

IN HER IMAGE: CHRIST AND THE FEMALE BODY
IN WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS POETRY OF THE GOLDEN AGE

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It has been only within the last decade that feminist criticism has begun to reconsider the role of the female body in, what Elizabeth Grosz affirms, "the production of subjectivity, the operations of perception and consciousness, and the functioning of power relations" (1). The traditional identification of women with body and nature, and man with mind and culture gave rise to a mind/body split which, made even wider by the essentialist and non-essentialist debate,¹ caused feminists to propound supra-corporeal theoretical paradigms. Because women have been limited to the body, its biological and reproductive functions, a *somophobia* set in among feminist theorists. Recently, however, various feminists have returned to view the female body without the restrictions of the mind/body dualism, re-theorizing it, as Grosz notes

...in terms of its ability to provide explanations for women's social subordination, and...its ability to help reconceptualize women's capacities for resistance to their social subordination and to provide positive terms in which to explain the process of social and psychical construction. ...The body is no longer construed merely as natural, fixed, ahistorical or given; rather it is analyzed and given ontological status as effect or result rather than a cause or givenness. It is no longer simply seen as an external limitation on women's capacities for transcendence, but is regarded as the pliable, variable condition of both women's identities and their differences from men, from other women, and from the narrow patriarchal characterization spawned by our received histories of thought. (2)

The perception that the female body is not a barrier to transcendence is manifested in the writings of women religious of the Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque; it is especially notable in the

area of mysticism. Whereas the traditional perception sees the mystical experience as dependent on the loss of subjecthood and the dissolution of mind/body and subject/object oppositions (Antonopoulos 187), among various female mystics the body itself is frequently the site and mode of transcendence. Instead of fleeing from the body in their aspiration of unity with God, women religious seek transcendence by means of the possibilities provided by fleshliness and the body (Bynum 1987, 6). This study will endeavor to apply this *somatic* expression and mode of transcendence to Spanish women religious poets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

In contrast to the women who wrote secular love poetry and who had to recodify the poetics and object of desire,² with regard to sacred poetry the desired object for both genders was the same: God. The problem, then, for female religious writers was that of developing a discourse to express their female condition towards the desired object. In this regard, women religious, in an extension of the metaphorical and traditional concept of Jesus as Mother (Bynum 1984), embraced the parallel tradition of Christ's body as female. This conception is based on philosophical, theological and physiological theories that, essentially, share the same principle. Theories of procreation had it that a child receives its form, its life, from the father; its matter, body, from the mother. Philosophically and theologically, this coincides with the equation that "Woman is to Man as Body is to Soul." Therefore, with regard to God, man represents his spirituality and woman his humanity, that is, Christ. The implication, then, is that man is made more in God's image than woman. The connection between Christ's humanity and the feminine is noted, above all, in the fact that Christ did not have a human father, and that he derived his body completely from his mother, Mary. As Caroline Bynum notes, "Not only was Christ enfleshed with flesh from a woman; his own flesh did womanly things: it bled food and gave birth to new life" (1991, 222). Christ has breasts that give forth milk, he has a womb in which souls are reborn.³

Physiological theory also associated matter, food and flesh with female in another sense. It was believed, correctly, that the mother's blood fed the child in the womb; however, it was widely believed, incorrectly, that it was menstrual blood that nourished the child; and, once born, the baby at its mother's breast suckled blood

transmuted into milk. One can appreciate, then, the intense identification female religious established between their body and Christ's humanity, and appreciate as well the psychological underpinnings both at the conscious and unconscious levels that fostered such an identification. Given the traditions of Christ as female, theories of procreation and intense psychological motivations, "it is no wonder that women's physiological processes were given religious significance" (Bynum 1991, 215).

The somatic intensity of women's religious devotion that Bynum finds in the women of the High Middle Ages is noted as well in the Spanish women religious of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These women identify themselves, much more so than they do with Mary, with Christ's humanity and His flesh, and the wounds and suffering that this flesh endured. There are various examples of explicit reference to God as Christ becoming human: *humanarse*. The *beata* Luisa de Carvajal⁴ in the *villancico*, "Al Nacimiento," of her *Poesías espirituales*, says:

El Verbo Divino
del inmenso Padre,
en la sacra Madre,
a humanarse vino,
abriendo el camino
al hombre perdido,
del amor herido. (530)

