Mystical Visions: Female Affective Piety and Queering the Divine

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In transgressing seemingly established boundaries, the experiences of medieval Christian women offer space for queer interpretation. Observing the writings and visions of specific Beguines, saints, anchoresses, and abbesses (Hadewijch, Julian of Norwich, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Angela of Foligno, and Hildegard von Bingen), female interactions with mysticism may display a distinctly queer form of religious relationality. Expanding upon affective piety, the medieval female mystic sought a direct, real, and "unmediated experience of God," aspiring to recognize herself in the divine.[1] Desiring to be one with God, these mystics disobeyed borders of sex and sexuality, presenting "accounts of insane love and endless desire in which gender becomes so radically fluid that it is not clear what kind of sexuality—within the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy [...]—is being metaphorically deployed to evoke the relationship between humans and the divine."[2] Thus, to be one with the divine was to mirror its all-encompassing nature, inhabiting a body that is both male and female, both heterosexual and homosexual. The means by which the female mystic "courted" the sacred often evoked a homoerotic sentiment, seeking to love a reflection of herself in God expressed through same-sex attraction. Elizabeth Petroff asserts that the mystic upheld a "double consciousness of self and God," knowing "God first-hand, and [...] herself in that same light of illumination."[3] Union with Christ disregarded otherwise "stable" categories of gender and sexuality through the negation of a singular identity for multiple. Once one with God, the female mystic imbued the masculine divine with a feminine essence, complicating sex binaries. The simultaneous existence of the feminine and masculine

[1] Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, "Women and Mysticism in the Medieval World," in *Women's Lives Self-Representation, Reception and Appropriation in the Middle Ages*, ed. Nahir I. Otaño Gracia and Daniel Armenti (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2022), 14.

[2] Amy Hollywood, "Sexual Desire, Divine Desire; Or, Queering the Beguines," in *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline*, by Virginia Burrus, ed. Catherine Keller, Transdisciplinary Theological Colloquia Series (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 122.

[3] Petroff, "Women and Mysticism," 14.

in one body stimulated a queer identity, creating a portal through which one could express both homoerotic and non-binary selfhoods. Thus, medieval female mystical experiences upheld a queer divinity, maintaining a genderqueer subject through their relation to a simultaneously feminine/masculine divine.

Recognizing the divine to be a diversely gendered figure, the female mystic often feminized the form of Christ, offering her a means to more directly relate to God. Seeking union with a figure expressed through female terms, these medieval mystical experiences could be regarded as homoerotic or "lesbian-like." While the application of the term "lesbian," or "lesbian-like" is contested in premodern studies,[4] I will opt to use the designation "lesbian" when referencing female/female sexual, erotic, or intimately affective relationships. Although reluctance to apply the term to a premodern context may stem from a concern of historical anachronism,[5] the decision not to use "lesbian" when describing medieval sexualities can serve to further obfuscate the already obscured identity of queer premodern women. While medieval people did not view their sexualities through the identifications that surround current terminology, Judith Bennett argues that "lesbian" nonetheless "has considerable antiquity," citing a Byzantine commentator who associated "'lesbian' with same-sex relations between women" over a thousand years ago, "indicating that the term 'lesbian' might have long roughly signified what it still does today."[6] Further, the application of this term does not need to apply solely to sexual relations between women. Rather, following Bennett's assertions, I will view lesbian identity as it exists on a continuum of relationality between women.[7] Bennett argues for the malleability of lesbian identity in both the past and the present era, contending, "Since no word has transparent meaning, now or in the past, surely we need not single out 'lesbian' as a word that must be proscribed, or even just italicized."[8] Martha Vicinus seconds this point, raising a pertinent question: "Is the past so different that we need different tools of analysis and theoretical assumptions, or should we acknowledge our affinity with parts of the past that resonate with our own needs and attachments?"[9] Thus, in an endeavor to unobscure premodern queer women's existence, I will prioritize the usage of the term lesbian.

In the medieval period, lesbian identity remained largely "invisible" to both clerical and non-clerical authors.[10] Same-sex relations were often grouped together under the banner of sodomy, as

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[4] See: *The Lesbian Premodern*, ed. Noreen Giffney, Michelle Sauer, and Diane Watt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

[5] Judith Bennett, "Remembering Elizabeth Etchingham and Agnes Oxenbridge," in *The Lesbian Premodern*, ed. Noreen Giffney, Michelle Sauer, and Diane Watt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 137.

