Genders, Bodies, Borders: Technologies of the Visible

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HISTORY AS A PROBLEM OF WOMEN’S HISTORY

As the senses of sight and touch separated with the industrial mapping of the body in the nineteenth century, the visible and the visualized aligned themselves in medical, scientific, and sexological discourses; even history claimed to make the past “visible.” The criteria of the visible came to mark modernity. Cultural studies of visualization technologies help us to understand history itself as sign of the modern and to join its desires for the visible to those desires for spectacle produced among observers of visualizing media (such as the diorama, photography, moving pictures) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹

Over the past twenty years women’s history has proclaimed its desire to render historical women visible. If women’s history acknowledges (as I believe a discursive critique of history requires us to) that such a desire is implicated in the knowledge-power of visualization technologies, then it produces a dilemma for itself. The rich interest in writing a history of medieval women mystics can serve as an example of this. Much recent work in medieval women’s history has focused on women mystics in an avowed effort to rewrite a traditional historiography whose contempt and fear of these women’s bodily practices had rendered them “invisible.” Such studies have tended to take for granted its organizing category “medieval women mystics” without questioning how its terms came to be generated and concatenated. An understanding of how the word “mystic” emerged in usage from the adjective “mystical” suggests, in fact, a contest over the very engendering of what counts as visible at different historical moments.² The engendering of the visible thus becomes a historical problem for women’s history.

This essay accepts the dilemma that the desire to make historical women visible is both an effect of modern visualizing technologies and also a possibility for

¹ This first citation gestures towards an abundant and discursive literature on modernity and its visualizations. My practice here and throughout is to cite those works which have been most important in guiding my thoughts for this essay. For a critique of history as a sign of the modern see Nicholas B. Dirks, “History as a Sign of the Modern,” Public Culture 2 (1990), 25–32; also Jonathan Crary, Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century (Cambridge, Mass., 1990); Barbara Duden, The Woman beneath the Skin: A Doctor’s Patients in Eighteenth-Century Germany (Cambridge, Mass., 1991); Bruno Latour, “Visualization and Cognition,” in Knowledge and Society 6 (1986), 1–40; Michel Foucault, “The Political Technology of Individuals,” in Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault, ed. L. Martin, H. Gutman, and P. Hutton (London, 1988); Jane Gallop, Thinking through the Body (New York, 1988); Barbara Maria Stafford, Body Criticism: Imagining the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine (Cambridge, Mass., 1991).


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their resignification. It works with the dilemma by articulating it through a reading of an important book that has become emblematic both within and beyond medieval studies, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* by Caroline Walker Bynum. My reading is an "infra-reflexive" one, meaning that it seeks to display the work of achieving a narrative of visibility at the same time that it dislocates that work to other locations: the past into the present and contemporary academic authority into the past. Such a reading distributes itself discursively—in this case—across medieval history, contemporary critical theories, especially feminist and postcolonial, and cultural studies of visualization.

Since its publication in 1987 *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* has become a required text in courses on medieval women's history and often appears as the one medieval selection in surveys of gender studies. This book, about "woman as body and as food," can be read for problems concerning the production of gendered knowledge in history today. How can we write these histories such that in making women "visible" we do not blind ourselves to the historical processes that defined, redefined, and engendered the status of the visible and the invisible?

The rhetoric of the text can provide clues to its own engendering, to the historical processes it renders invisible in order to make some category visible. I argue that in making medieval women mystics visible, the rhetoric of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* renders invisible the problems of engendering the medieval category of *Christianitas*. The engendering of both categories was fearfully connected, and that connection needs to be rearticulated; otherwise, making medieval women mystics visible simply reproduces Europe as a category in its medieval guise of *Christianitas*: "No Europeanist should ignore the once and future global production of 'Europe'."

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3 The book is the first in the series *The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1987). (I will refer to *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* as *HFFH* in parenthetical citations.) Readers should please note that I occasionally use the word "gender" in the plural in this article. This intended inconsistency invites us to think of gender as both a performed and a historically constrained construction exceeding the binary of sexual difference as it has been dominantly defined. If we allow for only two genders, we displace sexual difference into a discussion of gender. My reading in this essay concentrates on an engendering of historiography. A future reading is needed to untangle the sexualizing of historiography. The two fields are not commensurate; the ways they intersect cannot be known in advance.


CULTURAL CONCEPTS AND THE GENDER OF NARRATIVES

Bynum elaborates an anthropology of symbol and ritual and a social psychology of sexual development in order to explore the bodily practices, especially food practices, of medieval women mystics. Only a single reference to works critical of ahistorical and essentialist aspects of social-psychological theories of sexual development gives a hint of the contest over gender in Holy Feast and Holy Fast. Bynum largely dismisses feminist scholarship in the first chapter as “presentist” and evades a feminist concern (already in evidence by the mid-1980s) that the humanities have produced gendered forms of knowledge. Bynum claims instead a methodology with guaranteed access to medieval women’s experience: “the women themselves . . . generate questions as well as answers” (HFHF, p. 30). There is now increasing question—and not only among fem-


8 Bynum does mention the theoretical work of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva sympathetically in nn. 35 and 41, pp. 416–17, after prefacing her remarks that “French feminist writing has been determinedly atheistical . . .” For a study that brings Bynum and Kristeva together and extends them critically, see Karma Lochrie, Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh (Philadelphia, 1991). Important work criticizing the gendered production of knowledge was available when Bynum wrote Holy Feast and Holy Fast. She cites Scott’s article “Gender,” in which Scott cautioned historians that the production of historical knowledge was itself gendered and calls for an alliance between women’s history and critical theory to begin to question how rhetorical practices in history used gender as a resource and produced gender as an effect: “it requires analysis not only of the relations between male and female experience in the past but also the connection between past history and current
inists—about whether it is possible to capture the experience of people of the past in this way. Concern over the use of experience as well as the use of gender and race to organize disciplinary knowledge has only heightened since the mid-1980s.

Over the past two decades feminists have worked to formulate critical ways of understanding both historical and contemporary constructions of gender; such tools facilitate insights into ways in which notions of gender implicit in Holy Feast and Holy Fast rhetorically organize the text. Such tools also create possibilities for writing histories of medieval gender capable of historicizing gender in relation to other engendered categories given as "natural" in medieval discourses and hitherto taken for granted by historians. Critical studies of medieval gender would use these tools to work simultaneously as histories of other foundational categories imagined in the invention of Europe, especially "Christendom" (Christianitas), Corpus Christi, and the Jew (as an anti-Semitic category), as they defined and redefined relations of the masculine and feminine.

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historical practice. . . . How does gender give meaning to the organization and perception of historical knowledge?" (p. 1055). Perhaps the most famous and widely known critique of the gendered production of knowledge dating to the period of the writing and publication of Holy Feast and Holy Fast would be Evelyn Fox Keller, Reflections on Gender and Science (New Haven, 1985).

9 For different aspects of this debate see recent issues (1991) of Critical Inquiry, especially relevant is Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," Critical Inquiry 17 (Summer 1991), 773–97. Dominick LaCapra comments on the problem of "voices"—past and present—in essays collected in his History and Criticism (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985); I have found these words of caution very helpful: "The archive as fetish is a literal substitute for the 'reality' of the past which is 'always already' lost for the historian. When it is fetishized, the archive is more than the repository of traces of the past which may be used in its inferential reconstruction. It is a stand-in for the past that brings the mystified experience of the thing itself—an experience that is always open to question when one deals with writing and other inscriptions" (p. 92). Recent critical work on postorientalist history deeply troubles conventional uses of "experience" as a historical category: Gyan Prakash, "Can the 'Subaltern' Ride? A Reply to O'Hanlon and Washbrook," Comparative Studies in Society and History 34 (1992), 168–84; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives," History and Theory 24 (1985), 247–72; Michel de Certeau, The Writing of History (New York, 1988).

10 During the mid-1980s scholars of color and gay scholars called upon academic feminism to grapple with its differences (racial, sexual, class). The citations can only gesture toward the literature that challenged academic feminism and women's history in the mid-1980s as Holy Feast and Holy Fast went to press. For historical crosshatching of the debates see Jane Gallop, Around 1981: Academic Feminist Literary Theory (New York, 1992). My citations are selective, since this essay is not intended as a review of medieval women's history or of critical feminist theory. For an example of the growing critique of academic feminism for its racism see This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York, 1983)—awarded the Before Columbus Foundation American Book award in 1986; for an articulation of feminist theory in an internationalist frame, another pressing concern of the 1980s, see Spivak, In Other Worlds (for a recent criticism of a widely read essay in the Spivak anthology see Silvia Tandeciarz, "Reading Gayatri Spivak's 'French Feminism in an International Frame': A Problem of Theory," Genders 10 [Spring 1991], 75–91). The critique of the presumption of heterosexuality's organization of theories of sexual difference grew more vocal in the mid-1980s; for example, see Teresa de Lauretis, "Feminist Studies/Critical Studies: Issues, Terms and Contexts," Feminist Studies/Critical Studies, ed. de Lauretis (Bloomington, 1986), pp. 1–19; see also de Lauretis, "The Female Body and Heterosexual Presumption," Semiotica 67 (1987), 257–59.

