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**Dyan Elliott: Proving Woman**

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## *Introduction*

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THIS BOOK addresses the trajectory of female spirituality over the course of the High and later Middle Ages. From a certain perspective, it is a familiar story to which all students of the medieval and early modern periods can supply the ending: during this period, female spirituality (“always already” suspect) is progressively perceived as a substantial threat to the church and society at large. This gradual criminalization of female spirituality parallels the progressive efforts to constrain and even persecute women, an impetus most dramatically illustrated in the witch-hunts of the early modern period. Therefore this book is not really about what happens to female spirituality, but about why it happens. It attempts to isolate a constellation of factors that help to explain this process.

At the very center of this problem are the various convulsions medieval society was undergoing around the time of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215). As papal antidote to contemporary confusion, Lateran IV is undoubtedly the clearest statement we have of the problems confronting the medieval church in this period as viewed through the lens of the higher clergy. Although the problems are legion, there are several strands that are of particular importance to this study: the threat of heresy; the regulation of sanctity; the new emphasis on the sacraments, particularly confession and the eucharist; and the introduction of the inquisitional procedure. From the perspective of the church hierarchy’s disciplinary measures, these three strands are strategically interwoven in the fight against heresy: heretical antisacramentalism is countered by a due reverence for the sacraments, which becomes one of the benchmarks of orthodoxy; saints are newly perceived as key players in the struggle against heresy—hence an emphasis on the sacraments becomes intrinsic to contemporary profiles of sanctity; the inquisitional procedure will soon be adopted as the instrument for assessing both sanctity and heresy; and the sacrament of confession, made mandatory for the first time at the council, emerges as a new proof of orthodoxy, obliquely corresponding to the emphasis placed on confession in inquisitional procedure. All of these considerations are implicated in the way in which female spirituality is portrayed in this period.

Lateran IV also both signals and abets a more abstract change that affected individuals in all walks of life: a growing concern with what constitutes proof. The outlawing of the ordeal and the introduction of the inquisitional process are certainly the most explicit conciliar articulations

of this change, but the deliberations of the council are everywhere riddled with similar problems of evidence. Undoubtedly the most pressing of these issues is what constitutes orthodoxy or heresy. Papal efforts to control the identification of saints or the public veneration of relics are likewise freighted with considerations of proving authenticity. Many of these proof-fraught questions remain unanswered, but others would eventually find resolution through recourse to the inquisitional process, a disciplinary measure promoted by this council in response to the problem of how to proceed against a cleric accused of a crime. Very soon, a wide set of ecclesiastical and secular tribunals will look increasingly to the inquisition as the primary mechanism for the production of truth. Therefore throughout this study, the term “inquisition” (*inquisitio*), even when applied to a particular tribunal, should be understood in the widest sense as a procedure not limited to one forum but the province of many. In all cases, the term is more reflective of a process than of an institution—a point that needs constant reiterating particularly with respect to heresy.<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary representations of female sanctity were in many ways sculpted to confound the heretic. Central features of women’s spirituality that first emerged during this period—its physicality, eucharistic devotion, confessional practice—all answer to this need, providing vivid proof of orthodox contentions. This study examines what the phenomenon of women as proof of orthodoxy means: how female spiritual claims were first established, subsequently wielded, and then ultimately discredited. Both the supporters and the detractors of holy women looked progressively to more or less formal versions of the inquisitional procedure in order to prove (or disprove) the authenticity of women’s spiritual lives. One of my arguments is that the continued application of this procedure progressively undermined clerical perceptions of the essential integrity of female spirituality, whatever the original motive dictating the adoption of this procedure. Ultimately, the procedure itself contributes substantially to the faltering profile of female spirituality to the extent that, by the end

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Henry Ansgar Kelly’s objection to the tendency to approach inquisition as a method reserved for heresy alone, rather than recognizing it as a widespread procedure put to many different uses, in “Inquisition and the Prosecution of Heresy: Misconceptions and Abuses,” *Church History* 58 (1989): 439–51. Also see Richard Kieckhefer’s reminder that the prosecution of heresy itself was discussed in terms of the officers, *inquisitores hereticae pravitatis*, as opposed to an institution known as the “inquisition,” which develops only in the early modern period (“The Office of the Inquisition and Medieval Heresy: The Transition from Personal to Institutional Jurisdiction,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 46 [1995]: 36–61). Kieckhefer’s point is well taken. However, I am convinced that a common ideology—fostered by papal sanctions, inquisitorial manuals, and even the sharing of inquisitional records in order to track a person’s guilt—represents an enterprise sufficiently coherent and united to warrant the name “inquisition.” Cf. Edward Peters’s similar assessment in *Inquisition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 67–68.