[6] Bennett, "Remembering Elizabeth," 137–138.

[7] Bennett, 139.

[8] Bennett, 138.

[9] Martha Vicinus, "Lesbian Ghosts," in *The Lesbian Premodern*, ed. Noreen Giffney, Michelle Sauer, and Diane Watt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 195.

[10] See: Jacqueline Murray, "Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible: Lesbians in the Middle Ages," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. James A. Brundage and Vern L. Bullough (New York: Routledge, 2000); Ulrike Wiethaus, "Female Homoerotic Discourse and Religion in Medieval Germanic Culture," in *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, ed. Sharon Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternack (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

penitentials, theological writings, and law codes ignored the distinct nature of lesbian selfhood.[11] When these texts did explicitly cite relations between woman and woman, they largely reimagined female sexuality through a phallocentric perspective, remaining unable to conceptualize an absence of the male figure in the sex act. The eighth-century *Penitential of Theodore* displays this concern regarding the lack of masculine presence in sexuality. Jacqueline Murray cites the book's three canons that reference punishment for female homosexual acts:

> 12. If a woman practices vice with a woman, she shall do penance for three years.
> 13. If she practices solitary vice, she shall do penance for the same period.
> 14. The penance of a widow and of a girl is the same. She who has a husband deserves a greater penalty if she commits fornication.[12]

Locating "solitary vice" beside female/female sex acts, Murray affirms that the *Penitential* "highlights the primacy of a phallocentric understanding of human sexuality [...] It is the absence of the male partner that unites conceptually masturbation and lesbian sexual activity."[13] A perpetual unimaginability surrounding sex bereft of the male phallus furthered this obscurity of lesbian existence. Refusing to recognize the potential absence of male genitalia, some authors imagined that lesbian women used dildos or artificial penises to replicate heterosexual sex.[14] The women's usage of imitated phallus was an act to which these authors largely attributed a harsher punishment than other, non-penetrative forms of lesbian sex.[15] Threatening the perceived male position in intercourse, the use of a false penis represented the locus of utmost concern to clerical authors. However, while Murray argues that "female sexuality was not taken seriously except insofar as it threatened male privilege or the natural hierarchy of the genders,"[16] the texts remain critical, albeit less so, of lesbian sex acts bereft of phallic presence.

Nonetheless, despite the largely condemnatory nature of religious texts, medieval beliefs surrounding homosexual identity remain a contested site of scholarly investigation. The obscure nature of medieval gender stimulates a lack of clarity when evaluating the "general" consensus of premodern Christian European culture toward homosexuality. Bennett cites the diversity of scholarly interpretations that consider medieval gender: "some scholars argue that there was just one (male) gender in the Middle Ages (most women were defective males); others argue that a two-gender binary rigidly separated women and men; and still others argue that medieval people played readily with ideas about intermediate genders or third sexes."[17] Furthering this point, James Schultz claims that medieval

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[11] Jeffrey Richards, "Homosexuals," in *Sex, Dissidence, and Damnation: Minority Groups in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1994), 135.

[12] Murray, "Twice Marginal," 197.

[13] Murray, 197.

[14] Murray, 199.

[15] E. Ann Matter, "My Sister, My Spouse: Woman-Identified Women in Medieval Christianity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2, no. 2 (1986): 90.

[16] Murray, 199.

[17] Bennett, "Remembering Elizabeth," 137–138.

people did not even have a concept of heterosexuality against which to contrast any "alternative" sexualities.[18]

While it is unclear what the general population's attitude may have been toward lesbian and lesbian-like behavior in the Middle Ages, it nonetheless remained largely condemned by clerical authors. Existing in this religious space, the female mystical experience could offer a socially acceptable means by which to transcend these potential boundaries dictating sexuality and gender. Although clerical male authors criticized women's "divergent" non-procreative behavior, the possibilities of Christian mystical interaction undermined such strict limitations. Viewing the divine as a gender-diverse figure, medieval female Christian mystics "queered" their religious experiences, evolving through various sexualities and gender designations in an attempt to achieve a holy elevation.