11 In spite of complex and subtle debates over medieval Christendom, scholars have not questioned
To neglect the intersections of gender and ethnic identities with the historical formation of other medieval foundational categories is to run the risk of continuing to write histories of gender that inadvertently use gender and ethnic identities as a resource for producing "Europe" as the referent of history.

At this juncture I need to elaborate upon my understanding of gender as it will come into play in my reading of Holy Feast and Holy Fast. I use gender as a theory of borders that enables us to talk about the historical construction and maintenance of sexual boundaries, both intra- and intercorporeal, through powerful historical processes of repetition and containment. Gendered notions of both the topography and the sex of corporeal interiority and exteriority have varied historically (we need only think of the variations of medieval Galenism), as have the ways in which genders are distributed across discourses, institutions, cultures, or any such unitary, bounded categories invented by historical subjects to contain gender and naturalize it. Theories of gender, therefore, need to be histories simultaneously of corporeal interiority and of exteriority: sex, flesh, body, race, nature, discourse, and culture. It is not possible to write a history of gender that takes any of these categories as given in advance, assumed as "natural"; otherwise the study would end up reinscribing the asymmetries and/or hierarchies of historical genders rather than understanding how gender is a historically variable effect of maintaining unitary categories for the purposes of "naturalizing" sexual difference. To subject the body and sex to critique does not negate them; rather it opens them up as sites of historical and political debate.\footnote{Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of the 'Postmodern,'" in Feminists Theorize the Political, pp. 3–21.}

Such a critical understanding of gender can help us to understand how foundational categories implicit in Holy Feast and Holy Fast, especially "culture" and "Christendom," work to prevent the text both from rhetorically articulating identity and difference, especially with regard to its metaphor of the maternal, and from acknowledging the interplay of transference and empathy between the coconstruction of this category with medieval genders. For a synthetic discussion of how medieval Europeans used the word "Christendom" (Christianitas) see John Van Engen, "The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem," American Historical Review 91 (1986), 519–52. Van Engen notes that the scholar Raoul Manselli traced the origin of the concept to a "self-conscious, defensive reaction to Islam" (p. 539), but he drops the issue of the mutual construction of Islam, Judaism, and Christendom in the article. The failure to look at these contructions relationally in an article self-conscious of complexity within Christendom shows the abiding cultural domination of a unitary notion of this category. We can look to theoretical tools developed by African-American feminist theorists, notably Hortense Spillers, to help us to understand the historical ways in which cultural wholes are engendered through the exclusion and exteriorizing of the "other(s)" which exist outside, but in relation to, a political and cultural interior. Through her study of the historical construction of gender in the juridical world of American slavery, Spillers has conceptualized the problem of discontinuous genders, that is, genders exterior to, but in relation with, dominant juridical-kinship systems. Such systems typically conserve a notion of interiority, which is a notion of purity, by constructing a racial exterior. That exterior is also the cultural space where other excluded cultural "others" get located. Medievalists can usefully learn from this work and begin studying the problem of discontinuities of European genders produced juridically by medieval societies: Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Diacritics 17 (1987).
historian, historical subjects, and feminist theory. Bynum questions and revises the cultural anthropology of Victor Turner in her study, but she takes for granted his structurally inspired and implicitly foundational conception of culture. A history of the structuralist influence on the conception of culture in anthropology is a long and complex one; here suffice it to say that this conception, which is both historical and gendered, has come to mean something natural: "a coherent body that lives and dies. Culture is enduring, traditional, structural (rather than contingent, syncretic, historical). Culture is a process of ordering, not of disruption."

Such a theory of culture assumes boundaries rather than questions their historical formation. It tends to posit culture as an organic plentitude and to analyze it as a bounded object, thereby reinforcing unexamined notions of inside and outside. The constitution of such a bounded object of study (whatever its internal complexity) then requires a complementary conception of liminality (developed by Turner) as a process for mediating the inside and outside. Conceived as such, this notion of culture has avoided the study of the visualization processes historically at work in the production of the conception of culture as well as analysis of historical relations between the imaginary wholes of such posited cultures. The theory of liminality thus works to mystify the problems of the historical construction of interiority and exteriority. In a close reading of Turner's famous essay on Ndembu shamans, Michael Taussig has shown how its rhetoric engages liminality, not only in the narrative description of shamanistic practices, but in the overall flow of argument as well. Such liminal rhetoric, rather than marking a gap or tension between the magic under study and the act of writing, appropriates Ndembu magic in the service of the European observer. Turner thus writes as a shaman, and his ethnography becomes a form of magic.

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13 For a discussion of the problems of "empathy" and "transference" see LaCapra, "Is Everyone a Mentalité Case? Transference and the 'Culture' Concept," in History and Criticism, pp. 71–94: "Transference implies that the considerations at issue in the object of study are always repeated with variations—or find their displaced analogues—in one's account of it, and transference is as much denied by an assertion of the total difference of the past as by its total identification with one's own 'self' or 'culture'" (p. 72).


15 See Clifford, The Predicament of Culture, p. 235. This historical conception of culture is, of course, under critique. Such criticism is the purpose of The Predicament of Culture; also important is Edward W. Said, "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors," Critical Inquiry 15 (Winter 1989), 205–25.

16 Taussig, "Homesickness," p. 151: "there is thus an intentional or unintentional usage of Frazer's
Once an anthropologist writes himself as a shaman, Taussig has observed, a rhetorical collapse usually occurs between the participant-observer (the anthropologist) and the subject-informant (the shaman): "the subject addressed and the addressing of the subject become one." This textual conflation of anthropologist and shaman punctuates a problem of marking difference in ethnographies informed by a bounded, unitary conception of culture. These ethnographies have promoted a kind of autocannibalism, in which representation consumes difference rather than producing it, in order to conserve the "primitive," grounded usually on the body of the female "primitive" (for the anthropologist) or the past (for the historian) as an imaginary, bounded, coherent entity. "Synchronous, bounded but contiguous, and representational"—this string of adjectives, coupled with the metaphor of culture as a body, can be exchanged, uncannily, with dominant representations of the maternal today.

Law of Sympathy, a magical usage, not only in the actual rite itself, but in its representations, by the anthropologist-writer mimetically engaging the flow of events described with the flow of his theoretical argument, to the benefit and empowerment of the latter. Not the least impressive about this magical mimesis is that instead of obviously magicalizing the connectedness that holds the argument together, it naturalizes those connections." This critique by Taussig is not a "modernist" one which denies an aspect of play or carnival in writing; rather it insists that such play, carnival, rely on the marking of the gap.


18 In an analysis of the rhetoric of a famous essay on symbols by Lévi-Strauss, in which he writes, among other things, that "the shaman provides the sick woman with a language, by means of which unexpressed and otherwise inexpressible psychic states can be immediately expressed." Taussig has demonstrated how the anthropologist provides the shaman with a language in order to give birth to a structure which authorizes the anthropologist: Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Effectiveness of Symbols," in his Structural Anthropology, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York, 1963), p. 198. This essay, dedicated to Raymond de Saussure, first appeared in 1949 in Revue de l'histoire des religions 135 (1949), 5–27. Taussig uses this citation in "Homesickness," p. 168. My analysis follows Taussig closely here. My criticisms of the cultural concept are situated in an extended literature of the postorientalist critique of culture, which views culture as a historically essentialized notion and would encourage instead a refiguring of the concept: "thus to see Others not as ontologically given but as historically constituted would be to erode the exclusivist biases we so often ascribe to cultures, our own not the least. Cultures may then be represented as zones of control or abandonment, of recollection and forgetting, of force of dependence, of exclusiveness of sharing . . . ." cited from Said, "Representing the Colonized," p. 255. This criticism of the conception of culture is also influenced by the following works: de Certeau, The Writing of History; Robert Young, White Mythologies: Writing History and the West (New York, 1990); Homi Bhabha, ed., Nation and Narration (New York, 1990); Dirks, "History as a Sign of the Modern," pp. 25–32; Timothy Mitchell, "Everyday Metaphors of Power," Theory and Society 19 (1990), 545–77, and his Colonising Egypt (New York, 1988).