of the fourteenth century, women will no longer be perceived primarily as proving orthodoxy's dogmatic contentions—contentions that have, by now, been satisfactorily sustained in any event. Instead, women's faith and religious practices will be increasingly scrutinized from a skeptical standpoint, and the women themselves will ultimately be required to prove their own orthodoxy. Moreover, female sanctity is not a discrete phenomenon, cordoned off from its larger spiritual setting. The common application of the inquisitional process for the purpose of establishing the veracity of both sanctity and heresy tended to narrow the gap between these two conditions generally. The holy woman's downward spiraling can again be perceived as both symptom of and stimulant for this gradual dissolution of coherent categories. But like Lucifer, she did not fall alone. Even as the rebellious angel took a good chunk of the heavenly host along with him, the female saint also dragged positive representations of sanctity along in her wake.

Thus far I have been using the word "proof" in a legalistic or academic sense: to prove a case; to prove a position—both of which activities are accommodated by the Latin verb *probare*. But the same word had other dimensions as well. God proves his saints as gold in the fire, which in this context would be best understood in the sense of "tests" or "tempts." This manner of proving functions as a way of manifesting both to God (whose omniscience does not really require this information) and especially to humankind that the person in question is, indeed, a saint. Such testing, however, was not restricted to the perfected individual; it could also serve a purgative function for the sinner. Thus God proves the sinner through the infliction of suffering to purge an individual of sins for his or her own good. The expiational effect of purgatorial fire is but one aspect of this sometimes bewildering side of divine clemency. Although the agents for inflicting such persecution had traditionally been associated with the devil, the celebration of suffering in the High Middle Ages will interfere with the devil's near monopoly over the administration of such travails. The rising appreciation of the value of suffering alters the traditional perception of the agents responsible for its infliction, tending to purify, justify, and sometimes even sanctify the punitive function of both church and state. We hear an echo of this process in Chaucer's hagiographically inflected *Clerk's Tale* and its justification of the coercive aspects of gender roles dictated by the institution of marriage. The virtuous wife, Griselda, who is likened both to Job and to gold in the fire, demonstrates her submission to God's will through submission to her husband's authority—even when such submission requires the sacrifice of her children. The concept of proving is possessed of still darker aspects: *probare* is also a verb used for torture—a possibility that is at the center of the martyr's *passio* but that invariably hovers at the edge of the heretical trial.

In other words, I am seeking to encounter proof in its many different guises, and the ways in which these meanings reverberate in the religious lives of medieval women and society at large.

This study arose out of the sense that the categories of saint and heretic have too often been treated in isolation, or at least oppositionally—a dualistic perspective that in many ways reflects ecclesiastical hopes. There are some studies that represent exceptions to this kind of compartmentalization: scholars such as Peter Dinzelbacher, Richard Kieckhefer, and Aviad Kleinberg have all pointed to a number of disputed cases of sanctity, or circumstances under which the distinction between saint and heretic breaks down altogether.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Barbara Newman has treated orthodox and heretical mystical writings as indivisible aspects of a coherent corpus.<sup>3</sup> The present work likewise seeks to challenge the boundaries between sanctity and heresy: first, by analyzing their symbiotic natures, and second, by examining procedure with a view to understanding unintended effects. As suggested earlier, the very mechanisms developed for discerning the saint and the heretic inevitably make these categories more proximate. In order to trace this progressive development, I have cast my net as widely as possible, enlisting sources that reflect each of these imagined polarities: hagiographies, processes of canonization, heretical trials, manuals for both confessors and inquisitors of heresy, theological and canonical writings, ritual protocol, chronicles, and exempla are among the sources consulted to shed light on how the purity of an individual's spiritual metal is tested or "proved."

The sacrament of confession is at the very heart of representations of female spirituality in this period, and the far-reaching implications of this emphasis constitute one of the major themes of this book. Thus chapter 1 examines the concurrent rise of sacramental confession and its inquisitional counterpart with a view to illuminating how this parallel fostered what I refer to as a "covert bridge" between the respective tribunals. The two chapters comprised by part 1 focus on the way in which the female spirituality emerging in the wake of Lateran IV was shaped within the confessional relationship and then deployed in the fight against heresy. Chapter 2 analyzes the antiheretical impetus of the Beguines' confessional practices: their profound veneration for their confessors, their scrupulos-

