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Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7k16g02g>

Journal

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 32(1)

ISSN

0069-6412

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Publication Date

2001-10-01

Peer reviewed

“I AM THE CREATOR”: BIRGITTA OF SWEDEN’S FEMININE DIVINE

by Yvonne Bruce

Critical writings about Saint Birgitta of Sweden (1302/3–1373) adopt a curious tone: the literature marvels at her wide-reaching political, ecclesiastical, and secular influence, remarkable for a woman even in an age that saw Saint Catherine of Siena and Julian of Norwich achieve religious authority while maintaining popular appeal. Yet this marvel is checked by hesitation; surely no fourteenth-century mystic could have achieved such authoritative status except as an orthodox agent of the church, and historians have typically been cautious of seeing Birgitta as a forerunner of the Reformation. Ingvar Fogelqvist, for example, is reluctant to “judge the later Middle Ages through the viewpoint of the Protestant Reformation,” yet his own study of “apostasy and reform” in Birgitta’s *Revelations* reveals the saint’s struggles between old ideas and “new reformatory ones.”¹ Joan Bechtold attributes Birgitta’s articulation of the feminine to “internal struggle, rather than ... simple acquiescence” to a masculine ideology, but negates her “feminist victories” by asserting that she “rose to power by defending a system created by men more fervently than did her male counterparts”; a few lines later, Bechtold notes that Birgitta’s aristocratic background partly “explains the restraint she felt towards any subversive visionary or political activity.”²

The critical dilemma confronting an interpreter of Birgitta’s life and writings is twofold: how does one reconcile Birgitta’s zealous and iconoclastic reform activities—which often affronted the papacy and the Swedish monarchy—with her ostensibly orthodox goals and didac-

¹Ingvar Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and Reform in the “Revelations” of St. Birgitta* (Stockholm 1993) 17.

²Joan Bechtold, “St. Birgitta: The Disjunction Between Women and Ecclesiastical Male Power,” *Equally in God’s Image: Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Julia Bolton Holloway, et al. (New York 1990) 89, 88. And see Kari Elisabeth Børreson’s comprehensive essay, “Birgitta’s Godlanguage: Exemplary Intention, Inapplicable Content,” in *Birgitta, hendes værk og hendes klostre I Norden (Birgitta, her Works, and her Five Abbeys in the Nordic Countries)*, ed. Tore Nyberg, Odense University Studies in History and Social Sciences, vol. 150 (Odense 1991); Børreson believes that “Birgitta displays an exemplary feminist intention. Nevertheless, the androcentric impact of Birgitta’s writings makes her doct[r]inal content inapplicable” (23).

tic *Revelations*? Second, how can one claim “feminist victories” for a woman whose “background placed social and ecclesiastical limitations on her ability to conceive of possibilities for women apart from male structures”?³

The key to understanding Birgitta’s role lies in reevaluating the central features of her life’s work, the *Revelations*. Birgitta herself is the chief subject and fulcrum of this visionary doctrine; thus, the work requires a reading that shifts critical focus from her role as church representative to her own self-fashioned agency.⁴ My purpose in this essay is not to rescue Birgitta from charges of “antifeminism” nor to determine whether she ultimately undermined or reinscribed patristic doctrine, but to demonstrate her very indifference to these larger issues. The *Revelations* are radical because Birgitta puts herself at the very center of her supposedly Christo-centric work, partaking of divine authority for her own personal and female, as well as social and (proto)feminist goals. She manages this in three primary and inseparable ways: by presenting her revelations as the unmediated voice of God, a move that positions her “as a prophet in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets”;⁵ in her identification with Mary, whom she elevates to triune status; and through the juridical motif that figures prominently in her visions, by which she authorizes her own word as law. The *Revelations* indirectly questions medieval notions of women’s relationship to church hierarchy because Birgitta remains self-consciously ignorant of female infe-

³Bechtold (n. 2 above) 100.

⁴This is, indirectly, an important point for Birgitta’s latest biographer, Bridget Morris, who provides a complex definition of what Birgitta’s initial “calling vision” was not: it was not for her sake, but “for the salvation of others. She was not to experience a mystical *unio* with God, in the manner of many of her predecessors ... Her role was essentially as a conduit of moral guidance to other people and actively to participate in their salvation. The word ‘mystic’ is therefore less applicable to her than ‘visionary’ or ‘prophet’” (*St. Birgitta of Sweden*, Studies in Medieval Mysticism, vol. 1 [Suffolk, Eng. 1999] 65–66). See also F. R. Johnston, “The English Cult of St. Birgitta of Sweden” in *Analecta Bollandiana: Revue critique d’hagiographie* 103.1–2 (1985) 75–93, at 76. Birgitta is specifically a *conduit*, a conductor of “spiritual fluid,” and hence the importance to her visions of her material self (*Revelations*, bk. 6.52.9–10 [see n. 18 below]). See also Marguerite Tjader Harris’s edition of Birgitta’s *Vita*, in *Birgitta of Sweden: Life and Selected “Revelations,”* trans. Albert Ryle Kezel, intro. Tore Nyberg (New York 1990) 75 and 90, for example; and Morris 66–67. This specific materialism is one of the distinguishing features of the visions of medieval women and a crucial point of female spirituality for Luce Irigaray (q.v.).

⁵Claire Sahlin, “Gender and Prophetic Authority in Birgitta of Sweden’s *Revelations*,” in *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Jane Chance (Gainesville, FL 1996) 74.

riority. Her writings thus anticipate the feminist strategy of, as Elizabeth Grosz expresses it, “indifference to [phallic authority] presented as interest or commitment.”⁶

Birgitta’s revelations number approximately seven hundred, and their editing history is exceptionally tangled. Birgitta dictated her revelations in Swedish to her confessors, who transcribed them into Latin; none of these transcriptions survive. There are extant two primary and mostly complete Latin manuscripts of the *Revelations*, as well as numerous partial manuscripts (and seven extant Middle English manuscripts, most of them probably translated from the Latin manuscript kept at Syon Abbey, the Birgittine order established at Twickenham, England, in 1415).⁷ Given this palimpsest of sacred material, scholars are understandably reluctant to attribute specific utterances to Birgitta or to determine which of the many voices speaking in the *Revelations* belongs exclusively to her. And yet, it is impossible to deny the consistency and urgency of the voices animating the *Revelations*. My goal in this essay is to observe the larger patterns of gendered expression in the *Revelations* and, I hope, to suggest the ways in which Birgitta’s forceful and distinctly female concerns show through the overlay of masculine emendation. It is likely, for instance, that the most significant textual revisions, undertaken by her confessor and “editor-in-chief” Alphonso Pecha (at divine suggestion) were authorized and directed by Birgitta herself before her death.⁸ The *Revelations* cleverly “quarries male theology for women’s use,” as Birgitta was well aware of the doubts about her authenticity expressed by both her spiritual tutor and primary confessor, Mathias Övidsson—with whom she parted before leaving Sweden—and by the male-dominated clergy of which he was representative.⁹

⁶Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London 1990) 187.

⁷See the manuscript history prefacing each book of the *Revelations* (n. 18 below); also Morris (n. 4 above) 3–9 and 198–199; for the textual history of the Middle English manuscripts, see Johnston (n. 4 above) 79–80, and the first part of William Patterson Cumming’s introduction to his edition of *The Revelations of Saint Birgitta*, Early English Text Society, no. 178 (London 1929).

⁸Claire Sahlin makes the same point: because of the difficulty in determining the extent to which the visions and revelations are solely Birgitta’s, she is “examining textual representations of issues concerning gender and authority in the Latin editions of the *Revelations* and not necessarily Birgitta’s actual words” (“Gender and Prophetic Authority,” [n. 5 above] 72). Morris (n. 4 above) 6, uses the phrase “editor-in-chief.”