19 I can cite no synthetic reference for the recent history of the critical studies of representations of fantasies of the maternal and theories of such fantasies. Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York, 1990), and Drucilla Cornell, Beyond Accommodation: Ethical Feminism, Deconstruction, and the Law (New York, 1991), both provide useful critiques of some chief theorists of the maternal, ranging from the social psychology school (Chodorow) to Lacanian-influenced theory (Kristeva). Kaja Silverman offers a study of how fantasies of the maternal are staged in films in her Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema (Bloomington, 1988); see also Mary Ann Doane, "Technophilia: Technology, Representation, and the Feminine," in Body/Politics: Women and the Discourse of Science, ed. Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Sally Shuttleworth (New York, 1990), pp. 163–76. The politics of rethinking the maternal is urgent, since
The rhetorical problems attached to such structuralist conceptions of culture trouble *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. Bynum transfers Turner’s anthropology to history, and in so doing, challenges his neglect of gender. She corrects Turner by adding women to his theory of liminality but fails to question the ahistorical frame of a cultural theory that could neglect gender so easily in the first place. By simply adding on to the frame without questioning it, Bynum encounters rhetorical problems similar to those already discussed for Turner. Just as in Turner’s work, readers of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* encounter the rhetorical collapse of the subject addressed and the addressing of the subject. The collapse occurs most dramatically in Bynum’s staging of the voices of female medieval mystics. The cultural unity in her study is not the “primitive,” such as Turner’s Ndembu, but a “past,” that is, medieval Christendom. To maintain this conception of cultural unity, a typical symptom of structuralism, Bynum must be careful to distance that past from the present. She attacks “presentism” (*HFHF*, p. 30; the statement of historical problems in terms of issues of pressing modern concerns) both in the introduction to the book and within its chapters.

The “subject addressed and the addressing of the subject” collapses most markedly in chapter 5, which is devoted to food in the writings of women mystics. This chapter first strikes a distance from “modern sensibilities” (*HFHF*, p. 152) that would read erotic metaphors in the writings of women mystics. According to Bynum, readers must listen to the “voices” (*HFHF*, p. 152) of these medieval women and not to their own voices. Once Bynum has established this distance in the opening pages of the chapter, she then shifts to “we,” a we of historian and reader. The prose preserves the “we” even when it stages the threat of a “modern” interpretation: “Her [Hedwigh’s] account of this meeting with God reads like a description of sexual orgasm (and it is only our modern sensibility that makes the suggestion a shocking one)” (*HFHF*, p. 156). As the chapter progresses, the “we” comes to include the historical subjects as well. Prose circumscribes the historian, the reader, and the mystic as a “we”: “Thus, to Hedwigh, the soul should strive not so much to rest in satiety as to suffer a deeper hunger beyond filling. For the truest satiety is the pain of desire; the truest repose is the horror of God’s power. And all we attain—fullness or hunger—is the gift of Love” (*HFHF*, p. 159).

Similar rhetorical devices are used to craft the story of Catherine of Genoa in the same chapter. Bynum chastises scholars who would wish to organize her biography “around turning points and into neat stages” (*HFHF*, p. 181), that is, according to stereotyped tropes of masculine moral development. Bynum then relates this important methodological issue in reading women’s biographies to a critique of “presentism.” By attaching a methodological concern to a critique of presentism, Bynum overdetermines it, but in so doing she manages to strike the distance needed between past and present. The distance, once taken, enables the “we” of the historian and reader to reassert itself. Collapse into the historical subject ensues: “Desire for God is hunger—insatiable hunger. The

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food that is God and the food that is neighbor are thus the nourishment we crave, inebriated yet unfilled” (HFHF, p. 183).

The sharp divisions of past and present required by the structuralist rhetoric of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* confront Bynum with the conundrum of establishing some means of relating to historical materials. A structuralist-like approach solves the dilemma by essentializing some human essence, in the case of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, “women” and “experience.” Because a structuralist rhetoric has precluded any historical connection of the present to the past, Bynum uses the maternal as the essence to forge a “natural” link. The requirements of the foundational categories implicit in the text thus reduce women to the maternal. The model of gender in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* assumes that gender is an essence that appears prior to other categories and informs them, that the feminine mirrors, indeed reduces to, the female reproductive function, that the female body is the originary, foundational site of gender. Just as Taussig noted that the ordering of a structuralist anthropology often occurs on the body of the female “primitive,” the ordering of a structural history in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* occurs on an ahistorical, imagined body of the maternal.

**READING THROUGH THE MATERNAL**

Reading through that essential, ahistorical maternal of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* posed challenges to its reviewers.20 Many expressed uneasiness about the gendering of knowledge in the text without being able to articulate critically the rhetorical reasons for their confusion.21 John Boswell, who wrote one of the earliest reviews, uncannily raised the question of shamanism. He asked how a reader could read the difference between a shaman and a saint, a distinction that he would use to separate Bynum’s book from a companion volume under his review, Rudolph M. Bell’s *Holy Anorexia*. According to Boswell, shamans are

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20 My thoughts here are inspired by Jane Gallop, who has emphasized the political importance of a postmodern engagement with “the anxiety produced by the absence of any certain access to the referent.” My argument here is that Bynum foretells that form of anxiety by using the maternal as a natural referent for the history of medieval women. This move creates anxieties of its own, but, I would argue, they are reductive rather than transformative anxieties: Jane Gallop, “The Body Politic,” in her *Thinking through the Body*, p. 96.

“natural”; they are sacred by virtue of innate characters that make them “different” from their surroundings. Saints, he contended, are holy through acts of will; by nature they are “not different.” Boswell’s struggle to distinguish shamanism can be read as an effort to disentangle the rhetorical collapse of saint, historian, and reader in Holy Feast and Holy Fast.

Other reviewers read anxiously, seemingly unable or unwilling to analyze its sources, whether from some unexamined revulsion towards the subject matter or from the compounded effects of a structuralist rhetoric that involves the reader in a kind of autocannibalism, a “consumption of otherness,” or both.\textsuperscript{22} Maurice Keen anxiously asked how the reader can digest the myriad descriptions of women mystics fasting or feasting on noxious substances. He then listed eight examples of the very descriptions that for him “can be testing to the strength of the stomach.” His ambivalence seemed, however, to be anticipated by Bynum, who alerts her readers to the contradictions they will encounter in reading her text: “If readers leave this book simply condemning the past as peculiar, I shall have failed” (HFHF, p. 9). Or, does her rhetoric succeed, since she claims that one reason she “repeatedly break[s] the flow by citing examples” is to “convince modern readers of the decidedly bizarre behavior of some medieval women” (HFHF, p. xv)?

The use of medieval Christendom as a unitary, bounded category in Holy Feast and Holy Fast also evoked anxiety. Some reviewers expressed their uneasiness indirectly by simply mentioning other cultures in a comparative vein. John Frecceiro interrupted his review to mention others outside the Christian tradition, namely, Simone Weil and Gandhi. Boswell noted more directly that Bynum never addresses the “interaction of food, gender, ethic and culture at the level of whole religious systems,” namely, medieval Islam and Judaism. His comments inspire the reader to wonder about historical and contemporary fantasies of medieval Christendom. How did the cultural construct of Christianitas establish its sense of unity, and, crucially, what does Christianitas have to do with the construction of gender?

A review by Jack Goody most directly articulated a criticism of the structuralist categories of the text. Goody pointed out that although Bynum writes with great insight about the polysemous nature of symbols in the past, she has little sympathy for their potential richness in the present. She and many of her sympathetic reviewers, who implicitly defend the structuralism of the book, regard the present as “impoverished.” Goody claims that such a judgment “represents only a partial view of the climate of opinion.” Goody also suggested that “culture” as used by Bynum is an effect of her structuralist approach and its effort to search for structures of thought that underlie not only “divergent expressions

\textsuperscript{22} Bynum offers protocols of reading. Metaphors of food preparation tempt me to suggest that her book is like food. She describes herself as holding a sieve and “sifting medieval experience,” like flour, through a “fine mesh” (HFHF, p. xv). Her book is also corporeal; it has a “heart” (HFHF, p. 279). I would argue that these reading protocols, suggestive of reading as eating, can also be traced to the structuralist frame of the book. We have seen (above, p. 395) how a structuralist notion of culture can result in a kind of “autocannibalism,” the consumption of otherness. These images also raise interesting questions about distinguishing cannibalism from communion.
of individuals, groups and societies, but humanity itself.” He cautioned that “doubts must remain about the universality of such an analysis, even within a culture, let alone among all the varied internal and national cultures and subcultures, even [emphasis mine] of Western Europe.” Goody’s comments invite us to pause. Although he does not go so far as to question the disciplinary frame of knowledge that produces such a foundational notion of culture, he at least introduces the notion of divided cultures, which can be extended to gender divided between the masculine and the feminine, to the past and present divided within itself, even to the divided empathy of the historian.23