The writings in Middle Dutch of thirteenth-century Beguine Hadewijch reflect this diversely gendered and sexual self, desiring a union with a complex, multi-gendered divine body. Throughout her visions, poetry, and letters, Hadewijch often seeks to "court" Minne, the Middle Dutch word for love personified as a female figure. The boundaries between Hadewijch and this personified Minne are obscure: at times indistinguishable from God, a mortal woman, or Hadewijch herself.[19] Hadewijch upholds the obscure interchangeability of this figure in her poem *Were I But in Love*, in which she merges with Minne into a dual yet simultaneously singular identity:

> Be you, Love, my Beloved;
> You gave yourself as Love for your loved one's sake,
> And thus you, Love, uplifted me, your loved one, with you!
>
> O Love, were I but love,
> And could I but love you, Love, with love!
> O Love, for love's sake, grant that I,
> Having become love, may know Love wholly as Love![20]

When speaking to her beloved, Hadewijch simultaneously desires to use love to "become love" and "love you, Love, with Love," complicating a bodily and spiritual separation between herself and the object of affection. The oneness Hadewijch achieves with Minne deconstructs boundaries between the self and the divine, subsuming the mystic within the body of the worshipped. Considering the female nature of Minne, Hadewijch's ambition to love Love can be seen as both autoerotic and homoerotic. Externally seeking the affection of a female form, Hadewijch also seeks internally through the recognition of herself within Minne. In a letter offering spiritual advice to a younger Beguine, Hadewijch offers spiritual community as an acceptable outlet for lesbian behavior and emotion:

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[18] James Schultz, "Heterosexuality as a Threat to Medieval Studies," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 15, no. 1 (2006): 14.

[19] Ulrike Wiethaus, "Female Homoerotic Discourse and Religion in Medieval Germanic Culture," in *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, ed. Sharon Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternack (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 291.

[20] Hadewijch, "Poems in Couplets: 15. Were I But in Love," in *Hadewijch: The Complete Works,* The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), lines 46–52.

> How unspeakably sweet Love makes me find her being and the gifts that come to me from her! Oh, I can refuse Love nothing! And you, can you wait for Love and withstand her, this Love that is said to conquer all things? O beloved, why has not Love sufficiently overwhelmed you and engulfed you in her abyss? Alas! when Love is so sweet, why do you not fall deep into her? And why do you not touch God deeply enough in the abyss of his Nature, which is so unfathomable? Sweet love, give yourself for Love's sake fully to God in love. Necessity requires it, for your not doing so is hurtful to us both; it is hurtful to you and too difficult for me.[21]

Acknowledging the blurred boundaries created between Hadewijch and Minne, the assertion that the young Beguine must "fall deep into" Love may suggest that through union with Minne, she will simultaneously grow closer to Hadewijch. The letter thus potentially offers insight into lesbian expressions of love through the lens of religiosity. Beyond an interpersonal female relationship, however, Hadewijch's mysticism stimulated a transgression of gender binaries. Although identifying herself within Minne, Hadewijch's conception of the figure neglects a wholly feminine nature. Rather, Minne is dually male and female, imbued with the Holy Spirit, the Father, and the Son simultaneously. In one of her visions, Hadewijch recounts a visitation by the Countenance of the Holy Spirit, who "possesses the Father and the Son in one Essence." However, the masculine Countenance reveals himself to simultaneously exist as the female Love when speaking to Hadewijch:

> With regard to all things, know what I, Love, am in them! And when you fully bring me your self, as pure humanity in myself, through all the ways of perfect Love, you shall have fruition of me as the Love who I am. Until that day, you shall love what I, Love, am. And then you will be love, as I am Love. [...] In my unity, you have received me and I have received you. Go forth, and live what I am; and return bringing me full divinity, and have fruition of me as who I am.[22]

The otherwise male Countenance of the Holy Spirit denies a singular gender identity, imbued with the female essence of Love in total "unity." The Spirit instructs Hadewijch to mirror these "ways of perfect Love," an emulation of the female that will allow her to receive this masculine/feminine body. Further, as Hadewijch unites with Christ, a diverse gender union generates a decimation of self where gender is irrelevant:

> I lost that manly beauty outwardly in the sight of his form. I saw him completely come to nought and so fade and all at once dissolve that I could no longer recognize or perceive him outside me, and I could no longer distinguish him within me. Then it was to me as if we were one without difference. [...] After that I remained in a passing away in my Beloved, so that I wholly melted away in him and nothing any longer remained to me of myself.[23]

Achieving a state of equality with the divine, Hadewijch dissolves into the male Christ's body in a spectacle of annihilation, becoming "one without difference." Melting away in "him," Hadewijch's dissolution of self generates a newly male yet simultaneously female gender identity, being "one without difference" in Christ.

