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Anorexic Behaviors and Spirituality in Medieval Holy Women

THIS BODY OF MINE REMAINS WITHOUT ANY FOOD, WITHOUT even a drop of water: in such sweet physical tortures as I never at any time endured; insomuch that my life hangs by a thread.”¹

At only thirty three years old Saint Catherine of Siena lay in an almost constant state of hallucination, unable to stand, and on the verge of death. Saint Catherine lived the majority of her life in a near constant state of starvation as a form of suffering for religious worship, but four months before her death, she expressed she had lost the ability to take water or swallow and that her eventual death or continued life was in the hands of God. She writes, “it seems to me that this time I am to confirm them with a new martyrdom in the sweetness of my soul . . . He will put so an end to my miseries and to my crucified desires. Or He may employ His usual ways to strengthen my body.”² Shortly after, Saint Catherine experienced a dehydration-induced stroke where she lost the ability to walk and spent the next week slowly dying of a lifetime of malnutrition and dehydration.³

Saint Catherine’s experience with religious starvation is representative of larger historical experience where holy women in the medieval period of would oftentimes starve themselves as a form of physical torture in order to repent of sins or grow closer to Christ. Starvation was a common method of asceticism, a religious practice where undertakers looked to remove their sinful nature or grow closer to God through denying themselves physical desires. Although contemporaries to Saint Catherine would participate and punish themselves in different ways: holy men would commonly choose to experi-

1. Siena, *Saint Catherine of. Saint Catherine of Siena as Seen in Her Letters*. Translated by Vida Dutton Scudder. London: J.M. Dent & Co, 1905

2. Siena, *Saint Catherine of. Saint Catherine of Siena as Seen in Her Letters*.

3. Bartolomé, *Autobiography*, 22-35.; Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 22-53.

ence physical suffering and voluntary poverty, women would regularly abstain from food. The practice of self-starvation was very dangerous and oftentimes led to the death of the women involved. To help understand the actions of these women, these behaviors can be compared to modern explanations of the disease *anorexia nervosa*. Many modern scholars express that the modern understanding of anorexia categorizes that leading contributions to the development of *anorexia nervosa* is a feeling of limited control in life.⁴ These motives are reflected in Medieval European women who had very limited control over their lives. It was customary for medieval families to choose the life for their daughters based on the most advantageous option for the family. Women's choices were heavily reduced and often they were forced to resign themselves to whatever life had been chosen for them.⁵

Comparing the modern understanding of the causes of *anorexia nervosa* with the cultural environment of medieval women suggests that holy women's choice to abstain from food might have been influenced by a desire to cope with the lack of control available to them within their own lives. Historians like Rudolph Bell theorized holy women developed *anorexia nervosa* in response to living in a society where they lacked autonomy.⁶ Modern medical researchers like Megan Warren in her article, "Reimagining Anorexia." In *Abject Relations: Everyday Worlds of Anorexia*, explains that people with anorexia often develop it as an effort to gain control over situations and their bodies.⁷ Understanding that self-starvation has a history of being caused by a desire to establish control and autonomy, provides a useful starting point to understand holy women's experiences with self-starvation.

However, there were also many cultural and societal influences for why holy women would have chosen self-starvation as their key form of penance.

4. Warin, Megan. "Reimagining Anorexia." In *Abject Relations: Everyday Worlds of Anorexia*, 179-90. Rutgers University Press, 2010. Accessed March 16, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hjb4.12>; "Causes of Anorexia." National Eating Disorders Association, January 11, 2021. <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/help-support/contact-helpline>.

5. Musselwhite, Laura Gilstrap. "Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England 450-1500." *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods* 25, no. 1 (2000): 41. *Gale Academic OneFile* (accessed July 11, 2022). <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A63652496/AONE?u=googlescholar&sid=bookmark>;

6. Bell, Rudolph M. *Holy Anorexia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.; Brown, Peter. "The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity". Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1981.; Elm, Susanna. "Virgins of God": The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity. Oxford, 1994.; Head, Thomas.; Howard, Johnston, and Geoff Hayward. *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown*, edited by James Howard-Johnston, et al., Oxford University Press, 2000. ProQuest Ebook Central,

7. Warin, "Reimagining Anorexia." 179-90.; "Causes of Anorexia." National Eating Disorders Association.

Women in medieval Europe had very personal relationships with food. Historians like Caroline Walker Bynum in her book *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, explain women were more connected to food than men because of their gender-based roles in their communities and their close tie to the production and creation of food. The primary jobs for women within medieval Europe involved creating and preparing food; women were taught that their very bodies were made to create and be the sole provider of food for nursing children. Food was an integral part of their role in their communities and a large part of how they defined and understood their own femininity: food directly connected to a woman's identity and self-worth.⁸ The deep cultural connection women had to food explains why holy women who were looking to sacrifice viewed abstaining from food as an appropriate sacrifice.