No review I read directly questioned the ways in which Holy Feast and Holy Fast reduces women to the maternal function or challenged the historicity of such a reduction. The uneasiness of the reviewers about this central issue of the book translated itself instead into requests for more context. Ann Carmichael wondered how secular contexts of food practices that were not dominated by women, such as secular medical advice on eating and purging in dietetic treatises, related to the gendering of food practices central to the book’s thesis. Judith Brown found that the book failed to address a history of family life and child-rearing practices to justify its reliance on a model of mothering adopted from the work of Nancy Chodorow. This call to historicize maternity and nurture received the most extended attention in a review by Hester Goodenough Gelber in the Modern Language Quarterly. Gelber asked to see the arguments linked to changing practices of nursing and wet-nursing in medieval Europe, practices that varied by sex of the child, class, and region. Adding more context cannot, however, transform the essentialist move required by the structuralist frame of the text.24

The frame itself begs for transformation.25 As a dominant disciplinary practice, structuralism has historically sought to constrain and conventionalize gender to conform to social practices, especially practices of social reproduction, most notably of kinship. Once we grant anatomy a history, so that it ceases to be a foundational category, then historians and theorists need to think about how gender is performative, meaning that “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.”26 The performance of gender,

23 The notion of a divided empathy suggests that empathy traverses the path of transference.
24 My comments are restricted to rhetorical problems in Holy Feast and Holy Fast; I do not wish to imply here that the history of the construction of motherhood is not crucial. For an important historiographic step with helpful bibliography, see Clarissa W. Atkinson, The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages (Ithaca, N.Y., 1991).
25 For a critique of the call for more context see LaCapra, “Rhetoric and History,” in his History and Criticism, p. 19. My thoughts about framing are inspired by an essay by Jacques Derrida first translated in 1979 and then republished in 1987, the same year in which Holy Feast and Holy Fast appeared: Jacques Derrida, “‘The Parergon,’” October 9 (Summer 1979), 3–41; reissued in his Truth in Painting (Chicago, 1987), pp. 34–82: Derrida meditates on how a frame works as an “objectifying, representational essence, it is inside and outside, the criteria used in definition, the value attributed to the natural, and either secondarily or principally, the privileged position of the human body” (p. 22 of the October version).
26 Feminists theorize performance as a feminist practice and a way of undoing the “naturalized” links between anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. This theorizing offers ways
historical and contemporary, both enacts through repetition and challenges through the very impossibility of perfect repetition ("getting gender right") the rigid boundaries sanctioned between culturally constructed notions of "inside" and "outside" which make "culture" structurally possible. Such imperfect repetition of gender performance also both contains and questions the rigid divides between the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic, the spaces in which much structuralist-inspired theory imagines law, language, and sexual difference.

No foundational category can ever fully frame a text, however. There are always places where the differences within the category interrupt the desires to frame a unity, to argue from an essence. Once again, the reading practices of the reviewers of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* leave clues to gaps in the text. What do the reviewers overlook? What do they fail to mention? Of the reviews I read, none commented specifically on the thirty plates and frontispiece lavishly illustrating the text. Only Rita Copeland, in her *Speculum* review, praised Bynum for her ability to move "easily into visual discourses as well."27 Bynum, too, remains strangely silent about many of the plates. Although she deals explicitly with the problems of reading hagiographical material (*HFHF*, p. 5 and chap. 3), she does not discuss her methodology for reading iconographic evidence (*HFHF*, p. 81). She refers to the plates in only three places and reads them conventionally and presentistically for their content, as if visual images did not engender power-charged relations among visual communities, but only reflected them.28 A demand for a plate-by-plate exegesis, like the desire of some of the reviewers for more context for maternity, would not, however, resolve the problem of the plates in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. A reading of the patterns of selection of plates can render visible the foundational category of medieval Christendom invisibly at work in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. An infrareflexive reading of this

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27 Copeland, in *Speculum* 64 (1989), 144.

28 There is a discussion of iconographic evidence on p. 81 and mention of plates 1, 5, 7, 25, 26, 30: "Iconographic evidence also suggests that medieval people of both sexes associated food and fasting with women." On pp. 268 and 270–72 there is a discussion of the lactating Virgin and reference to plates 13–16 and 20–30. It seems that plates 2–4, 6, 8–12, 17–19 receive no mention. Michael Camille commented on the way the plates of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* are used simply as illustrations to back up textual arguments, rather than as semiotic objects in their own right that might not only reinforce, but contest and subvert, textual arguments, in a paper delivered at the conference "The Past and Future of Medieval Studies," University of Notre Dame, 1992, forthcoming in a book of that title edited by John Van Engen. In his book *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image-making in Medieval Art* (New York, 1989), Camille writes the following about medieval images, but the same could be said for their use as illustrations in current historical texts: "it [his book] also attempts to uncover realms of intervisuality and not just intertextual meanings, where images do not just 'reflect' texts innocently but often subvert and alter their meanings" (p. xxvii).
invisibility can begin to articulate the women the text makes visible with the fearful interconnections with invisibility.

**Engendering Christendom/Blood Libel**

Twenty out of thirty plates and the frontispiece of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* date from the period between 1450 and 1585. The majority of these late-medieval art works come from German and Netherlandish masters. The earlier illustrations depict works mostly by Italian masters of the fourteenth century. The plates thus mark temporal, regional, and institutional differences (some of the later material is for hospitals, convents, and cathedrals, institutions with different audiences). Rather than hold these contrasting regional, chronological, and institutional contexts in tension with the construction of gender, Bynum collapses such differences into sexual difference: “Indeed, recent scholarship suggests that differences between the sexes over-ride all other factors (such as chronology or social and economic status) in shaping women’s piety” (*HFHF*, p. 26). Attention to these differences, Bynum further asserts, have hitherto suppressed the study of correlations of eucharistic devotion with gender.29

Bynum calls this sexual difference “gender,” but for her gender carries the more restricted sense of “woman.” Even though chapter 4, “Food in the Lives of Women Saints,” is organized by region (Low Countries, France and Germany, Italy), the essentialized notion of gender reduces discussion of difference to sexual difference: “Despite the suggestion of recent scholars that the nature of female sanctity changed between 1200 and 1500 and displayed different patterns in north and south, the themes found in Low Country spirituality, from Mary of Oignies to Lidwina of Schiedam, echo throughout fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Europe” (*HFHF*, p. 129).

My reading starts with the gaps of regionality and chronology suggested by the assemblage of plates as a way into the breaches within the imaginary whole of Christendom. The blood that flows in the plates serves as the medium of my reading. This blood marks a crisis of exteriority and interiority in the construct of Christendom. The gaps and breaches through which blood could seep and about which Christians expressed great anxiety contest the historical formation of Christendom as a natural structure as well as the rhetorical practices that would perpetuate the study of gender uncritically within Christendom.30

29 “But historians have tended to correlate eucharistic concern with factors other than gender—for example, with religious order (particularly Cistercian or Dominican), with region (particularly the Low Countries or southern Germany), or with type of religious life (particularly monastic or anchoritic)” (*HFHF*, p. 75). Issues of region and audience are complicated by different patronage and distribution patterns in different art markets in the later fifteenth century. To begin exploring this problem see Lynn F. Jacobs, “The Marketing and Standardization of South Netherlandish Carved Altarpieces: Limits on the Role of the Patron,” *Art Bulletin* 71 (1989), 208–29.

30 A historical understanding of medieval European gender requires a study of how gender came to mark as “naturalized” borders of interiority and exteriority of the body, the community, the institutions that institute kinship. The outlines of this complex history, which produced Jews, homosexuals, prostitutes, lepers, and heretics as an exterior to the “natural” European sex-gender system, are delineated by R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western
Blood was a central food image to the medieval female mystics studied by Bynum, and the bleeding Christ forms the devotional matter of many of the plates. Blood also set the boundaries of marital exchange among medieval Christians; consanguinity measured exogamy and endogamy. Not surprisingly, as a religious symbol blood "was in general a more public and social symbol than bread, as well as a more ambivalent symbol" (HFH, p. 178). Difficult to control because of its fluidity, blood could seep through the boundaries of interiority and exteriority instituted by Christendom. It could mix among Christians and among those others constructed as exterior to Christendom: Jews, homosexuals, and prostitutes.

Anxieties about fluid boundaries began to surface in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Europe, as Europeans invented the unitary construct of Christendom. Christians began to fantasize intensely about blood libel, that is, the ritual murder and bleeding of Christians, usually Christian boys, by Jews, usually male. Christians also began to ascribe acts of ritual cannibalism and host desecration to Jews. By the thirteenth century in certain German territories of northern

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Europe, 950–1250 (London, 1987). In using the word "homosexuals" here I am not implying anachronistically a gay identity and lifestyle. For important discussion of how to talk about medieval gay people see the exchanges in the gay and lesbian issue of the Medieval Feminist Newsletter 13 (Spring 1992). Historians of gay history tell us that such an identity began to form historically in the nineteenth century; see John Boswell, Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century (Chicago, 1980). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offers a thoughtful and cogent analysis of the problem of speech acts in discussing histories of sexuality in her Epistemology of the Closet (Berkeley, 1990). For a brilliant study of how medical and theological discourses on medieval sexuality are intertwined see Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset, Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages, trans. Matthew Adamson (Princeton, 1988).