<sup>2</sup> Peter Dinzelbacher, *Heilige oder Hexen? Schicksale auffälliger Frauen in Mittelalter und Frühneuzeit* (Munich: Artemis and Winkler, 1995); Richard Kieckhefer, "The Holy and the Unholy: Sainthood, Witchcraft, and Magic in Late Medieval Europe," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 24 (1994): 335–85; Aviad Kleinberg, "Proving Sanctity: Selection and Authentication of Saints in the Later Middle Ages," *Viator* 20 (1989): 183–205.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Newman, "La mystique courtoise: Thirteenth-Century Beguines and Religious Women," in *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp. 137–67.

ity, their visions of purgatory, and their extreme asceticism. Taken together, these features function as a profound endorsement not only of auricular confession but of the entire penitential framework on which the sacrament depends. The example of Elisabeth of Hungary, the focus of chapter 3, reveals a different aspect of the church's antiheretical initiative. Both during her lifetime and after her death, Elisabeth was in the hands of the chief architects of the inquisition against heresy: Gregory IX; his penitentiary, the canon lawyer Raymond of Peñafort; and especially her confessor, Conrad of Marburg, who happened to be the first papal inquisitor. As with the Beguine movement, Elisabeth's unquestioning obedience to her confessor becomes an exemplar used to combat heresy. But the methods employed by her confessor are an early symptom of the heretical tribunal's possible infestation of its sacramental counterpart.

Part 2 explores various deployments of inquisitional procedure with a view to understanding how it impinges on the assessment of an individual's spiritual profile. The fourth chapter begins with a detailed examination of the protocol followed in two kinds of papal inquisitions: the process against heretics and the canonization of saints. The use of the *inquisitio* in both instances enhances the permeability between fora alluded to above. But the application of this procedure also demonstrates the limitations of clerical control: the chapter concludes with instances from heretical trials or failed canonizations that demonstrate the *inquisitio*'s potential for reversal and other unintended consequences. The fifth chapter concerns individuals who are regarded as holy during their lifetime and the ways in which their claims to sanctity are proved, largely by somatic evidence. Such proof can, however, be falsified, as a number of instances of imposture clearly demonstrate. The chapter concludes with the rising tide of medical discourse and its tendency to pathologize, and thus discredit, the most celebrated features of female spirituality.

Part 3 addresses the rise of the discourse of spiritual discernment in the schools. Clerical culture is the focus of chapter 6. By beginning with a demonstration of the parallels between the scholastic methodology and the inquisitional process, and the inherent reversibility of the verdicts arrived at by each, the chapter points to the ultimate instability of any given position. It then turns to certain Ockhamite-inflected questions raised in university circles, which have the effect of casting doubt on mystical experiences. Such clerical apprehension is a contributing factor to the rise of the discourse of spiritual discernment, which, in response to the rise of some highly visible contemporary prophets and visionaries, was intended to assess the validity of their experiences. Chapter 7 examines how theologian and chancellor of the University of Paris John Gerson deployed the discourse of spiritual discernment in order to discredit female mystics—an endeavor associated with his larger strategy of appropriating mysticism to

reform the university. His subsequent failed attempt to defend Joan of Arc will ironically testify to the success of his antiwoman initiatives. Gerson's efforts were enthusiastically embraced and extended by subsequent scholars, hence placing a seal on the declining fortunes of female spirituality. Ultimately, the distance between saint and heretic practically disappeared. The church had always been prepared for this eventuality. Christ himself had long ago cautioned against the false Christs and false prophets that would arise toward the end of time (Matt. 24.23–24). The later Middle Ages believed, perhaps with good reason, that this dire time was finally at hand.

There are certain tendencies implicit in this study that may, I fear, exasperate individual readers. First, I am concerned with how the religious identity of an individual is established—be that person a saint, a heretic, or just an undifferentiated member of the faithful. This orientation periodically requires a close examination of what might be considered aspects of the clerical culture of work: confessors' manuals, ecclesiastical procedure, ritual, scholarly convention, and theological controversy—masculine discourses, sometimes peppered by case studies that, if they address questions of gender at all, usually do so only obliquely. But these various facets are essential to an understanding of the environment in which female spirituality develops, is apprehended, and is assessed. A reader may further experience frustration with my approach to the women discussed, contending that I never really touch base with their spiritual lives. From this perspective, the presence of “female spirituality” in the title of this study may be perceived as highly misleading. In a certain sense, I would have to agree: this study both is and is not a book about female spirituality. It *is* insofar as it isolates factors that played an important role in how female spirituality was presented and how these representations were used. Moreover, it points to the propitious conditions under which female spirituality first flourished as well as the prohibitive ones that sought (often unsuccessfully) its suppression. But this study is *not* about female spirituality in terms of analyzing what the women in question really believed or experienced, even if, occasionally, such questions are addressed. In short, I am seeking to examine an important component of what might be described as the “frame” for female spirituality; I am not nearly as concerned with the picture within that frame except from the rarefied perspective of why the picture assumed the appearance it did, and how certain parties within the clergy may have sought to capitalize on it.