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[21] Hadewijch, "Letter 5: False Brethren," 56.
[22] Hadewijch, "Visions: Who and What is Love," 272.
[23] Hadewijch, "Visions: Oneness in the Eucharist," 280.

Figure 1. *Illumination from the Lindsey Psalter [Christ inside a mandorla]*. Before 1222. Illumination on vellum. Large octavo, 25 x 35 cm. Burlington House (MS 59).

Pursuing this entrance into the divine, the female mystic found space to "queer" their religious experiences through interactions with Christ's side wound. The late medieval era's increasingly popular visualization of Christ's side wound in the manuscript tradition coincided with a rise in affective piety.[24] Focusing on the cultivation of a distinctly personal relationship with Christ, images of the side wound provided a realm within which the medieval reader could meditate upon and relate to his sufferings. These illustrations of the wound detached from Christ's body are particularly rich sites of contemplation when investigating the female mystic's "queer" interaction with the divine. Often displayed vertically, these depictions simultaneously evoke imagery of a mandorla (see Fig. 1) or a vulva. While scholars contest the wound's likeness to a vulva,[25]

[24] Vibeke Olson, "Penetrating the Void: Picturing the Wound in Christ's Side as a Performative Space," in *Wounds and Wound Repair in Medieval Culture*, ed. Larissa Tracy and Kelly DeVries (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 315.

[25] See: Amy Hollywood, "'That Glorious Slit,'" in *Luce Irigaray and Premodern Culture: Thresholds of History*, ed. Theresa Krier and Elizabeth Harvey (London: Routledge, 2004); Sophie Sexon, "Gender-Querying Christ's Wounds: A Non-Binary Interpretation of Christ's Body in Late Medieval Imagery," in *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography*, ed. Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt (Amsterdam University Press, 2021); Martha Easton, "'Was It Good for You, Too?' Medieval Erotic Art and Its Audiences," *Different Visions: New Perspectives on Medieval Art* 1, no. 1 (2008); Michelle M. Sauer, "Queer Time and Lesbian Temporality in Medieval Women's Encounters with the Side Wound," in *Medieval Futurity: Essays for the Future of a Queer Medieval Studies*, ed. Will Rogers and Christopher Michael Roman, New Queer Medievalisms (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021).

the site of the wound as vulva allowed the female mystic to experience a "queer" religion, offering her a way to recognize herself in the predominately masculine Christian divine subject. Beyond its immediate vulvic similarity, the side wound found a further association with the vagina through medieval birthing girdles (see Figs. 2–3) and amulets. Carrying depictions of the wounds of Christ, women used these objects to ease pain in labor and menstruation by pressing the vellum closely against their skin.[26]

Figure 2. A life-size representation of Christ's Side Wound. Fifteenth century. Ink on parchment. British Library (Harley Roll T 11).

Figure 3. *Birth scroll with prayers and invocations to Saints Quiricus and Julitta*. Circa 1500. Vellum. Wellcome Collection (MS. 632).

Medieval ideologies surrounding blood, milk, and water stimulated this relationship between wound and birth. As Michelle Sauer claims, "the gospels report that when the side of Jesus was pierced at the crucifixion, both blood and water flowed forth. This echoes the water and the blood that issue with the birth of a child."[27] Analogizing the wound to the vagina through birthing imagery, medical beliefs further feminized Christ's body. Medieval concepts connecting blood to the female breast

[26] Sexon, "Gender-Querying Christ's Wounds," 140.

[27] Michelle M. Sauer, "Queer Time and Lesbian Temporality in Medieval Women's Encounters with the Side Wound," in *Medieval Futurity: Essays for the Future of a Queer Medieval Studies*, ed. Will Rogers and Christopher Michael Roman, New Queer Medievalisms (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 207.

emphasized the potentially feminine nature of Christ's bleeding wound: the popular late thirteenth–early fourteenth-century treatise *Women's Secrets* argued "that breast milk is created from surplus menses not released during childbirth."[28] These aspects of the female in the masculine Christ's body rejected a vision of the divine as a wholly masculine figure, encompassing both binary genders simultaneously. For the female mystic, the opening of Christ's wound could thus offer an entrance through which she could unite with the divine, upholding a possibility for oneness.

Figure 4. *The Measure of the Side Wound and the Body of Christ.*
Circa 1484/1492. Hand-colored woodcut on paper. 12 x 8.1 cm. National Gallery of Art (1943.3.831).