31 For discussion of blood in medieval medical treatises, especially menstrual blood, see Jacquart and Thomasset, Sexuality and Medicine.

Europe, eucharistic shrines began to appear at sites where Jews were massacred, and incidences of accusation and prosecution peaked in those areas over the late fifteenth century, the time and the provenance of many of the plates of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*.

Bynum cites the work of Lionel Rothkrug, who has listed known examples of German shrines erected at sites associated with anti-Semitic incidents, and she also recognizes the connection between eucharistic devotion and anti-Semitism (*HFHF*, p. 64). The word "Jews" and "anti-Semitism" are, however, overlooked in the index of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. Does this gap in the index help a reading of the gaps suggested by the pattern of the plates? I want to suggest that it is more than a coincidence that outbreaks of accusations of ritual cannibalism and host desecration peaked in the later fifteenth century in areas of Germany from which many of the plates have been chosen. The time and place of the plates thus mark what *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* cannot, for reasons of its structural frame, fully acknowledge, that is, the implications of the relations of anti-Semitism to eucharistic devotion. The book is thus condemned to repeat and reinscribe a fantastic moment of the European imaginary in its failure to include the excluded others in historical analysis. A historical study of medieval gender interrupts this foundational category of *Christianitas* by asking how a historical construction of gender in medieval Christendom was simultaneously a construction of other differences. I can briefly offer here two examples of such discursive conjuncture, where anti-Semitism, anxieties about blood and host desecration, and women mystics, the central subject of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, appear to converge. These two illustrations suggest some sense of the trouble of making "medieval women mystics" visible in our histories.

My first example asks us to consider an early accusation of ritual cannibalism made against medieval Jews. In 1235 thirty-four Jews of Fulda were killed for allegedly murdering five young Christian boys for their blood. The incident occurred during troubled political times in the Mainz region. The papacy had organized preaching against heretics and for the Crusades. Conrad of Marburg proved to be one of the most vigorous preachers in the region. Reputedly responsible for burning many heretics between 1231 and 1234, he even began to accuse important nobles of heresy. In a noted papal bull, *Vox in Rama* (June 1233), which heightened tensions, Gregory IX addressed the problem of eu-

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I borrow the term the "imaginary" from Lacanian psychoanalysis, where it has complex meanings. I am using it in this essay in the following sense: "In relation to meaning, the Imaginary is that in which perceptual features like resemblance operate—that is to say, in areas where there is a sort of coalescence of the signifier and the signified, as in traditional symbolism. For Lacan, the Imaginary relationship, of whatever kind, is also that of a lure, a trap. In this sense he is close to the normal usage of the word 'imaginary' to describe something we believe to be something else." From Jacques Lacan, *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Anthony Wilden (Baltimore, 1968), p. 175.
charistic heresies in the Mainz area by drawing upon fantasies of eucharistic pollution. Conrad was murdered at the end of July 1234, over a year before the first accusation of ritual cannibalism was made against local Jews. Those accusations, however, need to be read against several years of powerful crusade against heresy. Conrad of Marburg also served as the spiritual director of Elizabeth of Hungary, one of the fasting mystics studied in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. Conrad wrote early material on Elizabeth's life, and upon her death (November 17, 1231) he tried to organize her speedy canonization, which took place in May 1235, approximately one year after Conrad's death. When Conrad of Marburg died, he was buried at his request next to the shrine of Elizabeth. Bynum writes that the "importance of her stern confessor, Conrad of Marburg, in inducing her obsession with food is impossible to assess at this distance" (*HFHF*, p. 135). The staging of the early textual materials of Elizabeth's life and canonization process need to be brought together for their bearing on a complex, multifocal discourse of purity and pollution involving the Eucharist and the problems of cannibalism and cannibalizing authority around the Eucharist. Who is eating whose body, and what or who is engendering problems of visibility and invisibility around the Eucharist?  

The example just cited concentrates on textual conjunctures, local stories of ritual cannibalism, papal bulls, materials for a canonization process. My second illustration offers an example of how visual discourses joined anxieties over the circulation of blood in "Western Christendom." It is a predella designed by the Florentine painter Paolo Uccello for the altar of the Confraternity of Corpus Domini in Urbino in 1467–68. The predella offers clues to where the trail of blood depicted in many of the plates of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* might flow. Uccello executed the predella just as Urbino, under the influence of Franciscan preaching, planned the opening of its Monte di Pietà (1468), a lending fund, to break what was considered to be a Jewish monopoly on credit. Six scenes from the predella tell a story of the desecration of the host by Jews. The story, based on a Paris legend, had circulated in Europe since the late thirteenth century and became a popular source of drama in the fifteenth century. In Uccello's version, a Christian woman exchanges a host with a Jewish pawnbroker.

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34 Many readers of drafts of this essay expected it to turn into my own reading of Elizabeth of Hungary at this juncture. I have refused that move, because this essay is not about better or different readings, but about questions of engendering the visible and the invisible in our contemporary historiography. I wish to keep that problem open in the essay. For historical references to the above discussion see Gavin Langmuir's excellent essay "Ritual Cannibalism," in his *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism*, for the Fulda persecutions. The text of *Vox in Rama* appears in MGH Epp. saec. XIII, 1:432–34. For Conrad's writings on Elizabeth of Hungary see Albert Huyskens, *Quellenstudien zur Geschichte der hl. Elisabeth* (Marburg, 1908).

for some coins, although in the written versions she does this to redeem a cloak. The pawnbroker heats the host in a pan, as his wife and two children look on. In miraculous authentication of itself, blood runs from the host all over the tiled floor of the room and out onto the street. Alerted by this bloody rivulet, soldiers appear at the house of the Jewish family. The pope and other clerics restore the host to the altar in a liturgical procession. The woman who exchanged the host repents before her hanging. The Jewish family, husband, wife, and two children, are burned alive, a punishment usually reserved for heretics and witches. In the last panel, angels and devils dispute over the soul of the Christian woman.

The predella narrates a story of pollution which brings together a construction of the feminine and religious difference at the very altar table where priests celebrated the Eucharist. A woman initiates the exchange, the media of which, in most versions of the story, are finery and the host, although the predella depicts coins.\textsuperscript{36} The host bleeds miraculously over the floor and into the street in a fantasy of excess that echoes the Scholastic fear of excess in usury. Male members of the community, including soldiers and clerics, work to restore order and purity. The final status of purity and pollution remains in suspension to the viewer of the predella. The debate between the angels and the devils for the soul of the repentant Christian woman invites viewers to project their own ending to this customary debate and opens up the anxious possibility that the process of pollution could be set in motion again.

The Uccello predella visually narrates anti-Semitic stories which coincided with the intensification of persecution of Jews in Germany and Italy.\textsuperscript{37} Recent work on ritual murder trials in Germany by Po-chia Hsia (cited above, n. 32) demonstrates how the more virulent accusations of blood libel began to fuse with stories of host desecration to create a discourse of blood and sacramental pollution. The incidences of ritual murder accusations, compiled by Po-chia Hsia, correlate in interesting ways with the growth and geographical expansion of female piety in Europe.

The popular media of broadsheets and printed ballads, which had begun to circulate in the later fifteenth century, spectacularized stories of ritual murder and host desecration at the same time as they advertised Christian pilgrimage

\textsuperscript{36} Franciscan preachers condemned Italian women for their appetite for finery and claimed that this avariciousness made them partners to the Jews; see Hughes, "Distinguishing Signs," p. 28. For a discussion of Franciscan involvement in the establishment of montes pietatis throughout Italy (there were over eighty montes in Italian cities at the end of the fifteenth century) see John T. Noonan, \textit{The Scholastic Use of Usury} (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), p. 295. Note that many of the northern Italian cities ordered that Jews wear distinguishing signs just a generation before the predella was executed: Padua, 1430; Perugia, 1432; Florence and Siena, 1439 (Hughes, p. 20).

\textsuperscript{37} We need comparative regional histories of the expulsion of Jews in medieval Europe. Such a history would help to pose comparative questions of how anti-Semitism and anxieties about pollution maintained themselves discursively where Jews were present or absent. King Edward I ordered the first permanent expulsion of Jews from England in 1290; Philip IV expelled Jews from France in 1306; Jews in southern Italian communities were subject to the Inquisition in the late thirteenth century, and many migrated to northern Italy or converted. In the 1420s and 1430s many of the imperial cities of the Rhineland expelled their Jewish communities.
Paolo Uccello, Profanation of the Host (predella panels)
Urbino, Palazzo Ducale
(Photographs: Alinari/Art Resource, New York)
centers, such as Wilsnack in Germany, dedicated to the Holy Blood. The effusions of blood from the Suffering Christ, a holy excess of blood which repeats itself frequently in the plates of Holy Feast and Holy Fast, needs to be read with other coexistent iconography that depicted desecrated hosts bleeding excessively at sites of pollution. An anxiety about blood, consanguinity, and pollution expressed itself in the later fifteenth century in certain areas of Germany and consolidated itself in Italy with the preaching of Bernardino of Siena (1380–1444). The majority of the plates in Holy Feast and Holy Fast date from this period of intense, popular propagandizing about sacred and polluted blood.