This "humanarse" is reiterated by Sor Violante del Cielo and Sor Marcela de San Félix, especially in poems dealing with the Christ Child. In the *romance*, "Al Nacimiento," Sor Marcela not only speaks of Christ becoming human, but stresses the putting on of flesh:

¿cómo, Palabra Eterna,
se os pudo pegar carne
para pisar piadoso
nuestros humildes valles? (648)

Women religious especially identify with the wounds and suffering of Christ, much more so than male religious do. Christ's wounds, along with his crucifixion, are the object of devotion of all these Spanish religious. Luisa de Carvajal not only feels compas-

sion, she also wants to participate in Christ's suffering and be crucified with him:

¡Qué pies!, ¡qué manos!, ¡qué heridas!,
 ¡qué cabeza coronada
 con la corona que fue
 por mi soberbia inventada!
 ¡Quién la tuviera, Rey mío,
 en sus sienes apretada!
 Y que con esto, mi Dicha,
 llegara a verme enclavada
 en una cruz cual la vuestra,
 y en vuestro amor abrasada.
 Mas, ¡ay de mí!, pues os veo,
 vida de mi alma, acabada
 delante de mí, y no quedo
 con Vos muerta y sepultada. (520)

In various poems, Carvajal refers to Christ's wound as a door and, in one *romance*, besides the nuances of His femaleness, His body is also a castle that affords protection and salvation. The speaker says

y viendo abierta la puerta
 al lado del Real Alcázar,
 dándole amor osadía,
 y prestándole sus alas,
 voló hasta dentro el pecho.
 Y cual Fénix renovada,
 su vida fue así muriendo
 entre mil ardientes llamas. (517)

Here the speaker, in her desire to "salirse de sí misma,"⁵ experiences herself flying through Christ's wound and into His breast, where like the phoenix her life is consumed by fire, only to be reborn in mystic ecstasy. It bears noting that the poet changes the usually masculine gender of the "fénix" in order to affirm her female identity.⁶

Sor María de la Antigua is the female religious who elaborates most the idea of Jesus as Mother and who gives birth within his wound. In one of the narrative sections of her *Desengaño de religiosos*

y de almas que tratan de virtud, she sustains a dialogue with God comparing Him to a mother who, although she loves her child, from time to time has to punish her child for its own good (child=soul): "En qué ocasión, hija mía, no he sido Yo para ti esta Madre amorosísima. Mas como Yo no soy Padre solamente sino Madre, ¿quién ama a sus hijos como Yo? ¿Quién halaga como yo?" (*Desengaños*, 497). In various poems Christ is like a mother who breastfeeds her baby girl (soul):

Y si una madre no deja
sola [a] una hija que ama
cuando ha menester el pecho,
¿ha de dejar Dios su alma? (571)

Sor María also recounts how in a vision she saw two streams of milk flow from Christ's wound:

...despues que me enagené, diré lo que vide...parecióme que vide dos altos rayos de leche: el uno era más alto que el otro; eran delgados, y este mas alto venia a mi boca. No entendí, quando esto vide, de donde procedian, aunque antes de esto casi siempre se hallava mi alma assida del pecho amoroso de mi Señor...mas en la oracion me mostró mi Señor que era de su Costado, y que el un rayo era para mi, y el otro repartia para las demás. Dixome que la causa de ser tan delgado[s] era por que hiziessemos algo de nuestra parte, como lo pone el niño, llamando con las fuerças que él puede al apoyo, y trayendo a si la leche; y que tanto mamará uno de los pechos de su amor quanto para ello le dispusiera; y tanto gozará de la leche suave que da Dios en la oracion, quanto de su parte diere de mano a los negocios y cuydados de el mundo. (*Desengaños*, 300-01)

In much of her poetry, Sor María identifies with Christ's suffering. A notable example are the lines

¿y cuándo al mundo y a mí
estará crucificado? (...)
En las llagas de los pies
mis ojos pongo llorando,
y mi boca humilde besa
las rosas de vuestras manos.

Mi alma se esconde toda
 en la llaga del costado,
 para que, abrasada, sea
 cenizas del amor santo. (613)

Here the soul seeks union with Christ in order to be consumed in love and, implicitly, to be reborn in paradise. One cannot escape the obvious: the wound is a womb which the soul enters, and from love's consummation, this womb gives new birth to the soul. The female mystic perceives Christ in her image: the soul aspires for union with Christ's flesh conceived as female.