[28] Sauer, "Queer Time," 208; Hollywood, "'That Glorious Slit,'" 119.

Representations of the detached side wound stimulated an intimately personal relationship between the worshiper and the physical body of Christ, often purporting to match the actual size of the wound.[29] This focus on recreating reality through visual illustration emphasized the possibilities of medieval affective piety through the book, upholding a real connection between the reader and the represented image. Sauer attests to the importance of the medieval user's "sensory engagement" with the manuscript, contending that "the book was therefore seen as alive to many medieval users, and by extension any likeness that was placed on its surfaces. To a certain extent, then, touching an image of Christ was akin to touching a proxy of his body."[30] The manuscript's inherently performative space thus demanded the reader's tactile interaction, with touch serving as the path to cross from the secular into the sacred. Sophie Sexon maintains that "the haptic is evoked when viewing images in which Christ's finger points to his wound, asking the viewer to consider how that suffering body is similar to their own suffering body. The image erases the opposition between subject and object by pointing out the similarities between Christ's humanity and the humanity of the viewer."[31] Following this disintegration of boundaries between Christ and worshiper, a fifteenth-century woodcut (Fig. 4) upholds physical engagement as a key means of affective piety, instructing viewers to touch the image of the wound.[32] On the left banderole, the text clarifies the specifics of this touch: "This is the length and width of Christ's wound which was pierced in his side on the Cross. Whoever kisses this wound with remorse and sorrow, also with devotion, will have as often as he does this, seven years indulgence from Pope Innocent."[33] The text on the right banderole reiterates the necessity of kissing specifically: "This little cross standing in Christ's wound measured 40 times makes the length of Christ in his humanity. Whoever kisses it with devotion shall be protected from sudden death or misfortune."[34]

The fifteenth-century Loftie Hours (Fig. 5) reveal a medieval user's similar physical dedication to engagement with Christ's wounds. While a majority of the Loftie Hours' illuminations reflect no signs of tactile interaction,[35] Christ's wounds on fol. 110v demonstrate a history of unique physical attention. Standing out from the rest of the manuscript, the lower two wounds on the page are eroded and less vibrant, suggesting that they have "been touched or kissed in a way that has resulted in abrasion of the pigment."[36] Sophie Sexon affirms that "no other illustrations in the manuscript, including those of Christ's body and face, have been touched quite so fervently," singling out the wounds "as objects of adoration [...] worthy of attention that other body parts do not merit."[37] The slit's detached nature further marks it as the site of special attention. The wound is designed to

[29] Hollywood, "'That Glorious Slit,'" 113.
[30] Sauer, "Queer Time," 210.
[31] Sexon, "Gender-Querying," 147.
[32] Hollywood, "'That Glorious Slit,'" 117.
[33] Peter W. Parshall and Rainer Schoch, *Origins of European Printmaking: Fifteenth-century Woodcuts and Their Public* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2005), 259. https://archive.org/details/originsofeuropea0000pars/page/258/mode/2up.
[34] Parshall and Schoch, *Origins of European Printmaking*, 259.
[35] Sexon, "Gender-Querying," 147.
[36] Sexon, "Gender-Querying," 147.
[37] Sexon, "Gender-Querying," 147.

stimulate an affective experience, directing the reader to intimately connect with the body of Christ through touch. As a literal opening or slit, the wound represented an entrance through which the worshiper could directly relate to Christ, a portal to become "one" with his sufferings. The emotional purpose of this experience is directly displayed through Figs. 6 and 7, inserting a depiction of the Sacred Heart, largely associated with the Passion,[38] in the wound's opening.

Figure 5. *Leaf from Loftie Hours: Five Wounds of Christ*.
Mid-fifteenth century. Parchment. 9.5 x 14.5 cm. The Walters Art Museum (W.165.110V).

The tactile engagement with the vulvic wound, Amy Hollywood argues, may suggest a homoerotic relationship for the female Christian reader.[39] However, although representing a potentially erotic

[38] Sauer, "Queer Time," 202.
[39] Hollywood, "'That Glorious Slit,'" 117.

interaction with a feminine form, this affective piety denied a solely lesbian expression, as Christ remained simultaneously masculine. While the vulvic wound could serve as an entrance for the female mystic, Hollywood maintains that Christ's body still existed across gender binaries:

> The radicality of medieval devotional practices [...] refuse any absolute identification between masculinity and penetration or between femininity and penetrability. The very mode of reading implied by medieval devotional texts and images, with their constantly interpenetrating biblical, extrabiblical, and liturgical citations, suggests the ubiquity of an erotics of penetration within medieval spiritual traditions. The fluidity of sexual difference may be, at least in part, an outcome of such reading practices.[40]

Figure 6 (left). *The Side Wound of Christ.* 1480–1490. Tempera colors and gold leaf. 11.9 × 17 cm. Getty Museum (MS 101, fol. 105v).

