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### **Portrayal of Gender and Our Perception of Intimacy with Saints**

In Christianity, saints are regarded as beings who serve as intermediaries between God and humanity. They hold a central position between holiness and relatability. A saint must have shown heroic virtue, have performed miracles, are worthy of imitation, and perhaps have suffered martyrdom (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2023). However, in this paper, I will present evidence on how the portrayal of gender allows the everyday person to position saints between holiness and intimacy. The familiarity of saints draws them to intimacy, while gender ambiguity portrays holiness through the breaking and transcendence of norms, chastity, and choice of apparel.

The balance between holiness and intimacy could be evident through the concept of familiarity. This may be illustrated through the descriptions Christians give to God. According to Mayblin, “A concept of God. Or at the very least it is not beyond the bounds of conception that if one could visualize It, Him, or Her, God would look like you or me” (271). This shows how although the concept of God is abstract and unknown to the human eye, God’s relationship is better grasped when portrayed in relation to human understanding. A similar phenomenon goes for saints where Christians find familiarity in their human experiences. Mayblin elaborates in the lines that follow:

A saint's skin will have burnt under the same hot sun; their feet will have blistered walking the same rough ground; the saint will have bled when speared, felt hunger, endured pain. While it is implicitly understood that the saint is deserving of respect precisely because they are not like us—that is, they lived and died to an impossibly higher standard—overtly, what prevails is a powerful humanistic logic grounded in a principle of shared corporeality open to suffering... Good people suffer, saints suffer, therefore saints are “people like us”.

Shared humanity is what inspires Christians to relate yet strive to be like the saints. Similarly, the idea of Christianity centered on Jesus Christ stems from God becoming fully human, yet still fully God to be in solidarity with His people. This is not to say that Jesus and the saints should ever be put on the same pedestal but to stress how Christians value and understand through familiarity in relation to themselves.

Some sources believe that gender ambiguity in relation to the context of a saint's time can distance one from a more intimate relationship into respect for holiness. This can be seen in the breaking of gender roles, chastity, and apparel choices made during the time of saints. Mayblin claims that when one climbs the sacred hierarchy, there is a dilution of gendered identities (277). This was supported in a more broad sense by the idea that God is not strictly male nor female, but in a category of “ungendered humanity/divinity”. She continued by describing Christ and the image as someone who has suffered and is a nurturer. The words “suffer” and “nurturer” at that time, were associated to be more feminine descriptors. Going down the hierarchy, female saints

were associated with holiness when they exhibited more “masculine” traits in the context of their time.

An example of the defiance of woman traits was manifested through Saint Teresa de Jesús (1515-1582) who combated the fact that women were not supposed to teach at that time. Espin stated “...those women who achieve sainthood do so because their behavior is not really a woman’s behavior. The idea behind this conceptualization is the same as referring to any woman capable of intelligent thinking as someone who ‘thinks like a man’ ” (138). The transcendence of gender norms creating gender ambiguity does not imply nor assume the sexuality of female saints and holy beings but brings into light how gender norms may blur as they approach holiness.

The concept continues in the portrayal of female sainthood concerning chastity. In the thirteenth century, Empress Cunigunde of Luxembourg was known to be married to Emperor Henry II, as they both remained chaste. Jo Ann McNamara proposed that “chastity” constituted a third gender outside the world of sexually active men and women who threatened social and gender norms at the time (Anstatt 154). However, Anstatt sheds new light on chastity in the Middle Ages in terms of power dynamics. In the Middle Ages, virginity was *taken away* by men and thus stressed as an element of monopolization and power. Anstatt stated, “Men were forced into the role of provider and head of the household, proving their virility through dominance and control, whereas women were supposed to act modest, obedient and silent wives” (154). Because Empress Cunigunde of Luxembourg and Emperor Henry II consensually remained chaste, the gendered differences and power dynamics disappeared as a married couple and influenced their impact as powerful leaders. St. Cunigunde was portrayed in the *Additamentum* as more masculine as she was associated with the word *virago* which relates to overcoming female

weakness and practicing self-control (Anstatt 154). It is important to note that chastity alone was not the reason for her pious life, but may be an element affecting the reader's perception. The emperor and empress were indeed able to perform miracles and were later canonized as saints (156). Interestingly, Anstatt mentioned that most of the stories integrated into St. Cunigunde's cult were purely legendary. Thus, this may suggest that the portrayal of gender was intentional in communicating a message, especially within context.

In the 12th century, Saint Alice of Scarbeck further portrayed the transcendence from the expectation of a woman at that time. As revealed in McNamara's book, she stated:

A recluse should not have enough of her own to give and that she should not take on the task of dispensing gifts of others for the fear that the responsibility would lead her to become greedy. This unrelenting pressure against the charitable work of women seems to betray a deep panic on the part of both clergy and secular officials" (212).

It was also stated in the book that religious women were demanded to be "silent and cloistered" (212). In response to these restrictions, women like Saint Alice began spiritual almsgiving despite her leprosy. This example shows how one is able to go beyond the expectations at that time as a religious woman. Perhaps, the portrayal of her transcendence of what was socially accepted added another facet to her sanctity or holiness.

Gender roles and their portrayal may also manifest through the clothing or apparel of female saints. An example would be Joan of Arc (ca. 1412-1431) whose "refusal to renounce her male attire that eventually cost her her life." (Espin 137). Her ability to not only symbolically

transcend what it meant to be a woman at that time, but also her attitude which resulted in her political influence and defiance which created a sense of holiness and courage.

Saints exhibit human emotions which make them more familiar to the average person, but transcending what was expected of them has shifted their perception of them to be holy. Using gender as a lens to understanding the saints and how they are portrayed sheds light on a facet of sainthood not usually touched on. Familiarity, gender ambiguity, chastity, and symbolic identity through apparel may add to the portrayal in which we believe saints to be closer to us, yet holy and worthy of being emulated.

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