her own rendering a wayward youth who actually required encouragement from her parents to pursue a life of spiritual

¹⁹² Cathleen Medwick, *Teresa of Avila: The Progress of a Soul*, (New York: Image Books, 1999), 15.

¹⁹³ Medwick, *Teresa of Avila*, 21.

¹⁹⁴ Medwick, *Teresa of Avila*, 37.

piety. Teresa seemed, in her father's particular opinion, to enjoy jewelry and fine things much more than the average young woman.¹⁹⁵

Enclosure, if not conversion, then, came upon Teresa at an early age. Of course, Teresa, who traveled for most of the last fifteen years of her life, was one of the least "enclosed" of the famous female mystics, but Jerome's emphasis on female enclosure is visible in Teresa's mystical visions of receptivity. Following her entrance into the convent of Santa Maria de Gracia, Teresa began to suffer from a series of physical ailments. According to biographer Cathleen Medwick, Teresa "had too many illnesses for any single disease. In the course of her surprisingly long life, she repeatedly experienced fevers, chest pain, jaw and tooth pain, backaches, noises and throbbing in her head, palsy and paralysis, attacks of nerves and nausea."¹⁹⁶ Teresa's bodily ailments are heavily featured in her *Autobiography*, as Teresa seems to have spent a good deal of time worrying about her health. Teresa, like Gertrude, was likely familiar with medicine specific to women's ailments. It appears, however, that Teresa's perception of femininity, also like Gertrude's, was mostly developed through her intensive readings.

Teresa's official conversion experience happened shortly before her fortieth year. The episode and its representation in Teresa's *Autobiography* are indisputably related to the nun's close reading of Augustine's *Confessions*. *Confessions* was translated into Spanish during Teresa's lifetime, and the prioress was among its first

¹⁹⁵ Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Teresa of Jesus: The Autobiography of Teresa of Avila*, trans. Allison Peers, (New York: Image Books, 1960), 70.

¹⁹⁶ Medwick, *Teresa of Avila*, 32.

readers. Teresa recounts her conversion experience in *Autobiography*, and in doing so employs a large number of fluid metaphors.

Teresa's *Autobiography* was written with great reluctance and at the command of the saint's superiors, who worried that the woman's mystical raptures were inspired by the devil. According to Benedicta Ward, "it seemed ridiculous to [Teresa] that a person so devoid of talent as herself—and a woman into the bargain! - -could possibly write anything that would edify others."¹⁹⁷ Indeed, Teresa famously claimed that she would rather be using a spinning-wheel than writing down her visions of God. "For the love of God," she said, "let me work at my spinning wheel and go to choir and perform the duties of the religious life, like the other sisters. I am not meant to write: I have neither the health nor the intelligence for it."¹⁹⁸ Such self-deprecating assertions fill the pages of Teresa's *Autobiography* and their tone is most indicative of Teresa's keen grasp on the Church's perception of women. Of course, Teresa was quite intelligent and assertive, and probably thought of herself as such. Her reluctance to write was itself a reflection of Teresa's aggravation at the oxymoronic task of mystical testimony. In her *Autobiography* she states frankly that "the way in which this that we call union comes, and the nature of it, I do not know how to explain."¹⁹⁹

Teresa's visions have been described by theologians as "imaginative," "not because it was unreal but because it had a kind of physicality that "intellectual"

¹⁹⁷ Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*, 41.

¹⁹⁸ Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*, 41.

¹⁹⁹ Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Teresa of Avila*, 174.

visions, those that allow a perception of God not connected to any image, did not.”²⁰⁰

Thus, like most mystics, Teresa communicated her experiences with images. That she chose watery images to communicate her understanding of God.

In her *Autobiography*, Teresa depicts the reception of divinity through a series of fluid metaphors. These metaphors explain four ways in which a countryside can be watered: by a bucket and well, conduits, a stream, and rain.²⁰¹ According to Teresa, a beginner in prayer must imagine herself a gardener, with a plot of land unwatered and filled with weeds:

It seems to me that the garden can be watered in four ways: by taking the water from a well, which costs us great labor; or by a water-wheel and buckets, when the water is drawn by a windlass (I have sometimes drawn it this way: it is less laborious than the other and gives more water); or by a stream or a brook, which waters the ground much better, for it saturates it more thoroughly and there is less need to water it often, so that the gardener’s labor is much less; or by heavy rain, when the Lord waters it with no labor of ours, a way incomparably better than any of those which have been described.²⁰²

In Teresa’s conception of prayer, the soul is a garden, and God the means by which the garden flourishes. Aridity, dryness, are the enemies of prayer, and water the salvation of the soul, God’s presence.²⁰³ In the third degree of prayer, when water comes directly from a spring, God “may almost be said to be the gardener Himself, for it is He Who does everything.”²⁰⁴ The garden, in this image, does not so much enclose the water of divinity, but absorbs it:

In any one of these visits, brief as its duration may be, the Gardener, being, as He is, the Creator of the water, gives the soul water without limit; and what

²⁰⁰ Medwick, *Teresa of Avila*, 35.

²⁰¹ Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*, 57.