In the medieval Christian economy of exteriority, prostitutes and homosexuals shared affinities with Jews. The image of Jews as draining blood and devouring flesh became blurred with images of prostitutes, who were considered parasites on cities and their food supplies. Prostitutes thus make an exception to the universal association of medieval women with food preparation argued by Bynum. Even within medieval Christendom not all women could be reduced to the maternal function; in fact, those regarded as parasites marked instead an antimaternal function. Prostitutes were also commonly assumed to be sterile, and this fantasy linked them with discourses about the sterility of homosexuality. The trope of sterility linked them further to discourses about usury. Scholastics regarded money as fruitless, and its sterility came to be associated with homosexual intercourse. The blood of eucharistic devotion thus negotiated complicated borders in which the sacred fluid could seep into an exteriority composed of Jews, prostitutes, homosexuals, and a symbolic economy of usury and parasitism. In the midst of such anxieties it is not surprising that the chalice, containing the blood of Christ, disappeared from the communion service to the medieval laity.

38 See Kunzle, Early Comic Strip, pp. 11–28.
39 Hughes, “Distinguishing Signs,” p. 28.
41 It is the historically charged nature of these boundaries which undoubtedly accounts for the fact, according to Camille, that “the Host can be described as the single most important image to Christians from the middle of the thirteenth century onward, perhaps even outvoting veneration of the cross,” Camille, Gothic Idol, p. 215; or as Miri Rubin has brilliantly traced the many ways in which medieval Europeans used the host to think with: “The eucharist was constructed to bear these meaning as a symbol which still retained an enormous space between signifier and signified to allow such a broad array of articulations. But it was becoming increasingly overdetermined,” Miri Rubin, Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture (New York, 1991), p. 344. I regret that the following two essays, which have so much bearing on the argument of this essay, only became available to me as this essay was going to press: Rubin, “The Eucharist and the Construction of Medieval Identities,” and Sarah Beckwith, “Ritual, Church and Theatre: Medieval Dramas of the Sacramental Body,” in Culture and History, 1350–1600 (above, n. 5), pp. 43–64 and 65–90, respectively.
42 Rubin, Corpus Christi, pp. 70–71. Rubin quotes from De sacramentis by James of Vitry, who wrote: “Because of possible danger the eucharist is not given to the laity under the species of wine” (p. 71).
The flow of blood across juridical and iconographic spaces has blurred the boundaries between Christendom and the Others of its exterior. We now need to consider how such a reading renders problematic any unitary notions of bodies within medieval Christendom, especially the body of Christ and the bodies of medieval women mystics. The symbolic expulsion of the Jews by members of Christendom produced in the Christian imaginary a fantastic excluded body of the Jew. The fantasy of exclusion and the boundary it creates, however, can only be a fantasy. The excluded body of the Other returns to haunt the pure body of the “interior.” The host, the “most important image of Gothic Europe,” served as the site of haunting by the excluded body of the Other, the Jew. The haunting came to perform itself in the fantastical grotesque hybrid body of Christ in the Christian imaginary.\(^{43}\)

Popular rituals that grew up around the medieval celebrations of Corpus Christi enacted an awareness of the hybridity that haunted the host. The carnival processions of monsters and giants that preceded the liturgical procession on the feast of Corpus Christi recognized the problem of body doubles, the differences within dominant European constructions of kinship, and theological constructions of sacred bodies. Before considering some of the problems in constructing mystical gender in such a complicated, contested corporeal world, it is worth reviewing some thoughts of Mikhail Bakhtin’s regarding grotesque bodies:

all these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and between body and the world are overcome: there is an exchange and an interorientation. This is why the main events of the life of the grotesque body, the acts of the bodily drama, take place in this sphere. Eating, drinking, defecation, and other elimination . . . as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body—all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body.\(^{44}\)

\(^{43}\) Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1986), make this important point about exclusion and differentiation of the grotesque: “we have to avoid conflating the two different forms of the grotesque. If the two are confused [grotesque as excluded Other; hybrid grotesque as a boundary phenomena of hybridization and iminxing], it becomes impossible to see that a fundamental mechanism of identity formation produces the second, hybrid grotesque at the level of the political unconscious by the very struggle to exclude the first grotesque” (p. 193). I think their explanation could be related to the work of Homi Bhabha in postcolonial theory of “doubling”: Homi Bhabha, “Interrogating Identity,” in *The Real Me: Postmodernism and the Question of Identity*, ICA Documents 6, ed. Lisa Appignanesi (London, 1987), pp. 5–11; and “Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt,” in *Cultural Studies* (above, n. 4). Dollimore’s use of the notion of “proximate other,” in his *Sexual Disidence* (p. 135), which I came across after completing the draft of this essay, could be fruitfully developed here.

The host can be regarded as a hybrid sacred object that served as a relay point between religion and magic, purity and pollution, theological and popular devotion, clergy and layperson, urban and rural, rich and poor, the masculine and the feminine, the insider and the outsider, Christian and Jew. As medievalists study the regulation of its hybridity through gender relations, they will contribute to a history of hybridity and its different modalities and in so doing build an important historical bridge with current postcolonial theories of hybridity.\(^\text{45}\)

The Eucharist was good to think with, and it guaranteed the symbolic order of medieval Europe.\(^\text{46}\) It was both a “classical” body in the Bakhtinian sense, elevated, static, and monumental, and a “grotesque” body, broken, bleeding, excessive, maternal, paternal, a body which upset any fixed gender binary, a fluid body that troubled any container. It was a body that was distributed across different—and noncommensurate—textual, material, and visual realms. Christians fantasized intensely about both the pollution and the purification of the Eucharist because of its ambivalent position as a border phenomenon.

The host gave occasion to symbolic cannibalism as the church incorporated the host into its own body. With the promulgation of the doctrine of transubstantiation important switches in naming bodies began to occur. The host had been known as “corpus mysticum,” and the church as “corpus verum.” The church cannibalized the Eucharist, and the host became “corpus verum”; the church, “corpus mysticum.” The signified had become the signifier.\(^\text{47}\)

How to authenticate the signified that had become signifier during the twelfth century? Notions of visibility and invisibility came to be redefined and reen-gendered. Relics and the Eucharist came to be presented in new ways. Beginning in the early thirteenth century, ostensorsories, crystal cylinders in which a relic rested, began to appear, marking a shift away from the presentation of relics

\(^{45}\) Ella Shohat has called for study of the diverse modalities of hybridity: “forced assimilation, internalized self-rejection, political cooptation, social conformism, cultural mimicry, and creative transcendence,” in her article “Notes on the ‘Post-Colonial,’ ” Social Text 31–32 (1992), 110.

\(^{46}\) It is as if the host functioned in the way in which the “phallus” does today in contemporary psychoanalytic debate. The Eucharist as the guarantee of the symbolic in medieval Europe helps us to historicize the symbolic as a foundational category and to understand power-charged aspects of its work without insisting that medieval Europeans describe their symbolic in terms of penis/phallus. Brian Stock makes the point that the Eucharist was good to think with: “The eucharistic debate in particular opened up two broad subjects to systematic study by medieval thinkers. One was the status of symbol and ritual in a theory of religion that was increasingly preoccupied with explanation in literate terms. The other was the beginning of reflection on observable nature, or, more precisely, on the relation of phenomenal appearances to an inner reality whose logical properties coincided with those of texts,” p. 241, in his Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries (Princeton, 1983); Rubin, Corpus Christi: “The eucharist emerged as a unifying symbol for a complex world. . . . it possessed universal meaning” (p. 348). The symbolic guaranteed by the phallus brings us into psychoanalytic discourse of the twentieth century; for an introduction see Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole freudienne, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (New York, 1985). Feminist critiques of the Lacanian model abound; see most recently differences 4/1 (1992), an issue of essays dedicated to critical theory and deconstruction of the phallus.