Another cultural influence stemmed from the unpredictable availability of food within medieval Europe. There was no way of predicting weather patterns from one year to the next which meant food supplies would fluctuate yearly depending on the weather. Unpredictable food supplies created a constant stress among people regarding the availability of food and their continued survival. The people's concern with food made it a source of religious concern as well. High numbers had faced or experienced starvation which led people to consider having and eating enough food a religious experience.⁹ The connection with food to different religious experiences, like eating of the body of Christ within mass, created physical connection between God and food. Food was considered to be a connection to God, and women had an innate and special connection to food. The duality of food being connected to divinity as well as women's identities could have made it easy for so many women to turn to abstaining from food as a way of punishing themselves for their earthly sins.

Another influence for the self-starvation of holy women is the highly glorified language used to describe the torture of women in contemporary

8. Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. Berkeley, California: Univ. of California Press, 2010; Schulenburg, Jane Tibbets. "Forgetful of Their Sex": *Female Sanctity and Society*, ca. 500-1100. Chicago, 1998.; Nelson, Janet L. "The Dark Ages." *History Workshop Journal*, no. 63 (2007): 191-201. Accessed March 26, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25472909>; Newman, Barbara. *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. Accessed April 1, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central.; Whatley, E. Gordon. *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*. Edited by Jo Ann McNamara and John Halborg. Durham: Duke University Press, 1992. Wiethaus, Ulrike. "Sexuality, Gender, and the Body in Late Medieval Women's Spirituality: Cases from Germany and the Netherlands." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7, no. 1 (1991): 35-52. Accessed March 2, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25002144>.

9. Heffernan, Thomas J. *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages*. Cary: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 1992. Accessed April 6, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central.

literature. Many of the primary documents support the argument that when narratives were written about the experiences of past female saints, language would be focused on detailing physical violence experienced by women, exalting women not because of religious devotion but because of intense physical suffering.¹⁰ Examples can be seen in contemporary primary sources like, *A Legend of Holy Women* by Osbern Bokenham. Written in 1443, *A Legend of Holy Women*, is regarded as the first all-female hagiography, outlining the narratives of thirteen female saints.¹¹ Narratives of female saints who had died as martyrs, like written by Bokenham, highly glorified the violence inflicted on women and created a culture that believed physical mutilation a necessary part of female worship. The highly glorified physical suffering within narratives of female saints from antiquity illustrates the stories of female religious devotion women from later periods would have looked to as an example. Analyzing religious literature women of the medieval period would have been exposed to provides a useful starting point for understanding a culture that believed the only kind of worship available to women would be one that involved intense physical suffering.

Much of the secondary scholarship available supports the various aspects of what would have affected holy women. Academics like Dr. Caroline Bynum and Dr. Ulrike Wiethaus explain in their research the effect of gender-based roles in medieval communities on women and in extension their relationship with food.¹² Historians like Rudolph Bell explore the disordered eating habits of holy women and express what aspects of their behaviors can be attributed to what is now considered an eating disorder.¹³ Although there has been much valuable research on understanding the lives of medieval female saints, there

10. Miller, Julie B. "Eroticized Violence in Medieval Women's Mystical Literature: A Call for a Feminist Critique." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 15, no. 2 (1999): 25-49. Accessed March 2, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25002364>; Moulton, Ian Frederick. *Before Pornography: Erotic Writing in Early Modern England*. New York: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2000. Accessed April 6, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central.; Smith, Julia, "The Problem of Female Sanctity in Carolingian Europe c. 780-920." *Past and Present*, 146 (1995), pp. 3-37.; Elliott, Dyan. *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998. Accessed April 6, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central.; Elliott, Dyan. *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell: Metaphor and Embodiment in the Lives of Pious Women, 200-1500*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011. Accessed April 6, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central.; Robertson, Elizabeth. *Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience*. Knoxville, 1990.; "Women and Hagiography in Medieval Christianity." *Encyclopedia of Christianity Online*, 1999. https://doi.org/10.1163/2211-2685_eco_h6;

11. Bokenham, Osbern. *A Legend of Holy Women: Osbern Bokenham, Legends of Holy Women*. Translated by Sheila Delany. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992.

12. Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*; Wiethaus, Ulrike. "Sexuality, Gender, and the Body in Late Medieval Women's Spirituality, 35-52.

13. Bell, Rudolph M. *Holy Anorexia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.

is a distinct aspect of research missing that accounts for the effect a religious environment that glorifies regular participation in physical torture.

When applying secondary research to understanding the social and psychological pressures that encouraged self-starvation, explaining that women had a heightened individual connection to food is not enough to explain why many holy women made a decision to starve themselves until their eventual deaths. Choosing to focus on the cultural connection to food without considering the psychological reasons for self-starvation is in a way removing holy women from their own choices and summing their own decisions regarding their lives into a societal influence. In combination with considering the cultural connection women had with food, it is not enough to focus exclusively on women's societal lack of agency to understand these women. A desire to establish autonomy matches the theories mentioned above about how anorexia develops due to a need to establish control, but relying solely on women's lack of control as the only reasoning for the development of anorexic tendencies ignores the effects of contemporary opinions on religious devotion. The women experiencing anorexic tendencies were women in a life of religious devotion so it is necessary to understand the effect a religious culture of physical penance had on holy women in order to understand their behaviors.

Many of the primary source documents support the claim that it is from a combination of women's connection with food, contemporary society's acceptance of asceticism, the glorification of female pain, and lack of general autonomy, that women developed anorexic tendencies. When trying to understand these women, it is necessary to analyze both the psychological reasoning for self-starvation, and the effect of cultural values. Female saints would have been affected by both the psychological pressures that cause self-starvation and the cultural pressures of what holy women believed female worship to be. Female saints in medieval Europe manifested patterns of behaviors that are analogous with modern-day understanding of *anorexia nervosa* as a reaction to the need to express control over their lives in a society where they were unable, and in response to a culture that valued woman's physical pain and penance as a way of worshipping God.

Anorexic Behaviors of Saint Catherine of Siena

Saint Catherine of Siena is one of the most well-known holy women to have participated in self-starvation. Early in her life, Catherine experienced an increased awareness of the mortality of the people she loved. Consequently, she made a promise to God that in return for the eternal salvation of her family,

she would live a life of hard penance. Catherine's family pushed her to make an advantageous marriage even though she had explained her desire to live within a religious order.¹⁴ In response to being forced into marriage even though she had already sworn an oath to God, Catherine began to practice self-starvation as a way of gaining control over her life. When her family tried to stop her, she would simply forgive them for their ignorance and continue. Any attempt to punish her would never be as bad as her chosen process of sanctification, and regardless of their efforts, they were unable to force her to eat or drink enough to maintain/sustain her health.¹⁵

Catherine fasted for so long she nearly died, but as her mother begged her to eat and save herself, Catherine said to her, "If you wish me to get better, make it possible for me to join the Sisters of Penance. Otherwise I fear greatly that God and Saint Dominic, who are calling me to do their holy work, will make certain that you cannot have me anymore, neither in one habit nor the other."¹⁶ Catherine's message to her mother shows Catherine used her starvation as a means of control over her life by giving her family no other option but to accept her life of religious devotion, or watch her die. This correspondence is evidence that Catherine participated in self-starvation not purely for religious devotion, but as an outlet of control over her life where she previously had none.

Saint Catherine's rigid control of her diet and physical torture became a tool she used to establish power over her life which created an unhealthy relationship with food.¹⁷ Catherine let go of her guilt by physically paying for the salvation of her family. She kept herself from being forced into marriage by changing her family's focus from marriage to ensuring her continued survival. She exerted control over her family by appointing herself in control of their eternal souls, and she asserted power over death and God. Making a promise with God to tie her family's salvation to her physical suffering meant that God's actions were now entirely tied to her decisions. Catherine's desperation to gain control over her life, her grief, and the uncertainty of whether she would ever be reunited with her family led Catherine to abstain from food.

14. Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 22-53.; Siena, Saint Catherine of. *Saint Catherine of Siena as Seen in Her Letters*. Translated by Vida Dutton Scudder.

15. de San Bartolomé, Ana. *Autobiography and Other Writings*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. Accessed February 23, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central.; Riccoboni, Sister Bartolomea. *Life and Death in a Venetian Convent: The Chronicle and Necrology of Corpus Domini, 1395-1436*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. Accessed March 16, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central.; Vauchez, André. *The Laity in the Middle Ages: Religious Beliefs and Devotional Practices*. Trans. Margery Schneider. French original, 1987; Notre Dame, 1993.