This is not to say that female spirituality is framed by inhibiting factors alone. Nor do I think that every feature of this frame is as repressive and potentially punitive as are the components I am isolating. Some readers may regard my focus as negative, even depressing—a characterization I would, again, not entirely contest. In general, this is not a story of tran-

scendence. Although there are a number of striking instances of individuals resisting coercive powers, it is largely a story of constraint, where individuals are often complicit with their constraining forces. Some may think this perspective is unnecessarily pessimistic; but here, I would have to disagree. In the wake of Caroline Walker Bynum's landmark study *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, a number of works have appeared that celebrate the rich meaning of medieval women's spiritual lives.<sup>4</sup> The areas that I am examining form part of the background against which this more promising narrative of female spiritual transcendence may emerge. An unset jewel gives little indication of the ring as a whole; so it is when only the positive, volitional aspects of female spirituality are considered.

My emphasis on the clerical role in the construction of sanctity and heresy should not be construed as meaning that female spirituality was invented by a handful of clerical masterminds. Certainly the clergy was largely responsible for the rules with which women possessed of pronounced spiritual inclinations either conformed or contended. When viewed optimistically, rules in general can be construed as the very conditions for most kinds of creativity, even as the sonnet or the fugue is inseparable from the intractable dictates governing their respective forms. Moreover, in life as in art, a different, but no less puissant, order of creativity is unleashed when rules are deliberately broken. Either way, censorship itself is capable of generating a certain kind of creative expression—whether its strictures meet with compliance or defiance. But the main disadvantage of our particular rule-bound landscape is that we can seldom discern the extent of the women's participation in what is generally

<sup>4</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987); eadem, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991). Among these later studies are: John Coakley, "Gender and the Authority of Friars: The Significance of Holy Women for Thirteenth-Century Franciscans and Dominicans," *Church History* 60 (1991): 445–60; Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); Dyan Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993); Elizabeth Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechtild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995); Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman*; eadem, "Possessed by the Spirit: Devout Women, Demoniacs, and the Apostolic Life in the Thirteenth Century," *Speculum* 73 (1998): 733–70. There are also a number of valuable collections that foreground female spirituality. See particularly Catherine Mooney, ed., *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell, eds., *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991)—especially the contributions by John Coakley and Jo Ann McNamara. Cf. the new perspectives offered in Juliette Dor et. al., eds., *New Trends in Feminine Spirituality: The Holy Women of Liège and Their Impact* (Brussels: Brepols, 1999).

understood to be their own creative performances since the clerical hand constructs or at least shapes the vehicle through which women's creativity is conveyed. Thus the female spirituality to which the historian is privy may be regarded as something of a command performance with mandatory collaboration with a cleric as a given. The performance itself may be alternately amplified and muffled by the powerful clerical collaborator. Either alternative is possible. But it is impossible to know the extent of his intervention since a tacit condition of the performance is that it occur behind a screen. It is often virtually impossible to know who is performing at any given time—the priest or his penitent. Thus if the utopian expectation of identifying an unmediated female voice must ultimately be abandoned, this is not to deny the existence of a female spirituality, one that was meaningful and fulfilling to its female practitioners. This recognition and acceptance of women's veiled performance is alternately exhilarating and debilitating—every bit as full and as empty as Abelard's graceful resolution to the problem of Universals: “that the name of the rose is meaningful to the understanding although there are now no roses remaining . . . otherwise the proposition ‘there are no more roses’ would not be possible.”<sup>5</sup> There are no more roses—no more unmediated spirituality for us to apprehend; but there *were* roses, and this compromise formation means everything to the historian.

Yet supposing we hypothesize an ideal world where each medieval woman was literate and self-determining, free to enjoy and express her spirituality as she saw fit. Even if this were the case, her voice, like any sound, cannot exist in a vacuum. This study attempts to describe the atmosphere that enables and constrains, but ultimately conveys female speech.

<sup>5</sup> “. . . ut rosae nomen [non] iam permanentibus rosis, quod tamen tunc quoque ex intellectu significativum est . . . alioquin propositio non esset: nulla est rosa,” Abelard (d. 1142), “Incipiunt glossae secundum magistrum Petrum Abaelardum super Porphyrium,” *Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters* 21 (1933): 30. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.