\(^{47}\) For a suggestive study of the host and Christian cannibalism, see Kilgour, From Communion to Cannibalism, passim, esp. pp. 79–139. In my final revisions a copy of Michel de Certeau’s Mystic Fable (above, n. 2) became available to me. His is a much more detailed argument than Kilgour’s.
in reliquaries of the type which mimicked by their design the physical form of the body part they housed, such as a head or a hand, for instance. The older reliquaries are called "talking reliquaries," and the very contrast of the generic names for the two types of reliquaries—talking reliquaries and ostensories—marks a shift toward visibility: the contents of the reliquary must be visible to guarantee its existence.\(^{48}\)

Hans Belting has argued that the reliquary became the image of the relic and that images could become relics in the thirteenth century, an important time for the revaluation of images and issues of visibility in medieval Europe.\(^{49}\) If the Eucharist came to signify the church, if the hybrid grotesque body of the host unstably marked the boundary phenomenon of exclusion and incorporation that produced the fantastic identity of Western Christendom, if relic and image were exchangeable, who/what could guarantee signification? New solutions to problems of authenticity and questions about originals and copies emerged in the discourse of relics in the late twelfth and early thirteenth century: "The imagination becomes inspired by material proofs which existed in the East linking the reality of the relic with the evidence of the photograph."\(^{50}\) Belting argues for this startling and suggestive statement on the basis of controversy over the authenticity of Veronica's veil. First a relic, it assumed the status of an image, an image-relic. The image was that of Christ imprinted on the veil of Veronica.

This reading of Christian bodies, especially Corpus Christi, grows more complicated. The issues raised so far cannot be resolved in an essay of this type (itself a hybrid by virtue of its reading practice). Suffice it to note that the changing status of relics and their presentation makes it clear that the metaphoric nature of the body as referent was undergoing change. What guarantees the imaginary body of Christendom as a referent, and how would that body be gendered? The problem of the body seems to lie in the space in between this metonymic "image-relic," a space which poses problems of intervisibility in Western Christendom. Who could be the "photograph" of the host, as Belting provocatively puts it; who could be its authenticator? What possibilities of gender and mimesis does the image-relic pose?

That set of questions bears on the historiographical problems concerning medieval women mystics broached in the introduction to this essay. If we have only the textual effects of their practices, distributed across a range of genres

\(^{48}\) My arguments in this section are based on Hans Belting, *The Image and Its Public in the Middle Ages: Form and Function in the Early Paintings of the Passion*, trans. Mark Bartusis and Raymond Meyer (New Rochelle, N.Y., 1990), p. 82. My colleague Dianne Phillips pointed out the need for a study of the coexistence and coconstruction of talking reliquaries and ostensories. It is too simplistic to say that one replaced the other.

\(^{49}\) Belting, *The Image and Its Public*, pp. 212–14; also Camille, *Gothic Idol*, p. 9, who comments that the "very fabrication of a thing" became the cause of concern in thirteenth-century society. Belting also argues against any simple division between public cult and private devotion; he shows how each informed the other and how viewer and image were related mimetically. His work inspired me to question the gendering of mimesis and to wonder how mystics performed mimetically, whether their mimesis could be a kind of countermimesis that marked the gaps between object-illusionism and the depicted subject's mimetic power (Belting, p. 53). In a seminar conducted at the Medieval Institute at the University of Notre Dame (23 March 1993) Brigitte Bedos-Rezak raised complementary questions about complex issues regarding visibility and authentication in the changing culture of charters in France, 1000–1200.

with complicated authorship, how can we read these texts? The work of Bynum has already cautioned us not to embody the texts metaphorically in the form of historical female hysterics or anorectics. My reading of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* also urges us not to embody the textual effects of the practices of female mystics as a maternal function, as Bynum does. We can, however, figure these textual effects as performances of gender, that the access to the body as referent occurs only imperfectly in the performance, that there is no mystical body prior to the performance.  

PERFORMING VERONICA'S VEIL.

The problem of authentication, most immediately discernible in the changing status of relics and images, impinged on fundamental epistemological questions regarding the power-charged relations of the visible to the invisible, the masculine to the feminine. The shifting status of the real and the imaginary in visual images occurring over the twelfth century began to reorganize vision around the text, so that the text gave rise to an invisible inner life. *Mere* or "real" physicality became equated with the "oral, the popular, the inauthentic, the disreputable."  

Brian Stock has succinctly described this epistemological shift: "physicality, therefore, is ambivalent; popular culture utilizes physical symbolism without an interpretative context; sacramental theology places the same tangible objects in a framework of learned culture." Relics could become images, images could become relics in an exchange that required physicality to become a resource for textuality, and textuality produced physicality as an effect. The proliferation of texts about and, much less often, authored by holy women in Western Europe at this time may be usefully considered within the epistemological shifts clustering around authentication, ambivalent physicality, and discursive realignments of visibility and invisibility. This proliferation correlates with the gendering of the oral and popular as feminine, a feminine with positive and negative valences. As this composite of communication, physicality, and value came to be gendered feminine, learned culture began to reframe the feminine textually. The number of hagiographical texts devoted to female saints increased. Thus what textual culture produced as an effect, it also recontained.

The dispersion of holy women across hagiographical texts, mostly male authored, then makes more historical sense given the construction and relations

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51 This argument then questions the category of "medieval female mystic." My reading here complements that of Karma Lochrie: "We must begin looking at the body itself as an historical construction," *Translations of the Flesh* (above, n. 18), p. 15. Note also her emphasis on the point that the two terms, body and sexuality, are not coterminous in medieval mental maps of corporeality.  


54 Could we think of this as a *historical* moment of the simulacrum, in spite of the many problems posed by Jean Baudrillard's work? The feminine thus became a simulacrum, "never exchanging for what is real, but exchanging itself." This discussion of the circulation of the sign of the feminine derives from a critique of Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York, 1983), and represents an effort to question further his work by theorizing relations between what he calls hyperreality and what he ignores, embodiment.
of the visible and the invisible, the physical and the textual. As Miri Rubin has aptly remarked of thirteenth-century mystics in her excellent study of the politics of the formation of the feast of Corpus Christi: “we know little that comes directly from these women, and yet the material is rich; we should, therefore, talk not of experience but of the relation between representations of such experience.”

Authenticity relied on this relay between physicality and textuality, yet it was a highly ambivalent relay. In such ambivalent conditions, the authenticator of the host—“the photograph” to use Beltz’s image—has to have aura, which is the sign of the unique value of an authentic object. Aura was difficult to construct in a time known for its “crisis of overproduction” of images. There can be no replica of aura; aura is tied to the body. At this juncture in the crisis of representation and authentication, certain pious women began to perform within this gap of physicality and textuality, authentic and photograph, and their performance worked as a complicated visual system. They began to produce aura for the Corpus Christi.

Just as learned theologians produced physicality as an effect of textuality, pious women could produce textuality as an effect of physicality. Their performance provided a crucial hinge that could join object with interpretation and the tangible with the intangible. The performance of this hinge function was gendered feminine, not because of anatomy or maternity, but because of the gendering effects of dominant learned culture in this period that conflated the oral and popular with the feminine.

The bodily practices of holy women, especially their food practices, may be read as both brilliant and violent glosses on this crisis of representation in medieval Christendom. These women produced a kind of textual tattoo on

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56 Camille, Gothic Idol, p. 224. Camille talks about a “crisis of overproduction” in reference to Marian images, and his subsequent comments are relevant here: “this would seem to be a response to what I have termed a ‘crisis of overproduction,’ a kind of relic inflation in which the proliferation of the image of the Virgin meant that she was to some extent fragmented and diminished.”


58 The feminine need not always be constructed negatively; for the positive, nevertheless gendered as feminine, valuation of the oral see Sharon Farmer, “Persuasive Voices: Clerical Images of Medieval Wives,” Speculum 61 (1986), 517–43.

the surface of their bodies; the surface of their bodies produced imprints. At the same time their bodily interiors became the site of intense physicality. In so reversing interiority and exteriority, the two different "bodies" in the medieval model of corporeality, they marked them as relational terms. The many incidents of postmortem investigations of the body cavities of such women, referred to in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, testify to the impact of this reversal. Paradoxically, through their food practices holy women produced an exteriorized interior: the "invisible," interior, feminine appeared on the exterior or "masculine" surface according to medieval typologies of the body. By rendering visible the feminine interior through the signs of bodily practices, such performances could make "aura" visible, thus producing the "photograph" necessary to authenticate the host. The invisible feminine body transformed itself into a utilizable textual form: "the oral element thus survived the utilization of writing and was itself transformed." Within this historical dynamic of gender, the host functions as a relic, and the exteriorized "body" of the holy feminine performance serves as devotional image. Together they performed as an image-relic of medieval visual communities. Their performance reminds us to consider medieval textual communities as coconstructed and in tension with medieval visual communities.

The exteriorization of the feminine on the surface of the holy woman guaranteed the host a visual identity. In this material performance of Veronica's veil, the host served as veil, and the exteriorized feminine of the body served as the imprint, and the hagiographical framing of this performance by the clerics who authored the many lives of these holy women served as the "being imprinted on the imprint." Just as devotional images of the thirteenth century depicted in tension object-illusion (the naturalism or unnaturalism of an object) and the subject's expressive power, the performance of these holy women marked disjunctures, discontinuities, tensions in textual exchanges. Only gradually would these "two demands of mimesis"—"naturalism" and "expression"—be aligned with the emergence of new optical laws of painting in the fifteenth century. The accounts of such holy women enacted problems of mimesis and a crisis of representation.