⁹Quoted in *St Bride and Her Book: Birgitta of Sweden’s “Revelations,”* trans. from Middle English by Julia Bolton Holloway (Newburyport, MA 1992) 10. Holloway’s methods make many medieval scholars uneasy; I have relied on her chiefly for her recog-

Birgitta is hardly alone among medieval women visionaries in using God's authority to advance her own doctrinal perspectives; it is the inseparability of human and divine will that lends authority to the mystic—male or female—and the fascination of visionary literature comes, in part, from tracing this tangle of personality and doctrine. Birgitta, however, claimed far more for herself in her life and writings than any other visionary woman. Unlike most mystics, she married and bore a large family, beginning the *Revelations* upon her husband's death (1344) and continuing with it until her own in 1373. She came from a powerful family with a tradition of legal practice and scholarship. Her father, Birger Persson, was governor of Uppland, the seat of the Swedish monarchy; he rewrote Sweden's pagan law code, the Vig Saga, to reflect the country's increasing Christianization. Birgitta's maternal grandfather belonged to the long-ruling Folkung family and was himself governor of East Gothland. Birgitta was related to the Swedish monarchy and even tutored Queen Blanche; sections of the *Revelations* address the royal couple's extravagant lifestyle and Sweden's role in Continental politics. It was to King Magnus that Birgitta appealed for help in establishing her Ordo Sanctissimi Salvatoris, the Order of the Most Holy Savior. Magnus donated the royal castle at Vadstena for the purpose and levied a tax to pay for additions and upkeep.¹⁰ It was for this order that Birgitta wrote her *Regula*, or Rule, and the breviary for the Vadstena nuns, *Cantus Sororum*, Song of the Sisters (consisting in part of the *Sermo Angelicus*, the Angelic Conversation), both included in the *Revelations*.

It seems clear that Birgitta drew upon her legalistic heritage in framing her *Revelations* and in writing the *Regula*; in all her writing she not only appropriated the masculine tradition of prophet but, according to Julia Bolton Holloway, created “a Swedish and European Bible for the fourteenth century.” Holloway calls the *Revelations* “a book of books,” and regarding the works written for her order, remarks that Birgitta's “is the first instance (except for Saint Clare) where the woman writes the Rule and establishes the Order.”¹¹ And, of course, no

dition of Birgitta's mystical singularity—Holloway is one of the few students of the *Revelations* to suspect their possibly subversive content. See Harris's edition of the *Vita* (n. 4 above) 78 and 80, on the spiritual state of Master Mathias.

¹⁰See Helen M. D. Redpath, *God's Ambassadors: St. Bridget of Sweden* (Milwaukee 1947), esp. chaps. 1 and 2; Johannes Jørgensen, *Saint Bridget of Sweden*, trans. Ingeborg Lund, 2 vols. (London 1954) vol. 1, passim.

¹¹Holloway (n. 9 above) 125, 134.

other medieval woman has inspired such consistent devotion; not only did Birgitta’s Mariology spur Continental interest in the Virgin and, further, enrich doctrinal debate about Mary’s status within the church, but Birgitta’s Order of the Holy Savior at Syon Abbey is the only currently operating monastic order established by a medieval woman to have remained functioning continuously since its founding (by Henry V).¹² Given Birgitta’s powerful presence in Continental politics, spirituality, and papal reform, the words of Jesus that begin the *Revelations* take on a peculiar resonance: “I am the Creator of Heaven, I am one in divinity with the Father and the holy Spirit” (“Ego sum creator celi et terre, unus in deitate cum Patre et Spiritu sancto”).¹³ The *Revelations* repeatedly emphasizes Birgitta’s own status as virgin, bride, and mother, strengthening her identification with Mary and mirroring the Trinity that speaks through her. Her unmediated voice of God—the insertion of the “I” that is both God and Birgitta—and her Trinitarian exempla are thus related strategies of prophecy.

Luce Irigaray, in “Divine Women,” laments that there “is no woman God, no female trinity: mother, daughter, spirit ... [woman] is fixed in the role of mother through whom the son of God is made flesh ... the virgin’s relations with the Father always remain in the shadow.” Irigaray is here speaking of a Christian tradition that values the feminine only through its procreative link to the masculine, a relationship simultaneously devalued by the “amorphous, formless” (“amorphe, informe”) aspect of the womb.¹⁴ But Birgitta illuminates this relationship

¹²See Morris (n. 4 above) 6, 171–172; and Neil Beckett, “St. Bridget, Henry V and Syon Abbey” in James Hogg, ed., *Studies in St. Birgitta and the Brigittine Order*, 2 vols. (New York 1993) 2.125–150, passim.

¹³*Revelations* 1.1.1. Further references to the *Revelations* in the text and notes will be cited by book, chapter, and verse numbers. The publication information for the books of the *Revelations*, which are in various stages of availability in print and online, is as follows: Birgitta of Sweden, *Revelaciones*, bk. 1, ed. Carl-Gustaf Undhagen, Royal Academy of Letters History and Antiquities (Uppsala 1977); bk. 2, ed. Birger Bergh, St. Birgitta of Sweden Website 1999, *Editio Princeps* (Lübeck 1492), critical edition in preparation by Birger Bergh <http://www.umilta.net/birgitta.html>; bk. 4, ed. Hans Aili, Samlingar utgivna av Svenska Fornskriftsällskapet [SFSS], ser. 2, Latinska skrifter, vol. 7.4 (Göteborg 1992); bk. 5: *Liber Questionum*, ed. Birger Bergh, The Royal Academy of Letters History and Antiquities (Uppsala 1971); bk. 6, ed. Birger Bergh, SFSS (Arlöv 1991); bk. 8, ed. Arne Jönsson, St. Birgitta of Sweden Website 1999, *Editio Princeps* (Lübeck 1492), critical edition in preparation by Hans Aili: <http://www.umilta.net/birgitta.html>.

¹⁴“Il n’y a pas de Dieu femme, ni de trinité féminine: mère, fille, esprit. Cela paralyse l’infini du devenir femme dans la maternité et la tâche de l’incarnation du fils de Dieu ... Ses rapports avec le Père demeurent toujours dans l’ombre.” In Luce Irigaray, *Sexes et*

first through her emphasis on the Virgin as widow: “I was as a widow, by the fact that I had a son on earth who did not have a fleshly father” (“ego fui quasi vidua, eo quod habui filium in terris, qui non habuit carnalem patrem,” 4.53.2). Birgitta/Mary is widowed another way, too: through the death of the son, who is a manifestation of his heavenly father, who in turn is Birgitta’s heavenly husband. One of Birgitta’s most striking images of the triune motif, however, not only establishes a female trinity, but also, in conflating it with the masculine, asserts its authority: “If someone spoke through a pipe having three holes and said to the one listening: Never out of this opening will you hear my voice, he should not be blamed if afterward he spoke through the two remaining holes. Thus it is now in our speech. For although my mother the virgin said that this was to be the final letter sent to the king [Magnus], so this is the message to be understood as referring to the king’s own person. But now I God, who am in the mother and the mother in me, send my messenger to the king.”¹⁵

In this extraordinary passage Birgitta rewrites gospel: God responds here as Christ in John 14.10: “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?”¹⁶ Not only does Birgitta substitute the mother for the father, she also casts herself as messenger, as Christ does in the context of the biblical passage: “the words that I speak are not spoken of myself; it is the Father who lives in me accomplishing his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (10–11). Birgitta aligns herself with a divine Mary, with Christ the messenger, and even with the voice of God—for who is the pipe but Birgitta, a mute instrument till animated by divine *afflatus*? In this complex image, then, not only are the Godhead represented, but also the Birgittine trinity. And not only does the three-holed pipe imply spiritual conflation, but more subversively, perhaps, the physical conflation/equation of male and female that Birgitta elsewhere in her work insists upon spiritually.