Sor Marcela also expresses in her poetry an identification with Christ's suffering. In one *romance* on the Eucharist, "Al Santísimo Sacramento," she describes in terms of astonishment how upon receiving the host, she can experience direct communion with Christ:

¿Que pueda yo imprimir
 en tu costado abierto
 mis labios tantas veces
 que a recibirte llego?
 ¿Que tus hermosas llagas
 deposite en mi pecho,
 y las pueda tocar
 y darlas dulces besos?
 ¿Que tu carne virgínea
 me sirva de alimento,
 y tu sangre real
 de néctar verdadero? (678)

The image of the speaker's lips pressed against Christ's wound and drinking in His blood points to a conception of the wound as breast, and is an image which recalls the visions of St. Catherine of Siena feeding at Christ's wound/breast.⁷ This image not only manifests an identification or fusion of the female mystic with Christ's female body, it is also a metaphor for mystical knowledge. Eating and drinking, as well as kissing—as noted in the above lines—are the conduits of mystical knowledge, that is, such knowledge is experienced or expressed as bodily sensations. This is a fundamental rea-

son why female religious are obsessed with eating Christ's body and drinking His blood (Bynum 1987).

The images of the female mystic or her soul suckling at Christ's wound/breast or being reborn in his wound/womb are not uncommon. Women's somatization of their religious/mystic experience and their employment of intense corporal metaphors not only indicate an identification of their body with Christ's conceived as female, but points to an eroticism based on the rejection of phallogentrism. Jean Franco perceives that "The [female] mystic...fastened on the apertures in the Holy Body in a gesture that is not only erotic but is also a negation of phallogentrism. ...Mystical language is obviously a language of desire, without necessarily implying sublimated sexuality. On the contrary, it seems to focus precisely on those parts of the body least associated with male sexuality" (19).

By rejecting the phallogentric, female mystics exalt the female body, and consequently develop a type of mysticism that diverges fundamentally from traditional mysticism. The latter views body and soul dichotomously, and the mystic endeavors to free the soul from the body. Such female religious as Luisa de Carvajal, Sor Marcela and Sor María express this aspect of mysticism, but many of their images also indicate that they do not view the body and soul in binary or exclusive terms; indeed, their imagery suggests that the female body, traditionally perceived as the locus of demonic activity, is, on the contrary, the site and mode of spiritual transcendence. This is a type of spirituality that Foucault calls a religious "'technology of the flesh,' one in which the uses of the flesh, its pleasures and displeasures, were aimed at communion with and fulfillment in God" (cited in Antonopoulos 186). Another divergence from traditional mysticism is women's subjectivity. As Bynum notes, "men's writing often lacks the immediacy of women's; the male voice is impersonal. It is striking to note that, however fulsome or startling their imagery, men write of '*the* mystical experience,' giving a general description that may be used as a theory or yardstick, whereas women write of '*my* mystical experience,' speaking directly of something that may have occurred to them alone" (1991, 190).

Luce Irigaray employs the term "mysterique" to describe the mystical experience of women religious; it is a neologism that combines mysticism, mystery and hysteria. Thus the mystery of the

experience is related through a mystic discourse that subverts the symbolic and which is outside the logic of the linguistic system, which in turn is related to female hysteria or woman's madness. By excluding women from the domain of rational thought, the Church and clergy ceded the terrain of feeling to them, thereby unwittingly giving women a means of empowerment. As Franco notes "by privileging a purely subjective experience" these mystics "put themselves outside clerical control. ... They traded on the unverifiability of their experience and the clergy's conviction that female knowledge was a way of feeling and experiencing rather than abstract thought." Consequently, in the expression of their hysteria the female "mystics were behaving in the way that women were expected to behave" (8-9).

This examination of female mystic discourse leads us to extend Irigaray's definition to include "hysteria" in its etymological sense of the womb. The mystics' "hysteria," as it were, is often provoked by their obsessive desire to penetrate Christ's womb (the wound on his side), to gestate in it, and to be reborn in Paradise. "Ecstasy—as Irigaray affirms—is there in that glorious slit where she curls up as if in her nest, where she rests as if she had found her home... She bathes in a blood that flows over her, hot and purifying" (200). From love's consummation, Christ's womb gives birth to the soul.