²⁰² Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*, 128.

²⁰³ Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*, 129.

²⁰⁴ Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*, 163.

the poor soul could not acquire, even if it labored and fatigued its understanding for as much as twenty years, this heavenly Gardener achieves in a moment; the fruit grows and ripens in such a way that, if the Lord wills, the soul can obtain sufficient nourishment from its own garden.²⁰⁵

Once the water is made available to the soul, the garden assumes the watering capacities of its heavenly gardener. It becomes self-sufficient, fused with the fluidity of God.

The union of the soul and God is in Teresa's representation a meeting of two fluidities, the water-saturated ground and the rain of God's love.²⁰⁶ In Teresa's understanding, the ideal soul is reflective of God's fluid divinity. In Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa, God and mystic are fluid and meld through the means of this fluidity.

²⁰⁵ Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*, 169.

²⁰⁶ Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*, 174.

Conclusion: The Redemption of Fluidity

The impotence, the formlessness, the deformity associated with women, the way they are equated with something other than human and split between the human and the inhuman (half-woman, half-animal), their duty to be adorned, masked, and made up, etc., rather than being allowed their own physical, bodily beauty, their own skin, their own form(s), all this is symptomatic of the fact that women lack a female god who can open up the perspective in which their flesh can be transfigured.²⁰⁷

In “Divine Women,” Luce Irigaray explores the relationship of the elements--water, fire, earth, and air--to the gendering of God. According to Irigaray, this relationship “has never been decoded and has therefore remained a matter of fables and monsters (particularly in the etymological meaning of the word), revealing and hiding something of our identity, of the difficulties we have in situating ourselves in relation to ourselves and to our fellows, something of the dramas and spells that captivate us, bind us, and separate us.”²⁰⁸ Recall the Gnostic Poimandres’ rendering of the abyss of Genesis, in which a chaos monster (the deep personified), “frightful and horrible, wound in a coil,” appears to the anonymous author “like a snake. The

²⁰⁷ Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Colombia University Press, 1993), 64

²⁰⁸ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 57.

darkness changed into something moist, unspeakably confused.”²⁰⁹ What does this monster, read through Irigaray, teach us about women’s relationship to the elements, to themselves, and to God? More specifically, what does it reveal about the abyss of Genesis 1.2?

To summarize the genealogy of abyssal exegesis, in Genesis 1.2, God interacts with a fluid substance.²¹⁰ While Gnostics such as Poimandres mythologized and rendered monstrous this primordial fluidness, *Creatio ex nihilo* performed a nihilation of the deep. Irenaeus, by mocking the claim that a divine mother “produced from her passions aforesaid the so vast material substance of creation,” sacrificed the potential of an abyssal, female co-eternal.²¹¹ Irigaray’s essay argues that women lack a divine point of orientation because they have no female God. The absence of a female divinity hampers their quest of fulfillment. According to Irigaray, women need a female God to anchor their struggle towards divinity. Irigaray thus helps illuminate both the damaging effects of *creatio ex nihilo* theology and the redemptive value of Gertrude’s, Catherine’s, and Teresa’s constructive visions of divine fluidity, in which a God with female characteristics provides a divine point of orientation.

Irigaray explains that she was motivated to return to a study of the elements by a “deep, dark, and necessary intuition, dark even when shared by other

²⁰⁹ *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, trans. R. McL Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 329.

²¹⁰ Genesis 1.2 (The New Interpreter’s Bible)

²¹¹ Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 53.

thoughts.”²¹² “Divine Women,” provides a feminist treatment of the resurfacing deep inspired by the myth of *Melusine*. The monstrous Melusine was a mermaid-like woman mired in her inability to become fully human.²¹³ Strange imaginings of monstrous, animalistic femininities such as *Melusine*, are to Irigaray, a reflection of the “delayed becoming” of women. Melusine, half-fish, is a victim of “partial incarnation,” and, therefore, reflects the “veil” that, according to “Divine Women,” cloaks the female identity.²¹⁴ Genesis 1.2, its mythologization and silencing, can also be seen as such. In fact, as Irigaray points out, to fully understand the relationship of gender to God, we must go back to the creation, for creation stories best illuminate the nature of divinity.²¹⁵ Although Irigaray does not refer explicitly to Genesis 1.2 in her essay, the story’s treatment by theology, and participation in the construction of dualist hierarchies, supports her assertion that women have no traditional point of divine orientation.

According to Irigaray, women are like fish, confined to the marine realm, unable to emerge entirely into the air as birds due to a paralysis of becoming.²¹⁶ In explanation for this delay, Irigaray asserts that God has always been masculinized, that women have never had a female point of divine orientation and are bound to their position as wombs assisting in the incarnation of man.²¹⁷ Beatrice of Nazareth, described in her autobiography as a “fish swimming in a vast sea and resting in its depth [i.e. abysses], and like a bird, boldly mounting high in the sky, so that the soul

²¹² Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 57.

²¹³ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 58.

²¹⁴ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 66.

²¹⁵ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 63.

²¹⁶ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 58.