Parentés (Paris 1987) 74, 71. Translated text is taken from Gillian C. Gill, *Sexes and Genealogies* (New York 1993) 62, 59.

¹⁵(Deinde dei filius loquebatur ad me dicens:) “Si aliquis loqueretur per fistulam habentam tria foramina et diceret audienti: Numquam ex isto foramine audies vocem meam, non esset arguendus, si postea loqueretur per duo reliqua foramina. Sic etiam est nunc in locutione nostra. Nam licet mater mea virgo dixerit, quod illa esset ultima littera mittenda regi, hoc intelligendum est de persona sua. Sed nunc ego deus, qui sum in matre et mater in me, mitto nuncium meum regi” (8.48.18–20).

¹⁶All biblical references are from the New American Bible.

It is this conflation that paradoxically demonstrates Birgitta’s “indifference” to phallic authority/church hierarchy. Lacan, in “God and Woman’s *jouissance*,” believes that the “perverse *jouissance*” expressed by feminine mysticism is beyond the phallus and thus un-signifiable. He cites as an example Bernini’s sculpture of Saint Theresa—you only have to look at it, writes Lacan, “to immediately understand that she’s coming ... [but] [w]hat is she getting off on?”¹⁷ Lacan makes clear that while Saint Theresa’s *jouissance* is obvious, it is also inexplicable. Lacan’s interpretation depends for its success, of course, on the objectification of the female, on her lack of agency; he sees Saint Theresa as seductive rather than subjective. For what can Lacanian analysis make of a woman who authorizes herself and the role(s) of women rather than serving only as a receptacle of *jouissance*? How is Saint Theresa’s sexual climax obvious to Lacan if Bernini has somehow captured her inexplicability? Irigaray insists that mysticism, while “beyond the phallus,” is not un-signifiable: “This is not a *jouissance* that women cannot know or say; rather it is a *jouissance* that Lacan cannot hear for he does not know how, or even where, to listen.”¹⁸ And yet, Lacan here anticipates later objections to Irigaray’s attempt to entirely

¹⁷ “[C]’est comme pur Sainte Thérèse—vous n’avez qu’à aller regarder à Rome la statue du Bernin pour comprendre tout de suite qu’elle jouit ... Et de quoi jouit-elle?” In *Le séminaire, Livre XX: Encore 1972–1973* (Paris 1975) 70. Translated text is taken from Bruce Fink, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX 1972–1973* (New York 1998) 76.

¹⁸ Grosz (n. 6 above) 175. An anonymous reader of my manuscript argues that she finds “Irigaray’s work [and thus this essay] essentializing and embedded in paradox. To argue for a ‘feminine language’ or discourse is to deny the negativity that structures language itself. Lacan says that ‘woman does not exist’—what he means by this is that woman is a symptom of language’s inability to refer. Thus she becomes associated with all that juridical discursive structures must abject in order to imagine themselves as coherent ... ‘the feminine’ is a patriarchal fantasy.” I doubt there is any way out of this paradox, save for cutting it right through the middle. Objections to Irigaray’s essentialism always puzzle me: is her paradoxical theorizing any more paradoxical than the often tautological linguistic monolith put into place by psychoanalysis? There is value for literature in the Lacanian model of behavior, chief of which may be the idea that language itself is the problem, not the sex underpinning constructions of gender. And yet, to work with (and within) this model, Irigaray must embed herself in its self-referential structure. Irigaray can hardly be “blamed” for essentialism when she is simply using the master discourse. To escape the paradox, one must eschew the structure (as American feminists have tended to do). Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Julia Kristeva, with varying degrees of complicity, must necessarily subvert their own feminisms.

As Toril Moi points out, Irigaray cannot resist attempting to name the feminine, which, according to Irigaray herself, cannot be done. And yet, Irigaray is fully aware of her transgression, which is one reason why she is so indebted to Derrida’s serpentine journey through language. See Jacques Derrida, particularly his remarks on citation, in “signature événement contexte,” *Marges de la Philosophie* (Paris 1972).

free women from objectification when he wonders what and where Saint Theresa's "coming" is from. The difficulty Irigarayan theory (and indeed all feminist psychoanalytic discourse) faces is "positionality," defining a female *jouissance* that is neither Other nor masculine: Elizabeth Grosz suggests the feminine "cannot describe itself from outside or in formal terms, except by identifying itself with the masculine, and thus by losing itself." She goes on to describe Irigaray's strategy for challenging Lacan's phallogocentrism as "laughter, disinvestment of interest, *indifference* presented as interest or commitment." Irigaray proscribes masculine discourse but cannot prescribe a feminine alternative (the effort to do so—to name, delineate, delimit—is itself a feature of masculine discourse); instead, her own theoretical writings mimic male psychoanalytic discursive practices to achieve her feminist ends, what Grosz calls "a strategy for utilizing ... a 'machinery' hostile to one's interests so that it works against itself."¹⁹ Considering Birgitta's spiritual goals, this strategy might also be a way to mimic male discourse without the irony or mockery typically associated with Irigarayan discourse but with a certain spiritual joy.

Irigaray's strategic machinations do not simply subvert Lacanian discourse; her "Divine Women," for example, is written with Ludwig Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* very much in mind, and she is not content with Feuerbach's anthropological and essentialist explanation of the Trinity (despite the charge of "essentialism" continually leveled at Irigaray), even though his Trinity seems to substitute the Mother of God for the Holy Spirit as the third aspect of the triune God, because "the personality of the Holy Spirit is a too vague and precarious, a too obviously poetic personification of the mutual love of the Father and Son, to serve as the third complementary being." Yet the Virgin's status is posited contingently on the Son's masculinity in a protopsychanalytic way: "The son—I mean the natural, human son—considered as such, is an intermediate being between the masculine nature of the father and the feminine nature of the mother; he is, as it were, still half a man, half a woman, inasmuch as he has not all the full, rigorous consciousness of independence which characterizes the man, and feels himself drawn rather to the mother than to the father ... the son's love for his mother is the first yearning of man towards woman—his first humbling of himself before her ... Necessarily, therefore, the idea of the

¹⁹Grosz (n. 6 above) 175, 178 (quoting Irigaray), 187. On "positionality," see Toril

Mother of God is associated with the idea of the Son of God—the same heart that needed the one needed the other also.”²⁰

“Divine Women” takes issue with Feuerbach’s paradoxical treatment of the Virgin: in *The Essence of Christianity* she is first elevated to explain spiritual mediation between Father and Son and in this way is associated with both the Son and Holy Spirit; but because her material aspect is female she is relegated to a male-dependent role, lacking rigor and physical or spiritual autonomy. As Naomi Schor observes, Irigaray seeks not to define women (“a task better ... left to men”), but to mimetically transform woman’s masquerade: “the real in Irigaray is neither impossible, nor unknowable: it is the fluid.” Schor is here speaking of physical fluid, the “mater-ialism” of Irigaray’s scientifically-tinged criticism of essentialist discourse, but the fluid, as Irigaray’s *idée fixe*, works also figuratively to describe women’s playful reappropriation of the feminine. That is, the fluid may be described or defined in terms of the container that contains and thus shapes it. And yet, as Irigaray expresses it, “To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse ... It also means ‘to unveil’ the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function.”²¹ Birgitta, too, displays a typically generous and canny relationship to the fluid in her *Revelations*. As Birgittine scholars have long noted, she frequently refers to herself as a conduit, or channel (*canalis*) for divinity, which expresses itself in fig-

Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London 1985) 136–138, 140.