Figure 7 (right). *Heures d'Isabelle Stuart, duchesse de Bretagne, fol. 410.* 1401–1500. Ink and gold on parchment. 25 x 18.3 cm. Bibliothèque François-Mitterrand (Latin 1369).

In her *Revelations of Divine Love*, fourteenth-century anchoress Julian of Norwich follows in a diversely gendered "eroticization and maternalization" of Christ as man and woman, imagining his form through the terms of both mother and lover.[41] Upholding his outwardly male figure, Julian nonetheless subverts a purely masculine identity through reference to Christ in the feminine:

[40] Hollywood, "'That Glorious,'" 121.
[41] Sauer, "Queer Time," 208.

> Jesus Christ who does good in return for evil is our true mother; we have our being from him where the ground of motherhood begins [...] As truly as God is our father, so truly is God our mother; and he revealed that in everything, and especially in those sweet words where he says: 'It is I', that is to say: 'It is I: the power and the goodness of fatherhood. It is I: the wisdom and the kindness of motherhood [...] It is I: the Trinity. It is I: the unity [...] It is I: the endless fulfillment of all true desires.[42]

Recognizing Christ to be "our true mother," Julian imbues the divine with a dual male and female existence, defining God as both "the kindness of motherhood" and the opposing "goodness of fatherhood." To Julian, God and Jesus represent one being, inseparable within "the unity" of the Trinity. Simultaneously masculine and feminine, Christ's gender duality serves to reflect the all-encompassing nature of the divine, negating a binary separation for the expression of a "unity" that offers "the endless fulfillment of all true desires." Further, meditating upon Christ's side wound, Julian upholds medieval associations between vagina, blood, and breast, imaging the slit as a distinctly female form: "Jesus is our true mother, feeding us not with milk but with himself, opening his side to us and claiming all our love."[43] Wound becomes breast in Julian's *Revelations*, a source where one can receive holy sustenance as a child receives milk from a mother.

Expanding on Julian's visions, some female mystics regarded the wound as a space of refuge for the body and soul. Martha Easton claims that the wound acted as "an entrance into and exit from the body, the devotional contemplation of which led to a kind of swallowing and engulfing, all-encompassing experience, the liminal zone from which the Church is literally born."[44] Through their testimonies, the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century saints Angela of Foligno and Catherine of Siena describe "engulfing" experiences with the wound, considering it to be a destination of union with God. Specifically focusing on the consumption of Christ's body, their visions illustrate moments in which Christ directs them to drink his blood and subsequently take rest inside his wound. Angela recounts the enlightening and "cleansing" consolation of drinking the blood from Christ's side:

> He did say unto me, 'Put thy mouth into the wound in My side.' Then me thought that I did put it there and did drink the blood which was running freshly from out of His side, and in the doing of this it was given me to know that I was cleansed. And here I did begin to receive great consolation. [...] I did pray the Lord that He would cause my blood to be shed and poured out for His love's sake, as His had been shed for me, and I did desire that for His love all my members should suffer affliction and death, more vile and more bitter than His Passion.[45]

Although diverging from Angela's desire to directly replicate the sufferings of Christ and "His Passion," several scenes from Catherine of Siena's hagiography similarly display the saint consuming the blood of Christ. In one such moment, Catherine evokes Julian of Norwich and her associations

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[42] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Barry Windeatt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 128.

[43] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine,* 130.

[44] Easton, "'Was It Good,'" 3–4.