Woman, traditionally associated with the physical, pursued an *imitatio Christi* that concentrated on Christ's humanity, his flesh, his suffering and wounds. Because his flesh did womanly things, women religious identified their physiological processes with Christ's, giving them religious significance and thereby pursuing a particular female *imitatio Christi*. It is obvious, however, from the examples given that Christ is androgynous; although the female religious conceive Christ's humanity and flesh as female, as the object of their adoration he is male. Bynum affirms:

Female *imitatio Christi* mingled the genders in its most profound metaphors and its most profound experiences. Women could fuse with Christ's body because they *were* in some sense body, yet women never forgot the maleness of Christ. Indeed, exactly because maleness was humanly superior, the God who especially redeemed and loved the lowly stooped to marry *female* flesh. ...But women mystics often simply became the flesh of Christ,

because their flesh could do what his could do: bleed, feed, die and give life to others. (1991, 221-22)

Christ is male as the redeemer, the object of desire, and as the spouse of women religious. Women were not and could not be theologians, and did not, for the most part, write in Latin. So in writing in the vernacular, they were influenced by popular genres characterized by a display of feelings. Books of chivalry, sentimental romances and pastorals were avidly read by Spanish women who were major consumers and who contributed largely to the commercial success of this literature. St. Theresa was an avid reader of books of chivalry; Sor Marcela undoubtedly was well familiar with literature of all sorts, especially the poetry and plays of her father; and Sor María de la Antigua confesses that her favorite book was *La Diana*, as she says: "No se me acuerda leer en libro profano, sino fue en el de *Diana*. Éste gustaba de leer, y aun me fue de harto daño, porque me ayudó a mi mal natural; mas con todo desque veia que era mentiras, lo dejaba" (*Desengaños*, 14). So an important characteristic of female religious discourse is not only its affective content but also a marked tone of familiarity with respect to God or Christ.

There are several poems that celebrate a nun's marriage to Christ. Given such a solemn occasion, Ana Francisca Abarca de Bolea, nevertheless, introduces a note of comicity. In a poem celebrating Doña Francisca de Portugal's nuptials, she writes:

Este novio nos dicen
que es buen cristiano
y tiene mil sultanas
en su serrallo.

Es muy poco sufrido
con sus esposas,
que en amando a otros hombres,
mucho se enoja. (...)

Pues que siempre se casa
con mujer nueva,
y de todas pretende
grandes finezas. (432)

Here we seem to have an "a lo divino" depiction of the motif of the "amante celoso y mudable." A tone of familiarity and a manifesta-

tion of female inferiority are noted in a sonnet by Sor Violante del Cielo in which she ponders how a lowly woman can write to such a divine person:

Grande osadía es que a lo divino
 elija por asunto humano canto,
 pero mayor, Señor, que aspire a tanto
 la humildad de un ingenio femenino.

She advances her argument by stating that it is love that impells her to such great heights:

Efectos son de amor que, como es fuego,
 a esfera superior aspira altivo,
 si bien en lo que busca más se abrasa;

But she overcomes her inferiority and daring by virtue of being Christ's bride and living with Him:

pero también será, si a tanto llego,
 que, como en vuestra casa siempre vivo,
 hablo con Vos, Señor, como de casa. (301)

In the *romance* "Al jardín del convento," Sor Marcela compares the garden to Christ. In the courtly tradition it is the woman who is compared to a garden; in Sor Marcela's comparison she also inverts the courtly encomium, leaving us with an androgynous representation of Christ:

De tus hermosos labios,
 del coral dulce afrenta,
 su cárdeno color
 me muestran las violetas.

Majestüosa siempre,
 la cándida azucena
 tu bellissimo cuello
 venturosa semeja.

La fecunda retama,
 tan rubia como bella,
 de tus cabellos de oro
 me da memorias tiernas. (664)

In this encomium we note the projection of the female gender on the lover.