²⁰[D]enn die Persönlichkeit des heiligen Geistes ist eine zu vage und prekäre, eine zu sichtlich bloß poetische Personifikation der gegenseitigen Liebe des Vaters und Sohnes, als dass sie dieses dritte ergänzende Wesen hätte sein können ... Der Sohn—ich meine natürlichen, menschlichen Sohn—ist an und für sich ein Mittelwesen zwischen dem männlichen Wesen des Vaters und dem weiblichen der Mutter; er ist gleichsam noch halb Mann, halb Weib, indem er noch nicht das volle, rigarose Selbstständigkeitsbewusstsein hat, welches den Mann charakterisirt und mehr zur Mutter als zum Vater sich hingezogen fühlt ... Die Mutterliebe des Sohnes ist die erste Sehnsucht, die erste Demuth des Mannes vor dem Weibe.” Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums* (Suttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1960) 86, 87. Translated text is taken from *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot, intro. Karl Barth (New York 1957) 70, 71.

²¹Naomi Schor, “This Essentialism Which is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray” in *differences* 1.2 (1989) 38–57, 47, 50; Luce Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n’en est pas un*: “Jouer de la mimésis, c’est donc, pour une femme, tenter de retrouver le lieu de son exploitation par le discours ... C’est aussi “dévoiler” le fait que, si les femmes miment si bien, c’est qu’elles ne se résorbent pas simplement dans cette fonction” (Paris 1977) 74. Translated text is taken from Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca 1985) 76. And see Børreson’s analysis of the difference between the Birgittine and Julian trinitities. Birgitta, unlike Julian of Norwich, does not feminize the divine, but “divinises the female by making Mary Christotypic” (n. 2 above, 22).

ures of thirst-quenching liquid or wine. This is a strategy by which Birgitta can align herself not only with the Old Testament prophetic tradition, but also with Christ as the incarnation of his Father: no one comes to the Father but through the Son. In book 5, however (known as *The Book of Questions, Liber Questionum*), with her usual imagistic complexity Birgitta expresses the Son as the wine and Mary as the vessel.²²

Irigaray's discursive relationship with Feuerbach is far more complementary and rewarding than her relationship with Lacan; her philosophical objectives have more force than her reactions to psychoanalytic discourse. Feuerbach, much as Lacan, anticipates or grounds some of Irigaray's key speculations on woman's spirituality:

Certainty is the highest power for man; that which is certain to him is the essential, the divine. "God is love:" this, the supreme dictum of Christianity, only expresses the certainty which human feeling has of itself, as the alone essential, i.e., absolute divine power, the certainty that the inmost wishes of the heart have objective validity and reality, that there are no limits, no positive obstacles to human feeling, that the whole world, with all its pomp and glory, is nothing weighed against human feeling. God is love: that is, feeling is God of man, nay, God absolutely, the Absolute Being. God is the optative of the human heart transformed into the *tempus finitum*, the certain, blissful "IS,"—the unrestricted omnipotence of feeling, prayer hearing itself, feeling perceiving itself, the echo of our cry of anguish.²³

²²She does so to answer the first question asked in the Tenth Interrogation (i.e., why did God choose to hide his divinity, as it were, in the flesh of humanity?); it is a response sandwiched between the moralizing praise lavished on Mary in the Ninth Interrogation, and the subsequent response in the Tenth that addresses God's omnipresence and unique ontology: "In my own self I am, who is above all and outside all, who is within all and all within me, and without me is nothing" ("in me ipso sum, qui supra omnia et extra omnia sum, qui intra omnia sum et in me sunt omnia et sine me est nichil," 5.10.20). See Morris (n. 4 above) 66–67; Borreson (n. 2 above) 25, 41; and n. 4 above.

²³Gewissheit ist für den Menschen die höchste Macht; was ihm gewiss, das ist ihm das Seiende, das Göttliche. Gott ist die Liebe—dieser Ausspruch, der höchste des Christenthums—ist nur der Ausdruck von der Selbstgewissheit des menschlichen Gemüthes, von der Gewissheit seiner als der allein berechtigten, d. i. Göttlichen Macht—der Ausdruck von der Gewissheit, dass des Menschen innere Herzenswünsche unbedingte Giltigkeit und Wahrheit haben, dass es keine Schranke, keinen Gegensatz des menschlichen Gemüths giebt, dass die ganze Welt mit aller ihrer Herrlichkeit und Pracht Nichts ist gegen das menschliche Gemüth. Gott ist die Liebe—d.h. das Gemüth ist der Gott des Menschen, ja Gott schlechtweg, das absolute Wesen. Gott ist das sich gegenständliche Wesen Gemüths, das schrankenfreie, reine Gemüth—Gott ist der in das *Tempus finitum*, in das gewisse selige Ist verwandelte Optativ des menschlichen Herzens, die rücksichtslose Allmacht des Gefühls, das sich selbst erhörende Gebet, das sich selbst vernehmende Gemüth, das Echo unserer Schmerzenslaute"; in Feuerbach (n. 20 above) 145–146; translated text (n. 20 above) 121. On Irigaray's relationship to psychoanalysis and

This describes exactly the experience of mysticism, of spiritual union with God, that Irigaray discusses at length throughout her work, in which the God of women (and of men) is “[j]ust an elusive memory that flees representation” (“si ce n’est qu’un souvenir insaisissable qui se dérobe à sa représentation”).²⁴ The mystical experience “allows femininity to discover itself precisely through the deepest acceptance of patriarchal subjection.” In other words, there is a gap between feeling and articulation; the former may exist purely, if mutely, but it can only be authenticated doctrinally. This is where Irigaray’s strategy of mimicry, as outlined in (and by) *Speculum of the Other Woman* (*Speculum de l’autre femme*), can trace the impact and effect of Birgitta’s appropriation and exegesis of biblical writings, particularly in the first book of the *Revelations*. *Speculum* is structured like its nominal instrument; its “central section [is] framed by the two massive sections on Freud and Plato respectively ... as if the more fragmentary middle section sinks between the solid, upright volumes of the master thinkers. Within the middle section, the framing technique is both repeated and reversed.”²⁵ It is in this middle section, entitled “Speculum,” that Irigaray places her chapter *Une Mere de Glace*, a transcription of extracts from Plotinus’s *Enneads*, a Neoplatonist treatise on the hierarchy of existence that had considerable impact on Christian thought. The *Enneads* becomes “Irigaray’s expert (literal) imitation of them. Her perfect mimicry manages subtly to expose his narcissistic phallocentrism.”²⁶

Within the illuminating concavity of *Speculum*’s structure, Irigaray’s mocking appropriation of Plotinus seeks to erase the privileged position of masculine discourse, to show, by the placement of *Une Mere de Glace*—so that it mirrors the discursive objects of Western thought—that “it is, paradoxically, through the imitation of its object that the speculum objectifies it in the first place.”²⁷ When Birgitta begins the *Revelations* appropriating the voice of God as her own, she too is holding a mirror up to the church: if she speaks as a prophet in the Old Testament and as Christ in the New Testament, and if her authority is then validated by agents of the church, then her elevation of Mary and

philosophy, see Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London 1991) 53–54.

²⁴*Speculum de l’autre femme* (Paris 1974) 242. Translated text is taken from Gillian C. Gill, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca 1985) 194.

²⁵Moi (n. 19 above) 137, 130.

²⁶Moi (n. 19 above) 131.