16. Saint Catherine, *Saint Catherine of Siena as Seen in Her Letters*, 36

17. Bartolomé, *Autobiography*, 22-35.; Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 22-53.

Catherine's actions show religious women were developing what would now be considered anorexia as a way of gaining control when they felt they had no other outlets to attain power over their lives.

Even after achieving her goal of life in religious devotion and joining the Sisters of Penitence of St. Dominic in Siena, Catherine struggled to eat. She shares her frustrations with her father in a letter saying, "You wrote to me saying in particular that I should pray to God that I might eat. And I say to you, My Father, and I say it to you in the sight of God, that in every possible way I could I always forced myself once or twice a day to take food; and I prayed continually and I pray to God and will pray, that he will grace me in this matter of eating so that I may live like other creatures, if this is his will because mine there is."¹⁸ Catherine shares with her father she has to force herself to eat, and she prays she can eat without difficulty the way every other creates seems to. Catherine's correspondence explains even though Catherine turned to anorexic tendencies in response to a lack of control in her life, those same tendencies had grown to control her as much as any of the people in her life. The lack of control experienced by Catherine suggests that her choice to refrain from eating developed because of her need for control, but remained because of what would now be defined as an eating disorder.

Catherine confides to her father her inability to eat and desire to eat in the way she sees the people around her. She later asked her family, "I beg you that you beseech that highest eternal Truth to grant me the grace of allowing me to take food, if this be more for his honor and for the health of my soul, and if it pleases him."¹⁹ Catherine desperately wanted to be able to eat normally and be healthy like everyone else. Her inability to eat plagued her, and although she benefited in the early stages from the control it gave her over her life, it ultimately was to her detriment.

Saint Catherine's experiences give an example of the way medieval women found power in self-starvation. Catherine used starvation as a means of protecting herself from being forced into a life she didn't want, and to create the life she always wanted for herself within a religious order. These experiences show that in situations where women were lacking agency, starvation became a weapon to protect themselves. Saint Catherine's development of intense self-starvation is evidence that anorexic behaviors developed in women in the medieval period as a response to suffocating social and cultural controls over them. Although Catherine's correspondence with her family later in life is evidence of the fact Catherine was not in control of whether or not she ate. Cath-

18. Saint Catherine, *Saint Catherine of Siena as Seen in Her Letters*, 36.

19. Saint Catherine, *Saint Catherine of Siena as Seen in Her Letters*, 36.

erine's pleas with her family to pray for her ability to eat is evidence of the fact that her inability to eat was not a continued choice but rather a psychological condition she had no control over.

Depictions of Physical Torture of Ancient Saints

Female saints participated in extreme fasting in order to inflict physical pain as a form of religious worship. Narratives of early female saints, that medieval women would have been exposed to, glorified experiencing physical violence as a part of religious observance.²⁰ The depiction of early female saints experiencing intense physical violence created an expectation that to give truly and fully all to God, one had to experience pain and torment and continue to follow God. The belief stemmed from the experiences of persecution and martyrdom of early members of Christianity like early Catholic Saints and Christ himself. The emphasis on physical torture can be seen in medieval literature that shares the hagiographies of female saints like Osbern Bokenham's book *A Legend of Holy Women*.²¹ A fifteenth-century collection of poems about the lives of women venerated as saints by the Catholic church, Bokenham's book is an example of medieval literature written about female saints.

One example of the stories found in Bokenham's poems is the story of Saint Margaret of Antioch, who lived in the third century. An excerpt from the story of Saint Margaret says, "During her prayer they ripped her flesh so maliciously that her blood flowed to the ground faster than a river. The pitiless prefect hid his eyes and couldn't bear to see so much blood running out... on both sides, down to the bone, her flesh was burnt with many brands and then, afterwards, how she was bound and flung into cold water so that the sudden change from heat to cold should increase her pain."²² Bokenham's desire to graphically describe the torture of Saint Margaret helps to identify themes characteristic of the medieval period. Physical sacrifices represented a person's religious devotion and were emphasized when recounting the narratives of earlier Saints.²³ By focusing on the physical suffering endured by holy women

20. Bokenham, Osbern. *A Legend of Holy Women: Osbern Bokenham, Legends of Holy Women*. Translated by Sheila Delany. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992; Talbot, Alice-Mary Maffry, trans. *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation*. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1996; Cazelles, Brigitte. *The Lady As Saint: A Collection of French Hagiographic Romances of the Thirteenth Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991. Accessed March 2, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central; Elliott, Alison. *Roads to Paradise. Reading the Lives of the Early Saints*. Hanover, NH, 1987

21. Bokenham. *A Legend of Holy Women*, 7-195.

22. Bokenham, 17.

23. Head, Thomas. "Women and Hagiography in Medieval Christianity." *Encyclopedia of*

of antiquity, Bokenham's book illustrates the societal belief that physical suffering for Christ was the way to prove religious devotion.