[45] Angela of Foligno, *The Book of Divine Consolation of the Blessed Angela of Foligno*, trans. Mary G. Steegmann (London: Chatto and Windus, 1909), 8. https://archive.org/details/BookOfDivineConsolation/page/n287/mode/2up.

between blood and breast, using a metaphor to liken her consumption of Christ's blood to a child sucking on a mother's breast:

> Do you know what the Lord did to my soul that day? He behaved like a mother with her favourite child. She will show it the breast, but hold it away from it until it cries; as soon as it begins to cry, she will laugh for a while and clasp it to her and, covering it with kisses, delightedly give it her full breast. So the Lord behaved with me [...] He showed me His most sacred side from afar, and I cried from the intensity of my longing to put my lips to the sacred wound. [...] He came up to me, clasped my soul in His arms, and put my mouth to where His most sacred wound [...] the wound in His side. [...] my soul entered right into that wound, and found such sweetness and such knowledge of the Divinity there that if you could ever appreciate it you would marvel that my heart did not break, and wonder however I managed to go on living in such an excess of ardour and love.[46]

Catherine's comparison of Christ to a teasing mother further establishes a divine femininity, blurring distinctions between the Virgin Mother and the Son. Recognizing the intertwined associations between blood, breast, and vulva, women's experiences with the wound may uphold an erotic sentiment. Catherine and Angela's interactions with Christ similarly evoke consumption, directed to "feed" on or "drink" the material body of Christ. This material interaction, however, fulfills an intensely spiritual purpose, following in the mystic's goal to become one with the divine. As Easton asserts, the wound's structured opening evokes "medieval theories of sight as penetration,"[47] thus enabling the female mystic to "penetrate" inside of Christ through material interaction. Entering a simultaneously masculine and feminine body, these exchanges with and inside of the wound allowed a heteronormative expression of potentially homosexual longing, seeking union with a male figure through his female aspects.

However, once inside the wound, the female mystic rejected designation by any categories of gender, instead inhabiting the all-encompassing nature of divine form. Julian of Norwich and Hadewijch both express an ambition to achieve self-annihilation at the hands of divine experience. Julian's assertion, "until I am of one substance with him I can never have complete rest nor true happiness; that is to say, until I am so joined to him that there is no created thing between my God and me,"[48] mirrors the statement by Hadewijch that "I desired that his Humanity should to the fullest extent be one in fruition with my humanity [...] and that for me he should be all that he is, without withholding anything from me."[49] Aligning one's humanity with God so closely that "no created thing" may exist between oneself and the sacred generates self-decimation and simultaneous renewal at the hands of the mystical vision. Rejecting human categories for a divine state of dual-gender-oneness, the female mystic is no longer bound by any gendered or sexual degrees of separation when in union with God. The wound's momentarily vulvic portal thus transfers the mystic to the divine intersection of a non-binary, queer mandorla. Illustrating the convergence of heaven and earth, the wound's

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[46] Blessed Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, trans. George Lamb (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 2011), 173. https://archive.org/details/lifeofstcatherin0000raym/page/n10/mode/1up.

[47] Caroline Walker Bynum, "Interrogating 'Likeness,'" *Historische Anthropologie* 28, no. 1 (2020): 37.

[48] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine*, 145.

[49] Hadewijch, "Visions: Oneness in the Eucharist," 280.

mandorla-like imagery may represent the unity that exists between and across gender binaries. Simultaneously vulva and mandorla, the wound is feminine, masculine, and gender-neutral.