²⁷Moi (n. 19 above) 130.

calls for church reform (and it is largely through Mary that Birgitta makes her judgments and reform demands) must likewise force those agents to recognize their authenticity. To further confound the distinction between her voice and the voice of God, Birgitta often conflates references to the Bible and to her own *Revelations* under the rubric “book.” In book 8 of the *Revelations*, for example, Birgitta sees an angel and a fiend standing before a pulpit: “After this I saw a book glittering in that pulpit, as if made of the most gleaming gold and having the form of a book. That very book was open, and its writing was not written in ink, but every single word in the book was living and spoke itself. No one read the writing of that book, but whatever the writing contained, the whole of it was seen in the pulpit and in those same colors” [of which the beaming pulpit is made].²⁸ “Justice” speaks from this book throughout the chapter (“iusticia de libro”).

Or consider Birgitta’s revision of the Martha and Mary story, in a long chapter from book 6 of the *Revelations*. The biblical account of the two sisters, related in full in Luke 10.38–42, clearly establishes a hierarchy of services to God that in giving preference to the contemplative life of Mary also communicates her passivity: “On their journey Jesus entered a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him to her home. She had a sister named Mary, who seated herself at the Lord’s feet and listened to his words. Martha, who was busy with all the details of hospitality, came to him and said, ‘Lord, are you not concerned that my sister has left me to do the household tasks all alone? Tell her to help me.’ The Lord in reply said to her: ‘Martha, Martha, you are anxious and upset about many things; one thing only is required. Mary has chosen the better portion and she shall not be deprived of it.’”

Birgitta’s retelling does more than explicate the usual association of Mary with the richer contemplative life and Martha with the active; she makes both lifestyles “needful” and also contextualizes the active and contemplative lives, so that the former may approach equality with the latter:

Know therefore, that even though the part of Mary is best, nevertheless, that

²⁸“Post hec autem in ipso pulpito vidi librum resplendentum quasi aurum fulgentissimum et habentem formam libri. Qui quidem liber apertus erat et scriptura eius non erat scripta atramento sed vnum quodque verbum in libro erat viuens et se ipsum loquebatur ... Scripturum quoque libri nullus legebat, sed quicquid continebat scriptura, hoc totum in pulpito et in illis coloribus videbatur” (8.48.54–56).

part of Martha is not evil, but praiseworthy and very pleasing to God ... But note that Martha, when she came to me first asking for her dead brother Lazarus, he was not brought back to life. It was only afterward, when Mary was called and came, and then because of both sisters their brother was revived. Thus it is in spiritual life as well. For one who perfectly desires to be Mary ought first to be Martha, laboring bodily in praise of me ... Thus I said in the gospel that Mary chose the best part. For Martha's part is good at that time when she sorrows for the sins of her neighbors. Martha's part is better then when she labors, as those who live and stand firm wisely and honestly, and she does this because of her love of God.²⁹

It seems likely that Birgitta is rescuing Martha in order to authorize her own status as wife, mother, and widow. Birgitta appropriates the voice of Christ, just as Paul does in 1 Corinthians when he contrasts the virtues of the virgin and the wife: “I should like you to be free of all worries ... The virgin—indeed, any unmarried woman—is concerned with things of the Lord, in pursuit of holiness in body and spirit. The married woman, on the other hand, has the cares of this world to absorb her and is concerned with pleasing her husband” (7.32–34). By subtly re-writing Paul's pronouncement, Birgitta is redefining the roles of women in relation to Christ; further, she is authorizing her “carefulness” in the service of God. She continually wavered between the roles of Mary and Martha in her own life, often agonizing over her worldly, “active” duties, yet in the *Revelations* she arrives at a workable thesis for reconciling the two. By providing a fully authorized matristic gloss on the gospel of Luke, she revises the patristic “machinery” of Paul; secondarily she is of course circumventing the Pauline doctrine that forbade women to preach. Kari Elisabeth Børreson, one of the most comprehensive readers of the *Revelations*, notes the “womancentred falsifications” of the gospels in book 1, in which Birgitta rewrites Luke 1.11–20, and the *Revelations* are peppered with comparisons of Birgitta to Moses and Elijah, Old Testament exemplars of, respectively, ecclesiastical law and prophecy.³⁰

²⁹“Scito eciam, quod, licet pars Marie optima sit, non tamen ideo pars Marthe mala est, ymmo laudabilis et beneplacens Deo ... Sed nota, quod Martha rogans pro fratre suo Lazaro mortuo prior venit ad me, sed non resuscitabatur frater eius statim. Sed venit postea Maria vocata, et tunc propter ambas sorores frater resuscitatur. Sic eciam est in spirituali vita. Nam qui perfecte desiderat esse Maria, debet prius esse Martha laborando in honore meo corporaliter ... Ideo ego dixi in euangelio, quod Maria optimam partem elegit. Nam pars Marthe tunc bona est, quando dolet de peccatis proximorum. Est quoque pars Marthe tunc melior, quando laborat, quomodo homines sapienter et honeste viuant et subsistant, et hoc facit propter solius Dei dileccionem” (6.65.88–102).

³⁰Børreson (n. 2 above) 24. For relevant biographical information see Redpath (n. 10

Perhaps the most audacious of Birgitta's strategies, and certainly the one that lends the most authority to her *Revelations*, is her selective and pervasive use of divine law to uphold Birgittine doctrine and to pass judgment on the saved and the damned. Divine law within the *Revelations* is a complex presence: it refers not only to God's utterances (whether spoken to her or pronounced without mediation through her) but to the juridical processes by which Birgitta expresses doctrine. For example, during the trial of an "ungrateful and disobedient" king in book 8 ("ingratum ... et inobedientem"), the Virgin Mary intervenes on the king's behalf as he is about to be sentenced, and "To [Mary] the judge replied: It is not just, he said, to deny you anything." The king is saved, and Mary ends the chapter with an explanation of God's revelation to Birgitta—why he denies her some knowledge but legitimizes other: "for the saints of God received the holy Spirit in diverse ways ... But for you it is not lawful to know or to hear or to see anything except the spiritual, and to write down and to tell what you see to those persons as you are ordered."³¹

Mary's role is more enigmatic in book 4, during another trial. After a knight and an Ethiopian argue their cases for the judgment of a soul,³² "innumerable demons" appear and plead:

"We know," they said, "that you are one God in three persons ... You are in truth that charity to which are joined pity and justice ... We say more: if that woman you value before all others, who is the Virgin who bore you and who has never sinned; if, I say, she had sinned mortally and had died without divine contrition, thus you esteem justice so that her soul would never have obtained heaven but would be with us in hell. Therefore, O judge, why do you not sentence this soul to us, that we may punish it according to its works?" ... After this was heard a sound like a trumpet's ... and immediately a voice was heard speaking: "Be silent and listen, all of you angels and spirits and demons, to what the Mother of God is saying. [Mary then chas-

above) chaps. 1–3; Jørgensen (n. 10 above) vol. 1, bk. 2; Morris (n. 4 above) chaps 2–4. For a discussion of the passages in the *Revelations* and the *Acta et processus canonizationis beate Birgittae* related to Birgitta's comparison with biblical figures of law and prophecy, and with Moses in particular, see Børreson 30–35.

³¹"Cui iudex: Non est, inquit, iusticia tibi aliquid negare ... Nam sancti dei diuersimode acceperunt spiritum sanctum ... Sed tibi non est licitum scire alia nisi spiritualia audire et videre et illa, que vides, scribere et dicere illis personis, quibus tibi precipitur" (8.56.93–100).

³²Barbara Obrist writes: "In Bridget's revelations, the Ethiopians are always those devils which claim a soul that is being judged. When the judgment is negative and stands as a condemnation, they lead the soul away." "The Swedish Visionary: St. Bridget" in *Medieval Women Writers*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson (Athens, GA 1984) 249 n.11.

tises the fiends:] “O, you enemies of God! You have persecuted mercy, and you love justice without charity. Even though this soul appears lacking in good works, for which it ought not to gain heaven—nevertheless, see what I have under my mantle!”