In various poems of Sor María, particularly those of the "Coloquios amorosos" cycle, Christ appears in the traditional guise of the Pastor whom the Pastorcilla fervently seeks. If, as previously noted, the speaker/soul yearns to penetrate the female Christ's womb, in Sor María's experience, as male, Christ is also in hers. In the fifth coloquio, the Pastorcilla encounters her Pastor: "amor de mi alma, ¡si tu Pastora / de amores herida / muriese ahora," and to whom she beseeches: "¡Oh si Tú me enseñases / las leyes de amar!". Sor María expresses Christ's union with God: "Gentil hombre en el cuerpo / es mi dulce amador; / llega al seno del Padre / y es Dios como Dios." Here "seno" is a metaphor for the "Divinidad del Padre, en que está y se considera incluido, y de quien se origina el Hijo" (*Autoridades*). But "seno" also means womb, "el vientre materno." The next quatrain comes very close, if not actually, to this meaning, and with notable erotic overtones: "En mi seno se anida / mi divino amor, / que si es chico, Él le ensancha, / da ser y valor" (594-95). Thus Sor María expresses Christ's divine union with God, the Father, and also strongly suggests Christ's union with her by virtue of penetrating and nesting in her womb. Mystic union can be interpreted as the experience of a divine penetration into her body; thus, instead of being a limitation to transcendence, woman's body becomes the site of a mystic transportation that, in the process, exalts female sexuality: "Él le ensancha, / da ser y valor."

The principal area of female devotion was the Eucharist, for it is in this sacrament that the Humanity of Christ is concentrated, and the consumption—and also non-consumption—of it is associated with mystical and paramystical experiences. Women religious concentrate much more fervidly than men on this Sacrament, and the psychological and spiritual reasons for this concentration appear to be those same reasons that help to explain the rise of female mysticism: the necessity of finding a substitute for the clerical experience. Bynum affirms:

...the eucharist and the paramystical phenomena that often accompanied it were substitutes for priesthood in two complementary senses. First, eucharistic ecstasy was a means by which women claimed "clerical" power for themselves, or bypassed the

power of males, or criticized male abuse of priestly authority. Second, ecstasy was a means of endowing women's nonclerical status—their status as lay recipients—with special spiritual significance. (1991, 135)

The veneration and consumption of the Sacrament elevated these women into ecstasy as it filled them with a sense of power. Furthermore, for those women incapable of true mystical experience, the Eucharist gave them a sublime substitute for mystical union.

We find that Spanish women religious writers, like their predecessors, also employed their identification with Christ's humanity and their role as His spouse to resolve the question of authority. They, like all women, not only lacked clerical authority, they also had to contend with the Pauline proscription of silence. Therefore, they found themselves obliged to justify their authority to write. As noted above, the Church conferred authority to the priest by virtue of his office, authority which he exercised in his distribution of the Host; women experienced their authority in receiving it. And this authority, bolstered by their mystical and paramystical experiences attendant with the reception of the Sacrament, gave them to understand that they were in direct communion with Christ and receiving charismatic authority to write of their mystical and visionary experiences (Bynum 1991, 135-36).⁸

Many of the female religious, such as Luisa de Carvajal, Sor María and Sor Marcela, attribute their writings to divine command.⁹ Likewise, for many, writing was not a pleasurable task, compounded by the fact that, by carrying out this divine command, they found themselves in the dilemma of what is now commonly called the "double bind."¹⁰ On the one hand, these female religious claimed divine authority to write; and on the other, they received authority to write from their confessors, who indeed commanded them to write. But even so, their "freedom" to write was an illusion, as their writings were scrutinized by ecclesiastical authorities for signs of being *ilusas* and the Devil's medium of deception; and they were frequently censored and sometimes ordered destroyed.¹¹ As Franco affirms in this regard,

The confessor sat firmly in the center of the web that the [female] mystics spun out of mysterious and fragmented surges of feeling,

and constituted a veritable panopticon from which every wayward thought was scrutinized. It was he who determined the difference between the clever mimicry of deluded women possessed by the devil and the real thing. He had tried and tested rules at his disposal and practice in close reading of speech and actions. (6)

This double bind was complicated also by a situation whereby, again, if these women claimed divine authority, they also had to display humility with regard to their divine gift and their writings. As women without theological training, their humility prevented them from defending the theological import of their writings. As Alison Weber notes with regard to Santa Teresa, "to prove worthiness and humility at the same time implies the logical contradiction of the double bind, since humility is tainted by self-regard. As the religious writers of the times acknowledged, humility is a silent virtue, incompatible with self-defense" (46).

A way out of this dilemma was, since they wrote from divine command and by order of their confessors, these female religious disclaimed authorship of their writings. Because of this disclaimer and the male clerics' denial of their authorship, then, female religious did not have property rights over their own written material. Consequently, their works were appropriated by priests, and frequently compiled and edited by male authorities as examples of edifying Christian lives, into biographies in the mode of conversion stories and hagiography. This is but one example of how "the marginalized have always been used as grist for the mill of writing" (Franco 3).