The graphic violence used to represent ancient saints is representative of larger historical experience involving the worship of Christianity. Practicing Christianity before the end of the fourth century was either illegal or heavily persecuted. Because practicing Christianity in antiquity was illegal, many of the Saints from that period became saints because they experienced religious persecution and died painfully as martyrs.²⁴ Holy women in the medieval period would not have experienced religious persecution because within their society, religious devotion to Christianity was celebrated. Even though there was no religious persecution towards Catholicism in medieval Europe, the standard of religious devotion established in antiquity had not changed. There remained an expectation that in order to show pure religious devotion, like Christ and the saints of antiquity, a person had to suffer physical torture.²⁵ The belief that religious piety included physical torture would have encouraged women into participating in dangerous behaviors like self-starvation as a way of suffering for their faith like the saints of antiquity.

Holy women in medieval Europe developed behaviors of self-starvation in response to a culture that valued physical torture as a means of religious worship. It can be surmised that many women participated in self-starvation because they felt a need to suffer for Christ as a form of religious observance. Holy women spent their life in religious devotion and had been taught physical pain was a way for them to build a closer relationship with God. It was not uncommon for people in religion to desire a more intimate understanding of God, and holy women would have attempted to build that relationship in the only ways they had been taught.

Christianity Online, 1999. https://doi.org/10.1163/2211-2685_eco_h6; Elliott, Alison. *Roads to Paradise. Reading the Lives of the Early Saints*. Hanover, NH, 1987; Whatley, *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*. 50-57.; Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*.; Riccoboni, *Life and Death in a Venetian Convent*. 2-17; Nelson, "The Dark Ages." 1-75; Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 12-20; Hayden, "Women in the Middle Ages," 17-25.

24. Cazelles, Brigitte. *The Lady As Saint: A Collection of French Hagiographic Romances of the Thirteenth Century*; Elliott, Alison. *Roads to Paradise. Reading the Lives of the Early Saints*.

25. Smith, *The Problem of Female Sanctity*. 3-37; Miller, "Eroticized Violence in Medieval Women's Mystical Literature", 25-49.; "Women and Hagiography in Medieval Christianity." 1999. https://doi.org/10.1163/2211-2685_eco_h6.

Conclusion

Female saints in medieval Europe manifested patterns of self starvation as a reaction to the need for autonomy in a society where they had none, and in response to a culture that valued woman's physical pain and penance as a way of worshiping God. Saint Catherine's experience with intense self-starvation is evidence that women in the medieval period developed anorexic behaviors in response to suffocating social and cultural controls over them. In Catherine's experience she had no control over her life other than whether or not she ate, and so whether or not she ate food became her only tool for control. Saint Catherine developed patterns of self-starvation in part as a way of gaining control over her life. The stories of female worship like those found in Bokenham's poems and other contemporary sources, explain the connection of physical violence with religious worship. Holy women living a life of religious devotion would have seen physical torture as a tool to gain a more intimate relationship with God.

Understanding the reasons medieval holy women developed habits of self-starvation is important because it forces a reevaluation of modern understanding of *anorexia nervosa*. A misunderstanding of the disease in popular culture suggests disordered eating is a recent phenomenon caused by desire to fit idealized body images.²⁶ The existence of anorexia within medieval religious orders reveals self-starvation is not in response to exclusive beauty standards, but that it is a longstanding human behavior caused by very complex psychological and social experiences. Analyzing the lives of holy women who suffered from what would now be considered an eating disorder provides a useful starting point for answering larger questions about the treatment of disordered eating. Establishing self-starvation is rooted within a human response to traumatic events and situations can lead to further research on how to help people who suffer from disordered eating.

Understanding that self-starvation is part of a larger human experience reaching back centuries is also important because it provides a useful starting point for analyzing trends in environments that would encourage anorexic behaviors. Analyzing the events in their lives can help explain what happened psychologically and understand what causes these kinds of behaviors in people so that eating disorders can be better prevented.

26. Warin, "Reimagining Anorexia", 179-90; National Eating Disorders Association, "Causes of Anorexia."