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63 Belting, *The Image and Its Public*, p. 53, for discussion and illustrations. The issues raised here can help us to historicize the practices of female mystics more fully and to ask whether it is advisable to view these practices on a continuum from the twelfth century to the seventeenth century. I would argue for ruptures in these practices and suggest that the brilliant work of Michel de Certeau on mystics, especially mystics of the seventeenth century, requires modification for the study of medieval mystics: see his "Mystic Speech," in his *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (Minneapolis, 1986), pp. 80–100. Sarah Beckwith makes the same point, that "to posit mysticism then as a natural source of resistance to orthodoxy is dangerously a-historical, both because the function of mysticism varies with the social and historical conditions in which it is produced and reproduced and because, over and above this, the very quality of mysticism which can empower its by-passing of official structure... removes both God and the human soul from history": "A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe," in *Medieval Literature*, ed. David Aers (London, 1986), p. 40.
It is important for historians not to judge these performances. Since the more severe forms of bodily practices, especially fasting, actually resulted in death, they tempt us to identify ourselves with issues of violence and victimization or with romantic tropes of female heroines. Contemporary feminist theory of performance can help us to think about these historical practices in other ways. This complex body of theory regards gender performance as a political, ethical means of disrupting normative, ontological discourses of sexual difference. A feminist mimesis affirms the feminine as performance, as a role that can be restyled, played differently, but never reduced to or identified with the lives of actual women. Feminist performance (in theory and practice), perhaps better called counter-mimesis to distance it from notions of imitation, enacts the non-identity of anatomical sex and gender identity. A feminist performance theory questions the conventionalized notions of corporeal interiority and exteriority: such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. This also suggests that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body, the gender border control that differentiates inner from outer, and so institutes the "integrity" of the subject.64

The kind of feminist performance I am speaking of here puts into question the very notion of original and natural identity and also helps to historicize the violence involved in conflating anatomy, gender identity, and gender performance. The brilliant performances of these "hunger artists" disrupted cultural notions of interiority and exteriority and marked the discontinuities in textual exchange in the service of authenticating the fantasy of an original and a natural identity, the Corpus Christi. Their performance helped to guarantee the "classic" host, to guarantee the fantasy of an "original," an authentication that helped to contain the contradictions of the identity of Western Christendom. These performances engaged the grotesque hybrid body of the Eucharist, and in that engagement they profoundly challenged dominant representations of learned culture and kept relations of the oral, physical, and local in tension for the learned culture. That learned culture could also recontain these performances to cannibalize their aura, and their writings are riddled by the intertextuality of the complicated textual exchange at work to contain the crisis of representation. This historical performance reminds us today of the high stakes of gender as performance. In the service of some naturalized notion of original, medieval, modern, or postmodern, performance can kill.65

64 Butler, Gender Trouble, p. 136; see also Cornell, Beyond Accommodation.
65 The kind of performance discussed here interrogates a basic epistemological assumption of Western representation, in urgent need of critical historicization, that a cultural text somehow has a separate nature distinct from a particular articulation or performance. For a provocative discussion of abiding, seemingly naturalized dualism in current conceptions of power, see Mitchell, "Everyday Metaphors of Power" (above, n. 18). I am grateful to Lisa Rofel for drawing my attention to this reference.
PERFORMANCE/FUSION AND MEDIEVAL HISTORY

The metaphor of the mother does not complete her.
—Drucilla Cornell\(^{68}\)

Aura locates itself in the presence of the body. It also paradoxically requires distance, “however close it may be,” and the contemplation of that distance.\(^{67}\) Medieval holy women could produce aura through their bodily practices to embody the fact that there can be no replica; thus they guaranteed the host. This concluding section asks whether medieval historians and their audiences cannibalize this historical aura to guarantee the visibility of medieval Christendom as a moment of plenitude, a moment to which our allegedly impoverished present cannot measure.

To think about this problem I will return to issues raised at the opening of this essay regarding the collapse of historian, reader, and historical subject at critical moments of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. To return to this rhetorical problem could seem gratuitous if it did not help us with some fundamental problems of historical representation germane to the writing of women’s history and studies of historical gender. The rhetoric molds the text into the narrative power of history as *dérèlection*. *Dérèlection*, like essentialism, is a term with multifold meanings and charges in contemporary feminist theory. For the purposes of this discussion, I define it as the inability to write about the feminine as other than an imagined unity of the maternal function and the mother-daughter relation.\(^{68}\) Bynum frames *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* in terms of mothers and daughters, and her prose embodies that relation as fusion. Historian, reader, and historical subject fuse rhetorically in the prose. Bynum’s rhetorical practices, which reinsert a historical fantasy of the feminine as maternal, cannot allow for the historical or contemporary problem of studying both separation and connection of daughters and mothers or, in the metaphor of this paper, of studying their fluctuating visibility. Such studies belie the oft-repeated fantasy of the maternal function as a form of symbiosis and a paradise.

*Holy Feast and Holy Fast* thus cannot escape its own presentism as much as it distances itself from it: “Thus recent work on medieval women has tended to have either presentist issues or male issues built in” (*HFHF*, p. 30). How could the entanglement of this book in presentism be otherwise, unless the practices of history as representation are questioned? History writing collaborates rhetorically in preserving the process of *dérèlection* by moralizing its rhetorical practices as the authority of experience:

experience is at once always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it

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\(^{66}\) Cornell, *Beyond Accommodation*, p. 78.


\(^{68}\) Drucilla Cornell’s extended meditation on *dérèlection* inspires my comments; see Cornell, *Beyond Accommodation*. For some further thoughts on the maternal function and its problems in contemporary technology see Kathleen Biddick, “Stranded Histories: Feminist Allegories of Artificial Life,” forthcoming in *Research in Philosophy and Technology* 13 (1993).
is always contested, and always therefore political. The study of experience, therefore, must call into question its originary status in historical explanation. This will happen when historians take as their project not the reproduction and transmission of knowledge said to be arrived at through experience, but the analysis of the production of that knowledge itself. Such an analysis would constitute a genuinely nonfoundational history, one which retains its explanatory power and its interest in change but does not stand on or reproduce naturalized categories.69

My pause at the collapse of historian, reader, and historical subject can also guide us to problems encountered in the pedagogy of teaching Holy Feast and Holy Fast. This book has galvanized and polarized my undergraduates and graduate students in a way that few books have in my gender studies courses. Discussions have often led to charged quarrels in seminar. I interpret those quarrels as enacting political problems in contemporary academic culture (still predominantly coded as white, heterosexual, middle-class, and male) in engaging the politics of identification as they relate historically to positioning the maternal function in the cultural work of reading, writing, teaching. Depending on popular, but often unacknowledged, attitudes toward fusion (and much theory echoes these popular attitudes), readers may regard the collapse of writer, reader, historical subject as good—a celebration of the maternal and a return to paradise lost; or they may experience the rhetorical entanglements as bad, a sign of disorder, a failure to differentiate, a form of psychosis (as Julia Kristeva would argue). The quarrels go unresolved and repetitively flare up because Holy Feast and Holy Fast enacts a process of fusion rhetorically without consciously opening a space in the text where the political and historical problem of fusion could be redescribed and replayed in political and ethical ways.

My reading of blood prompted by the “invisibility” of the plates of Holy Feast and Holy Fast has sought to open up a space in between the text and its frame and to intimate that the subject addressed and the addressing subject are not one, that these subjects are divided between themselves. By tracing the flow of blood across historically constructed categories I have striven to displace the overdetermined aspects of the book’s structuralism and its reinscription of the very exclusions in relation to which medieval genders were maintained. The fact that the plates were uncannily invisible to reviewers suggests to me that they do the dream work of Holy Feast and Holy Fast and in so doing warn us of the dangers of the ongoing project of dreaming the Middle Ages and reengendering Europe as a foundational category, nostalgically and romantically, as our tropes for reading the Middle Ages are wont to instruct us.70

Where the invisibility of the plates comes into contact with the historiographical project of making medieval female mystics visible, there emerges the space where those things that were divided, often violently—the exterior Jew, the interior Christian, the visible and the invisible, the authentic and the copy, the


masculine and the feminine—fearfully connect. The joining of those things divided, as urged in this article, does not have as its goal the repair of the past or the fabrication of some new synthesis. This fearful interconnectedness disconnects the space of autocannibalism, both historical and historiographical. Such interconnectedness can help us to appreciate the need for a transformative ethic for medieval gender studies of the sort which Toni Morrison has figured so magnificently and performatively in her novel *Beloved*: “It was not a story to pass on.”


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