The Sacrament of the Eucharist is the principal theme of female religious, and frequently the source of their visions and raptures. Consequently, they cannot bear to be deprived of communion. Nonetheless, and paradoxically, this deprivation is also a common source of their visions (Bynum 1991, 128). Sor María relates a vision she experienced during a period when she was denied daily communion. One day, as she left the kitchen on her way to the garden, she had a vision in which God told her not to worry. And during Mass, when she was watching the other nuns receive communion, Christ approached her and gave her His flesh and blood: "Comul-

góme en la Missa rezada con tanto y más regalo que cuando comulgo sacramentalmente" (*Desengaños*, 38).

Female mystics and religious do not just receive communion, they consume, devour the host, feeding on the very flesh of Christ. Its deprivation, consequently, causes extreme hunger and thirst. Luisa de Carvajal relates in a sonnet the hunger pangs and thirst she experienced when her confessor allowed her the Sacrament only twice a week:

prueba de amor terrible y rigurosa,
y cifra del pesar más apurado;
cuidado que no sufre otro cuidado,
tormento intolerable y sed ansiosa;
fragua que en vivo fuego me convierte
de los soplos de amor tan avivada
que aviva mi dolor hasta la muerte (492)

Here doña Luisa employs courtly love rhetoric and imagery "a lo divino." On the narrative level, she writes from a female perspective to a male desired object; and in this way she inverts the traditional roles of lover and beloved. The absence of her beloved is an allegory of her quasi-mystical anguish caused by the absent Eucharist.

In the Sacrament of the Eucharist, the spiritual lover transforms himself into the tangible lover, into flesh, and he unites physically with his beloved. Poetry dealing with the Eucharist celebrates God's incarnation and the intimate union of the soul with him. This experience is expressed in various ways and forms; in this "Soneto Espiritual de Silva al Santísimo Sacramento, en que habla el Divino Verbo inmenso con el alma que le está recibiendo de las manos del sacerdote de Silva,"¹² Luisa de Carvajal celebrates with reminiscences of the *Cantar de los Cantares*:

De inmenso amor a queste abrazo estrecho
recibe, Silva, de tu dulce Amado,
y por la puerta de este diestro lado
éntrate, palomilla, acá en mi pecho.
Reposa en el florido y sacro lecho,
y abrástate en amor tan abrasado
que, hasta que el fuerte nudo haya apretado,

no sea posible quede satisfecho.
 ¡Mira cómo te entrego, amiga mía,
 todo mi ser y alteza sublimada!
 Estima aqueste don que amor te ofrece.
 Tendrás en mí gloriosa compañía,
 y entre mis mismos brazos regalada
 gozarás lo que nadie no merece. (485)

We note the considerable eroticism of this sonnet. Christ's consumption is the consumation of love; and we note again the reference to his wound, here as a door that leads to the bridal chamber; and, although He is the "Amado, once more we perceive the suggestion of Christ's flesh as female.

Sor María de la Antigua's obsession with the Eucharist, her unsatiated gluttony of consuming Christ is evident in these selections from two different poems. In the first, Christ reminds her of the sacrifice he made for humanity when he made himself into food:

si me hice tu manjar,
 porque de hambre no mueras,
 y con mi sangre amasé
 el pan con que te sustentas (554)

In the second, where the poet endeavors to describe simultaneously the Eucharist and the space of mystical union, heaven meets earth and provides souls the opportunity of a celestial eating frenzy:

Amor hace aquí el banquete,
 todos comen a porfía,
 y hay tanto que bocas faltan
 donde sobra la comida. (588)

Such imagery has to be taken in the context of periods in which there was much famine; so that food and gluttony take on a different context than in our anorexic times.

Finally we return to the *romance*, "Al Santísimo Sacramento," by Sor Marcela. This poem begins with due reverence and decorum towards the Eucharist, then takes on a somewhat ludic tone as the

poet exclaims in wonder at the marvel of Christ offering his flesh to redeem humanity:

Pero dame licencia,
 que a lo llano y grosero
 te haga una pregunta
 con mi corto talento:
 ¿quedaste con algo
 en ese ser inmenso,
 o me lo diste todo
 en este sacramento? (...)
 ¿Que coma en abundancia
 este cuerpo grosero,
 este manjar precioso
 que está de gustos lleno (...)
 ¿Y que puedan gozarte
 los grandes y pequeños,
 el gigante en virtud
 y en ella el más pigmeo?