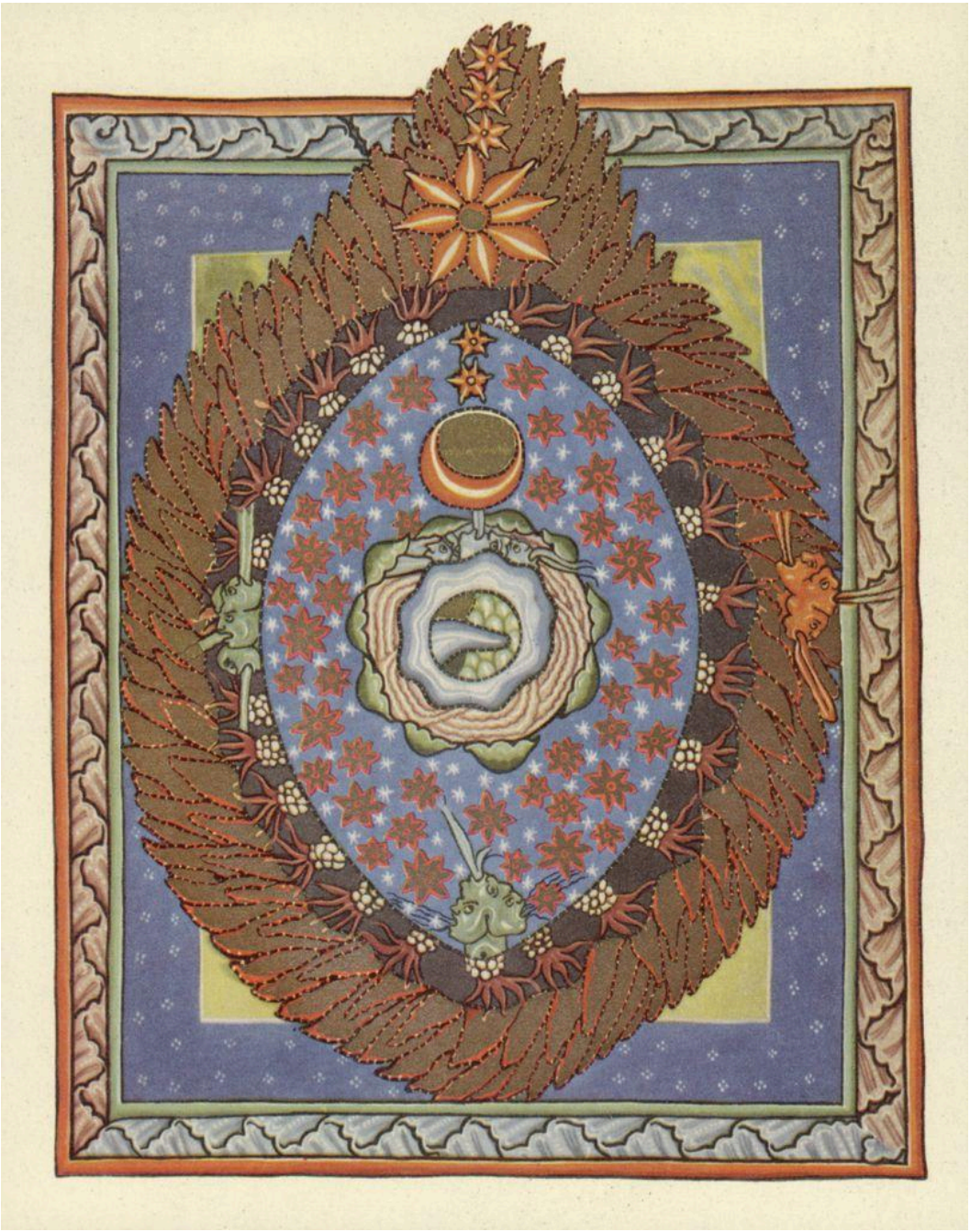

Figure 8. Hildegard of Bingen. *Liber Scivias, fol. 14r.*–79. JSTOR (5Dk.193).

The potentially engulfing nature of the mandorla shape is seen through Hildegard von Bingen's illustration "The Universe" in her visionary text *Scivias* or *Sci vias Domini*. Mirroring the traditional models of the mandorla and Christ's side wound, Hildegard's vision of this fiery "cosmic egg"

represents "the universe as a symbolic, layered structure in which God sustains powerfully contesting forces in a delicate balance."[50] Upholding the totality of divine existence, the image evokes both mandorla and wound imagery, locating the completeness of the universe inside an almond-shaped symbol.

Aspiring to mirror the diverse, cross-boundary nature of the divine, female Christian mystics effectively "queered" their religion, embodying alternative constructions of piety in order to exist across binaries of sexuality and gender. While Hadewijch's visions, letters, and poetry deconstruct boundaries between the worshiper and the divine subject, female interactions with the wound-mandorla similarly transgress limitations of gender and sexuality. Often courting female divine forms or interacting with feminized expressions of Christ's body, women's mysticism created an outlet for lesbian expression through religious sentiment. Touching Christ and being one with him in all of his femininity and masculinity, the mystic further "queered" their religious expression, desiring to become the dually gendered form of Christ through their love for him. Although the general beliefs surrounding medieval lesbian identity and gender remain a site of scholarly debate, the female mystics' elevation past potential societal limits nonetheless stands as a subversive and "queer" act. Negating a singular gendered or sexual identity, female mystics opposed the existing clerical condemnation of lesbian existence. Interacting with the feminine divine under a heterosexual pretense, the female mystic could "queer" their divine experiences and express love for the female form in the guise of man. Further, their piety "queered" gender expression, remaining malleable through union with God. Heterosexual and homosexual, female and male, the mystic upheld a diversely gendered and sexual body, uniting with God across spectrums of existence.

[50] Barbara Newman, introduction to *Scivias*, by Hildegard of Bingen, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 28.

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