Mary lifts her mantle to reveal a “small congregation” (“modica ecclesia”) of men and women: “Then after was silence, and then the Virgin was heard speaking: ‘Scripture says: who has perfect faith shall be able to move the mountains on the earth ... O demons,’ she said, ‘I order you by the authority of the judge to attend to these things which you see now in justice.’”³³

Bechtold describes Mary’s role here as “attorney for the defense,” noting that “the final Word and the earthly conception of justice are distorted by Mary ... the soul is granted a reprieve from suffering the full impact of the Law due to Mary’s introjection of merciful silence.”³⁴ Mary interrupts—rather than distorts—divine law, inserting a charitable if obscure silence, Irigaray’s “disruptive excess,”³⁵ that initially appears to reduce Mary’s mantled church to a specular, mute feminine object (like Lacan’s Saint Theresa) but which in fact “speaks” eloquently. Through this image, and her own voice, which repeats the word of God and reiterates Christ’s power to judge, Mary expresses a changed, merciful, and feminized divine law.

This passage is also a clever revision of the transfiguration of Christ. While the gospel’s revelation of Christ’s divinity depends upon the apostles’ expression of faith, Birgitta’s Mary reveals her divine aspect to the faithless fiends, “having under her mantle things of great importance, in secret, as it were ... a small congregation [of] women and men

³³“Nos,’ inquit, ‘scimus, quod tu unus es Deus in tribus personis ... Tu vere es ipsa caritas cui coniuncta sunt misericordia et iusticia ... Plus dicimus: si res illa quam pre omnibus diligis, que est virgo que te genuit et que nunquam peccavit, si, inquam, illa peccasset mortaliter et sine contricione diuina mortua fuisset, sic diligis iusticiam, quod anima eius nunquam obtineret celum set esset nobiscum in inferno. Ergo, o iudex, cur non iudicas animam istam nobis, ut puniamus eam secundum opera sua?’ Post ista audiebatur sonitus quasi tube ... et statim quedam vox loquebatur dicens: ‘Silete et auscultate, omnes vos angeli et anime et demonia, quid Mater Dei loquitur!’ ... ‘O, o inimici! Vos persequimini misericordiam et cum nulla caritate diligitis iusticiam. Licet in operibus bonis hic apparea<n> defectus, pro quibus hec anima non debet obtinere celum; videte tamen quid ego habeo sub mantello meo!’ ... Deinde factum est silencium, et virgo loquebatur dicens: ‘Scriptura dicit: Qui habet fidem perfectam potest per eam montes transferre in mundo ... O,’ inquit, ‘demones, precipio vobis ex potestate iudicis attendere ad illa que in iusticia nunc videtis’” (4.7.17–32).

³⁴Bechtold (n. 2 above) 95.

³⁵Grosz (n. 6 above) 179.

and friends of God, religious and other” (“habens sub mantello suo quasi occulte res aliquas magnas ... modica[m] ecclesia[m] ... mulieres et viri amicique Dei religiosi et alii,” 4.7.25–27). This emblematic revelation of Mary is opposed to the open, male, and patristic apparition Christ presents to the apostles.³⁶ In the gospel accounts of the transfiguration Jesus leads his apostles to the top of a mountain: “He was transfigured before their eyes and his clothes became dazzlingly white—whiter than the work of any bleacher could make them.³⁷ Elijah appeared to them along with Moses; the two were in conversation with Jesus... A cloud came, overshadowing them, and out of the cloud came a voice: ‘This is my Son, my beloved. Listen to him ... When they heard this the disciples fell forward on the ground, overcome with fear. Jesus came toward them and laying his hand on them, said, ‘Get up! Do not be afraid.’”³⁸

In the *Revelations*, Mary’s mantle is not transfigured per se; she lifts it herself to reveal a congregation devoted to her. Her presence, like Christ’s in the gospels, is a mediating one that banishes fear from the godly soul; when God commands the witnesses to hear her, however, she responds not only with a Christlike silence, but also with her interpretation of divine law. After the fiends witness Mary’s charity, Christ sanctions her interpretation of justice: “When this was spoken to them, the demons fled” (“Quibus dictis demones fugierunt,” 4.7.35). Yet in Birgitta’s most cunning transfiguration of Scripture in this passage, Mary speaks the words by which, in the gospels, Christ had banished the devil: the *Revelations*’ Mary tells Birgitta, “Scripture says: who has

³⁶See Holloway (n. 9 above) 56 n. 21 for the frequency of this emblem; see also Bynum’s examples of typical medieval religious iconography, in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York 1992); and Elizabeth Robertson’s analysis of the uses of the female body in Julian of Norwich’s writings: “Medieval Medical Views of Women and Female Spirituality in the *Ancrene Wisse* and Julian of Norwich’s *Showings*” in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, ed. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (Philadelphia 1993).

³⁷For more of Birgitta’s clothing imagery see, for example, 4.9; see also Cumming’s *Revelations* 2.26. Book 2 of the *Revelations* in Latin has not been published in print yet, although it is available online, along with the other books, at the Birgitta and her *Revelations* website; this is a very informational site, packed with links to other mystics’ sites, books of scholarly and lay interest, and online articles. See the references to books 2 and 8 online, and note also Birger Bergh’s online remarks regarding the differences between the print and electronic versions of these books, the latter of which follows the 1492 Ghotan text.

³⁸I have used primarily Mark 9.2–7 for the transfiguration story; for the passage in which Jesus tells his apostles not to fear and for the story of Christ’s casting out of the devil I have used Matthew 17.6–7 and 18–20.

perfect faith shall be able to move the mountains on the earth.” In the transfiguration story of Matthew, when Christ and his apostles come down from the mountain they are met by a man whose son is possessed by an evil spirit. Christ rebukes the devil and casts him out, after the disciples fail to, and then explains their failure as a lack of faith: “I assure you, if you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you would be able to say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it would move. Nothing would be impossible for you.” Once again Birgitta is rewriting gospel *indifferently*; her triune Virgin judges as the Father, mediates as the Mother, commands as the Son—Mary is not only an aspect of the godhead but displays all three divine aspects in the revelations she claims as lawful for Birgitta.

There is another, overarching juridical quality to Birgitta’s life and works, peripheral to the eight chief books of the *Revelations* by which she is known—her establishment of a feminine genealogy. Grosz writes:

The mother/daughter relation is the “dark continent of the dark continent, the most obscure area of the social order” ... [which] covers over the debt culture owes to maternity but cannot accept ... Man’s self-reflecting Other, God, functions to obliterate the positive fecundity and creativity of women ... the phallogocentric reduction to maternity ... implies ... her subjection to the Law of the Father, her subsumption under the name of her husband, and her giving up her identity as a woman.³⁹

Irigaray puts it this way: “Respect for God is possible as long as no one realizes that he is a mask concealing the fact that men have taken possession of the divine, of identity, of kinship.”⁴⁰

Birgitta establishes her nonsubjection to the Law of the Father, masking it as subjection, and thus she renews her identity as a sacred woman. As Holloway notes, the final section of Birgitta’s *Vita*, written by her confessors shortly after her death, “muddles together the categories of wife and widow”⁴¹ so as to take advantage of Birgitta’s status as worldly widow and spiritual bride. In other words, Birgitta co-opts marriage for her own purposes: chastity is preferable to marriage, yet a chaste, spiritual marriage to Christ is not only a singular example of

³⁹Grosz (n. 6 above) 181.

⁴⁰Gill, *Sexes and Genealogies* (n. 14 above) v. “Le respect de Dieu est possible tant qu’il ne devient pas évident qu’il masque une appropriation du divin, de l’identité, de la parenté par les seuls hommes,” Irigaray, *Sexes et parentés* (n. 14 above) 7.