The poem gains in intensity and tone, reaching its climax where the communicant presses her lips to Christ's wound.

The somatization of women's religious experience and the conception of Christ as female are two fundamental characteristics of female piety that endured from the High Middle Ages, through the Renaissance and to the Baroque, and which were manifested in women religious throughout western Europe.¹³ As this study has demonstrated, Spanish women religious, like their kindred sisters, perceived Christ in their image, and identified and merged with His flesh, thereby not only dignifying their status as women, but also arriving at a mystical union through a unique and feminine mode of transcendence.¹⁴ Instead of perceiving body and soul dichotomously in their religious experience and mystic transportation, for these women, as Bynum affirms, "body is not so much a hindrance to the soul's ascent as the opportunity for it. Body is the instrument upon which the mystic rings changes of pain and of delight. It is from body—whether whipped into frenzy by the ascetic herself or gratified with an ecstasy, given by God—that sweet melodies and aromas rise to the very throne of heaven" (Bynum 1991, 194).

Notes

¹See, for example, Fuss, Kirby, Schor & Weed.

²For a discussion of women's secular love poetry of the period, see Olivares & Boyce, "Introducción."

³Medieval and Renaissance iconography depict Christ's wound both as a breast and as a womb in which souls are reborn. See the illustrations in Bynum 1991, particularly Figs. 3.6, 3.10, 3.11, 3.13, 3.14, 6.7, 6.8, 6.9.

⁴See the appendix for brief biographies of the poets included in this study.

⁵From the poem's title: "Romance esiritual de Silva [Luisa] en que se muestra cuán vivos sean y cuán justos los sentimientos del alma que ama a Dios cuando halla faltas en su correspondencia, aunque inadvertidas y poco voluntarias y que el remedio último de estos aprietos es aquel a que forzosamente ellos la obligan, que es salirse de sí misma, huyendo al soberano refugio y presencia del Cristo Nuestro Señor, a do hallaba felicísima acogida."

⁶The change is also necessary to maintain the a-a assonance.

⁷The correlation between wound and breast is revealed in the iconography of the period which often places Christ's wound near or at the site of His breast, and which also draws a parallel between Mary's lactating breast and Christ's wound. Various versions of St. Catherine's *vita* speak of Christ nursing her at His breast; see Bynum 1991, 206-11.

⁸Another authorizing figure and model of emulation was, of course, Santa Teresa. Sor María de la Antigua especially claims she received authority from the saint: "Estando la vispera de Pasqua del Espiritu santo en el coro regalandome con mi Señor, entendi entre sus amorosos regalos, quan favorable es para intentos mi señora y Madre Santa Teresa de Jesus. Ayudóme a esto que mi Padre el señor Doctor [Gameró] me traxo una estampa suya. Y entendi que me dezia en el entendimiento... 'Que mucho, Hija, que parezca yo en tu figura y tu en la mia? Porque para autorizar tu flaqueza, ordenó tu Señor y mio, qué entendieran q̄ue era yo, como en la verdad lo soy, pues un mismo zelo es, y un ansioso deseo, que amen las Esposas al Esposo celestial. Si ambas con un espiritu, Hija mia, buscamos una misma cosa y ambas tenemos una misma herida de un solo amor, y ambas passamos tormento por un enemigo de nuestro Esposo, que es el engaño en que las Esposas viven, por que no seremos una cosa ambas?" (*Desengaños*, 16).

⁹Divine command was also the justification that male editors often gave for their edition and publication of female religious texts. Since women were deemed intellectually inferior, their sacred verse could only be attributed to divine illumination. Thus the *censtras* and *aprobaciones* of P.