²¹⁷ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 61.

feels its spirit freely moving through the vastness and depth and the unutterable richness of love,” appears not to have felt Irigaray’s paralysis of becoming.²¹⁸ Beatrice, who lived at a time when women were regularly identified with childbearing and the flesh, expressed a freedom of self that contradicts Irigaray’s assertion that women are confined to their roles as wombs. Of course, we cannot say that Beatrice was an anomalous woman, uniquely able to see herself in the abyss of a feminine God and to meld with divinity, for as we have learned a number of other female mystics shared her experience. As Irigaray points out, “the love of God has often been a haven for women. They are the guardians of the religious tradition.” “Divine Women” acknowledges that “certain women mystics have been among those rare women to achieve real social influence, notably in politics,” without exploring the irony of this fact that the same women so respected were also revolutionaries in the revival of a female co-eternal.²¹⁹

Irigaray argues that the hierarchies established by the masculine gendering of God, “the man/woman hierarchy, or state/woman, or a certain form of God/woman, or machine/woman,”²²⁰ have held women back from divinity. This imposition of hierarchies is evident in the patristic, scientific, and philosophical texts covered in chapters one and two of this paper. In medieval theology, which claims that woman is the opposite of man, the opposite of God, every adjective assigned to man is deemed the antithesis of woman. For this reason, medieval and early modern women were consistently equated with carnality, fluidity, moistness. As McGinn argues, no

²¹⁸ Roger De Ganck, *Life of Beatrice* (Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1991), 316.

²¹⁹ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 63.

²²⁰ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 60.

such adjectives were assigned to divinity until the thirteenth century, when the abyss entered mystical discourse. Even then, male mystics like Bernard of Clairvaux and William of St. Thierry, dualized the abyss of light and the abyss of darkness.²²¹ Only women's writings collapsed this distinction.²²² Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa, who describe an indistinction between God and the soul, God and woman, beautifully illustrate this argument.

Why are Gertrude's, Catherine's, and Teresa's divinizations of femininity so helpful? According to Irigaray, "man is able to exist because God helps him define his gender (genre), helps him orient his finiteness by reference to the infinity," whereas woman does not have the same capability. The orientation of man to God was the endeavor of patristic theology. Augustine, we recall, claims that "the image of God is in man so that there may be one created from which the rest may be originate, having the power of God, as it were his deputy, because he has the image of the one God, and so woman is not made in the image of God,"²²³ thereby denying the possibility of divine femininity. Augustine's woman lacks a horizon towards which to direct her being. She is the victim of *Creatio ex nihilo*, which itself negates the potential of this horizon.

Irigaray claims that without divinity, woman cannot become "free, autonomous, sovereign."²²⁴ She locates woman as "fixed" in her carnal role of

²²¹ Bernard McGinn, "The Abyss of Love," *The Joy of Learning and the Love of God: Studies in Honor of Jean Leclercq*, ed. E. Rozanne Elder (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 93.

²²² McGinn, "The Abyss of Love," 103.

²²³ *Women Defamed and Women Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, ed. Alcuin Blamires (London: Clarendon Press, 1992), 85.

²²⁴ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 62.

motherhood. Women are more open, in her analysis, because they are always half-way to infinity. The only “ideal other” provided to woman is man and that the “most human and the most divine goal woman can conceive is to become man.”²²⁵ The concept of man as woman’s ideal other is present in medieval theological texts on the renunciation of sex by female monastics. For example, we learned that according to Jerome, “as long as woman is for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman, and will be called a man.”²²⁶ Of course, Jerome’s “male” woman was nonexistent in medieval and early modern Europe., when women remained women even inside the monastic context. Jerome did not anticipate that even the most pious and chaste of women monastics would never participate in gender renunciation.

Were the women of my study handicapped by the absence of a female God?

Here, Irigaray laments the historical damage caused by this absence:

The only diabolical thing about women is their lack of a God and the fact that, deprived of God, they are forced to comply with models that do to match them, that exile, double, mask them, cut them off from themselves and from one another, stripping away their ability to move forward into love, art, thought, toward their ideal and divine fulfillment.²²⁷

She locates women as “still always between different incarnations,” deprived of their “own ends and means.” In the conclusion of “Divine Women,” she argues that women need to find a mirror that will enable their incarnation, that “they be God for,”

²²⁵ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 63.

²²⁶ Monica Brezezinski Potkay and Regula Meyer Evitt, *Minding the Body: Women and Literature in the Middle Ages* (800-1500) (London: Twayne Publishers, 1997), 19.

²²⁷ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 64.

themselves, “so that [they] can be divine for the other.”²²⁸ According to Irigaray, in light of the fact that the elements are only discussed in poetry it is no wonder frequently “turn to the Middle Ages in search of our images and secrets?”²²⁹ This statement was probably meant in jest. After all, the Middle Ages are generally described as dark and regressive. But what if we were to look back that far, not at the patristic apologists for a male/female hierarchy, but at the female mystics who overthrew it? Gertrude, Catherine, and Teresa worshipped a fluid divinity, a point of orientation reflective of themselves. Might we follow their lead?

²²⁸ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 71.

²²⁹ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 58.

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