⁴¹Holloway (n. 9 above) 6.

Christ's husbandry of the church, but also sanctifies the state of earthly marriage. Throughout the *Revelations* Birgitta worries about the secondary status accorded to married life by the church fathers, yet her spiritual union with Christ retroactively elevated her physical union with Ulf, and her earthly marriage refined her commitment to Christ, particularly as Birgitta used marriage as an opportunity to urge her husband to greater piety, perfect the management and rhetorical skills she would need in Rome, and practice something of the self-indulgence and haughtiness that made her later asceticism sweeter and more humbling to her.

But Birgitta is one element of a mystical kinship of women, a network for which she was largely responsible, and by which women and men might share in her feminine divine. Her establishment of the Order of the Most Holy Savior for women and men, as well as her influence on contemporary female visionaries, helped create a Christianity contiguous to male Christianity, sometimes subverting it and sometimes supporting it, but faithful to the ideal Irigaray describes in terms of fluidity and fluctuation: "We women, sexed according to our gender, lack a God to share, a word to share and to become ... we are in need of ... our elementary sentence, our basic rhythm, our morphological identity, our generic incarnation, our genealogy ... It is equally essential that we should be daughter-gods in the relationship with our mothers ... Does respect for God made flesh not imply that we should incarnate God within us and within our sex: daughter-woman-mother?"⁴²

Mother, daughter, and granddaughter form another, secular kind of trinity within the *Revelations*, as Birgitta explores her role as a daughter and mother in conversation with the Virgin. In book 6, Mary reproaches the pride of women, to which Birgitta responds as a proud woman: "Our mother also sat with the nobility, in the finest clothes, having many servants and nourishing us with honor. Why oughtn't I inherit this for my daughter, who has certainly learned to bear herself

⁴²Gill, *Sexes and Geneologies* (n. 14 above) 71. "Il nous manque, nous sexuées selon notre genre, un Dieu à partager et à devenir ... il nous manque ... notre phrase élémentaire, notre rythme de base, notre identité morphologique, notre incarnation générique, notre généalogie ... Il est indispensable aussi que nous soyons filles-dieux dans la relation à notre mère ... Respecter le Dieu fait homme, n'est-ce pas incarner le Dieu en nous et en notre genre: fille-femme-mère," Irigaray, *Sexes et parentés* (n. 14 above) 83–84; see also "Les femmes, le sacré, l'argent" in *Sexes et parentés* 89–102; and *Je, Tu, Nous: por une culture de la différence* (Paris 1990), chaps. 1 and 2; and René Girard, *La Violence et le sacré* (Paris 1972), chaps. 1–2. See also Morris's biography (n. 4 above) 109–113.

nobly and to live with joy of the flesh, to die with great honor in the world?” (6.52.17–18). In this lengthy and poignant chapter Birgitta wrestles with her own feminine legacy while struggling to bequeath a different kind of morality to her daughter.⁴³

Two of Birgitta’s daughters, Katherine and Ingeborg, were sent to the Cistercian convent at Risaberga for their education; Ingeborg (to whom Birgitta is referring in conversation with Mary) died a Cistercian nun. Katherine married and, following her mother’s example, attended to her duties as the wife of a prominent man while encouraging her husband to lead a life of prayer, penance, and abstinence. In 1350 Katherine joined her mother in Rome, where Birgitta had gone on pilgrimage, and Birgitta asked her to stay there with her, devoting her life to Christ. Katherine agreed. God told Birgitta that Katherine was the spiritual coworker he had promised her earlier. It appears that God compensated Katherine’s husband for his loss by granting him an early death; thus widowed, Katherine vowed not to remarry but to assist her mother, and the two worked together, sometimes fractiously, until Birgitta’s death. It fell to Katherine to press for her mother’s canonization, to run the order based at Vadstena and manage the faithful who had followed the two women from Rome intending to join it, and to get confirmation from Rome of Birgitta’s *Regula*, the rules she had written to run her order (delayed because, among other reasons, Katherine would not submit to changes suggested by Urban VI). This last was accomplished after Katherine’s death, and by the fifteenth century convents run according to Birgitta’s written rule had been founded all over Western Europe.⁴⁴

Birgitta’s Order was founded “per mulieres primum et principaliter,” “for women first and principally.”⁴⁵ Beyond creating a personal, feminized God, Birgitta created a Christianity linking her with God and with other women. In “Women, the Sacred, Money,” Irigaray claims that women desire to set up a “different social order” and, to fulfill that

⁴³See Cumming’s translation history, *Revelations* xiii–xvi. On the relationship between Birgitta and Katherine, see also Morris’s biography (n. 4 above) 109–113.

⁴⁴See Redpath (n. 10 above) esp. 73–82; Jørgensen (n. 10 above) vol. 2, bks. 7–8; Morris (n. 4 above) 109–113; note that in Jørgensen’s work Birgitta’s daughter is known as Karin (Morris transcribes her name, more familiarly, as Katarina). See also Holloway’s chronological chart (n. 9 above) xii–xiv; Harris (n. 4 above) 13–98; and the final third of Birger Gregersson and Thomas Gascoigne, *The Life of Saint Birgitta*, trans. Julia Bolton Holloway (Toronto 1991).

⁴⁵Quoted in Holloway (n. 9 above) 8.

desire, need “a religion, a language and a currency of exchange, or else a nonmarket economy. These conditions are in fact closely linked.”⁴⁶ The mystical women whose visions and writings flourished throughout the medieval period explored and revised these conditions of faith and existence, and Birgitta remains the most innovative circulator of their particular currency. While male mystics experiencing divine revelations were seen themselves as occupying a feminine state (passive, silent, emotional), the revelations of the women evolved into a distinct discourse, a way of exchanging information among and about women, using a language and imagery modeled upon that used by men, but re-encoding the rhetoric. Thus, while women were assumed to be likelier receptors of mystical visions (as, variously, children or the insane have been considered likelier prophets),⁴⁷ they used their more direct “access” to divinity to reauthorize holy writ. Because the majority of visionary writings by women were dictated to male scribes and scrutinized by male ecclesiastics, their work is considered ultimately to support church hierarchy. But once the revisionary value of these texts is accepted, then men become the agents circulating a feminine discourse—or, at least, providing ecclesiastical women with the opportunity to construct their own divinity.

Birgitta and her successors at Vadstena were not entirely successful in convincing the papacy of their order’s orthodoxy (and thus the orthodoxy of its *Regula*, despite the guarantee of Mary in book 4 of the *Revelations* and of Birgitta’s confessors and biographers). Even by Birgittine standards, the *Regula* was an incendiary document, its “Mariocentric identification decidedly feminist, trespassing the boundaries of ecclesiastical androcentrism.”⁴⁸ And yet, the *Revelations* had been authenticated by her confessors, even though Birgitta claimed more for her gynocentric God than other mystics. For example, Birgitta

⁴⁶Gill, *Sexes and Genealogies* (n. 14 above) 79. “Pour accéder à une organisation sociale différente, il faut aux femmes une religion, un langage, une monnaie d’échange ou une économie non marchande. Ces conditions sont d’ailleurs apparentées,” Irigaray, *Sexes et parentés* (n. 14 above) 93. For more on Irigaray’s relationship to the symbolic, and thus to her understanding of a feminine genealogy, see Whitford, chap. 4. For more on Birgitta’s influence in England, see Johnston (n. 4 above). For more on Birgitta’s influences on both male and female mystics during her lifetime, and the rise of mysticism in the fourteenth century, see Obrist (n. 32 above) 227–237; Bynum, *Fragmentation* (n. 36 above) chaps. 4–6; and Margaret Wade Labarge, *A Small Sound of the Trumpet: Women in Medieval Life* (Boston 1986), chaps. 5, 6, and 10.

⁴⁷See Bynum, *Fragmentation* (n. 36 above) 134 and 188–189.

⁴⁸Børreson (n. 2 above) 54; see also 51–55; and Morris’ biography (n. 4 above) 106–

experienced participation in Christ’s nativity, like Gertrude the Great, Marie d’Oignies, Hadewijch of Brabant, Adelheid of Frauenberg, and other visionaries. Unlike others’ visions of participation, however, Birgitta’s is typically unambiguous, detailed, and complex. She (or the divinity speaking through her) expresses her devotion in metaphors of maternity (a common motif in visionary writing), is present at Mary’s recreation of the birth of Christ (a vision Mary had earlier promised to give her), or, in book 6, simulates the physical pregnancy and birth in her heart rather than in her womb.

The mother of God said to the betrothed: “Daughter, you wonder at this motion that you feel in your heart. You ought to know that this is not an illusion, but a manifestation of something similar to the sweetness and compassion given to me. For just as you are ignorant of the way the motion in your heart came to you so suddenly and with exultation, thus the coming into me of my son was wondrous and sudden. For when I consented to the angel who announced the conception of the son of God, immediately I sensed in me something wondrous and living. And when he was born from me, he came forth from my closed maiden womb with unutterable exultation and miraculous quickness. Thus, daughter, do not fear an illusion but be thankful, for this movement you feel is a sign of my son’s coming into your heart. As my son assigns to you the new name of his bride, so I call you my daughter-in-law. For your father and mother, growing older and more quiet, are placing the burdens on the daughter-in-law, and they tell her there are things to be done in the home, just so God and I do things—by our charity—in the old and indifferent hearts of the people. We wish to show our friends and the world our will through you.”⁴⁹

109.

^{49c} ... mater Dei et dixit sponse: ‘Filia, miraris de motu, quem sentis in corde tuo. Scias, quod non est illusio sed ostensio quedam similitudinis dulcedinis mee et misericordie michi facte. Nam sicut tu ignoras, quomodo tam subito tibi cordis exultacio et motus aduenit, sic aduentus filii mei in me mirabilis fuit et festinus. Nam quando ego consensi angelo nuncianti michi conceptionem filii Dei, statim sensi in me mirabile quoddam et viuudum. Et cum nasceretur ex me, indicibili exultacione et mirabili festinancia clauso meo virginali vtero prodiebat. Ideo, filia, non timeas illusionem sed gratulare, quia motus iste, quem tu sentis, signum aduentus filii mei est in cor tuum. Ideo, sicut filius meus imposuit tibi nomen noue sponse sue, sic ego voco te nunc nurum filii mei. Nam sicut pater et mater senescentes et quiescentes imponunt nurui onus et dicunt ei ea, que sunt facienda in domo, sic Deus et ego in cordibus hominum senes et frigidi a caritate eorum indicare volumus amicis nostris et mundo per te voluntatem nostram’ (6.88.3–7). See Sahlin’s response to this vision and to Birgitta’s maternity in the *Revelations*, in “A Marvelous and Great Exultation of the Heart’: Mystical Pregnancy and Marian Devotion in Bridget of Sweden’s *Revelations*” in Hogg (n. 12 above) 1.108–109; and see Børreson (n. 2 above), who calls Birgitta’s vision of pregnancy “completely exceptional” 39. Børreson’s tone here (and throughout her lengthy essay) is unusual. Her thesis suggests that Birgitta’s influence is less subversive than feminist scholars would like to make it, and yet she herself admits to Birgitta’s singularity and audacity in any number of areas.

Despite the singularity of this message from the Virgin, visions of maternity were not experienced exclusively nor even primarily by women; neither were the symbiotic pregnancies associated primarily with Mary, but rather with Jesus. As with their spiritual writings and the liturgy common to their religious orders, the visions expressed by women borrowed and adapted those expressed in communities of men. Complex cultural changes during the patristic and early medieval periods paved the way for a changed conception of Christ and an expanded role for his mother Mary, but the rationale behind individual experiences of the Son as mother figure is fairly clear: maternity is associated with unqualified love, nurturance, the inextricability of physical pain or effort with emotional pleasure, and with the fleshly unity that at one time made mother and child inseparable entities. But Birgitta's maternal visions are, without exception, associated with Mary (even though Birgitta's Christ expresses love for his church in traditional maternal terms). By envisioning Mary as the generative entity and spiritual authority—to the extent that Mary not only allegorizes Birgitta's faith by her pregnancy, but makes Birgitta her and God's spiritual successor—Birgitta's vision neatly contradicts the physiological commonplace of the period, reflected in other visionary writing, by which the female generates the fleshy matter of the fetus and the father the spiritual matter.⁵⁰

Birgitta is clearly unique among visionary women. Those who would deemphasize the heterodoxy of her religious writings and practices might consider one of Feuerbach's observations in *The Essence of Christianity* on the subjectivity of the man-God relationship: "And thus, in reality, whatever religion consciously denies ... it unconsciously restores in God. Thus, in religion man denies his reason ... he can only believe what God reveals to him. But on this account the

⁵⁰Carolyn Bynum's *Jesus as Mother (Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* [Berkeley 1982]) is perhaps the most important study of gender in medieval spirituality in recent years; see in particular chap. 4, and also Bynum's discussion of Bernard of Clairvaux's "conception of the father as disciplinarian," vis-à-vis Christ as nurturing figure (116), a duty that Birgitta's Mary also appropriates. It is interesting to consider how much more "affective" (and Bynum has much to say about this term, 129–135) these fluid gender conceptions of the divine are in pictorial representations (and for these, see the numerous figures Bynum has collected in *Fragmentation and Redemption*, n. 41 above); it becomes easier then to understand how resistant modern scholars were, until recently, to clearly *seeing* these emblems, as opposed to reading them as they occurred in patristic and monastic writing. One can read Jesus as mother allegorically; when one sees a figure of Christ giving suck to his faithful, however, one must

thoughts of God are human, earthly thoughts”⁵¹ (one is again reminded, inversely, of Paul in 1 Corinthians 2.11–12: “Who, for example, knows a man’s innermost self but the man’s own spirit within him? Similarly, no one knows what lies at the depths of God but the Spirit of God”). It is difficult to speak of Birgitta as merely an agent of the church and impossible to speak of her as an independent entity. Throughout her life, as she worked toward her personal, spiritual, political, and monastic goals, she simply joined her will with God’s and went her own way. Whether confronting a divided papacy, or castigating King Magnus for his alleged homosexual inclinations, or demanding an end to the Hundred Years’ War, or substituting community affections for parental affections, Birgitta received from God those things she was denied as a fourteenth-century religious woman. By sublimating her earthly impulses in the service of God she was able to channel those impulses, her beliefs, and idiosyncrasies in order to change a rich internal relationship and a visionary rule into a reality *per mulieres primum et principaliter*.⁵²

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reconcile this image with our culture’s comparatively rigid gender roles.

⁵¹“Uns so setzt denn auch wirklich die Religion Alles, was sie mit Bewusstsein verneint,—vorausgesetzt natürlich, dass dieses von ihr Verneinte etwas an sich Wesenhaftes, Wahres, folglich nicht zu Verneinendes ist,—unbewusst wieder in Gott. So Verneint der Mensch in der Religion seine Vernunft: er weiss nichts aus sich von Gott, seine Gedanken sind nur weltlich, irdisch: er kann nur glauben, was Gott ihm geoffenbart. Aber dafür sind die Gedanken Gottes menschliche, irdische Gedanken.” In Feuerbach (n. 20 above) 33–34; translated text, 27.

⁵²I would like to thank Professors David Allen and Jane Bishop for their great help with the Medieval Latin translations.