Pedro de la Recolección's edition of Sor María de la Antiguas' *Desengaños* contain such statements as "en todos ellos [piadosos escritos] se hallan utilísimas doctrinas y admirables enseñanzas, y que en su modo de hablar se conoce que es de Dios la habla"; "Y considerando que quien escribió estas cosas fue una muger ignorante con lo natural, alabara al Padre Señor de Cielos y tierra, porque escondió estas cosas de los sabios y prudentes deste siglo, y las manifestó a los pequeñuelos"; "Pues veo a una muger en el humilde estado de lega y despreciado exercicio de la cozina hecha Blanco de los mas regalados favores de Dios, Maestra de la mas eminente perfeccion, y lince de los secretos mas arcanos de la Divina Sabiduría" (*Desengaños*, prelims., s. p.). Luis Muñoz, in his introduction to the poetry of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza, relates the concept of "divine furor" to divine illumination: "Participó la venerable doña Luisa de Carvajal con grandes avenidas desta influencia divina, destes ímpetus amorosos, destes incendios del divino amor, y fuéle necesario buscar alguno, si no alivio, porque no le estava bien carecer desta dulce pena, por lo menos, medio con que alentarse y significar su pasión. Juntóse a esto su excelente natural, la viveza de su ingenio, y un señorío grande de lo más perfeto de nuestra lengua; y así compuso varias poesías, que por ventura ostentan... la grandeza de su espíritu, cuán poseída estava su alma del amor de Dios, cuán abressada, cuán herida" (fol. 208; cited in Olivares & Boyce 84).

¹⁰The double bind theory has been discussed by various critics; for its application to Santa Teresa, see Weber 1985, 1990: 45-46.

¹¹One of the *cronistas* of the *Fundación del Convento de Descalzas de la Santísima Trinidad*. *Noticia de las religiosas que en él han florecido* relates that, in addition to her book of poetry which "lo reservó por obediencia, Sor Marcela de San Félix wrote four books that her "humildad y modestia la obligó a quemar; and her autobiography, written at the command of her confessor, was ordered destroyed by the same: "Mandóla su confesor que escribiese toda su vida interior... y que había de ser con toda fidelidad sin reservar cosa alguna de las misericordias que el Señor había usado con ella. Hizolo así por el mérito de la obediencia, mortificándose mucho. Y cuando ya tenía su tarea concluida, a costa de mucha fatiga, la mandó que la quemase, como que no merecía otro paradero. Y al punto entregó los papeles al fuego con tanta complacencia que se dio por muy pagada del trabajo que había tenido en escribir algunos meses" (fol. 209; cited in Olivares & Boyce 621-22). Likewise, at the command of her confessor, Teresa de Jesús burned her *Meditaciones sobre los Cantares* (Weber 1990, 117), and the-sibling nuns Cecilia de Nacimiento and María de San Alberto document the sequestration of some of their writings by a church official (Arenal & Schlau, 135-36).

¹²"Silva" is her persona, based on the letters of her name "Lvisa."

¹³And for Hispanic female religious in the Americas as well; see Arenal & Schlauf, and Franco.

¹⁴A singular exception to this "feminine mode of transcendence" would be Teresa de Jesús. As Catherine Swietlicki [Connor] perceives, in her most mystical book, *Castillo interior*, the saint only fleetingly describes the mystic state in terms of the traditional *Brautmystik*, nor does her book close with the union of the soul/Bride with Christ/God. Instead, she experiences it as a flowing space accessible to "'femystic' readers of either sex" and in which the boundaries of language, gender and the social order are transcended. Furthermore, in the *Castillo interior* the sexual signifiers in her mystic imagery are free of rigid gender identification: "The only such 'maternal' imagery used in her most mystic text refers to an androgynous God from whose 'pechos divinos...salen unos rayos de leche que toda la gente del castillo cohorta' [7.2.7]. Gender identification in the *Castillo interior* takes on a 'femystic' quality: it has a feminine/humankind aspect that allows for flexibility, for a mobility in gender and language that might be called androgynous" (290-91).

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Appendix

Doña Ana Francisca Abarca de Bolea

Doña Ana Francisca Abarca de Bolea was born in 1623/1624 to a very noble family in Casbas, in the area of Jaca. She was put into a Cistercian convent, el Convento del Císter, by her parents at the age of three, for reasons that remain unknown. It was probably an unreformed convent, not uncommon in the times, that afforded considerable luxury to the sisters. She was obviously conscious of her nobility, as she did not take a religious name, keeping her title: Doña Ana. In addition to poetry published as a consequence of literary tournaments, she published in her lifetime one hagiographical book, *Vida de catorce santas del Císter* (1655) and a book, in the form of a pastoral, recounting the events of the "noche de San Juan," which includes numerous poems, *Vigilia y octavario de San Juan Bautista* (1679). The date of her death is unknown, probably towards the end of the

century. The convent later was destroyed by fire and all her works archived there perished.

Doña Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza

Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza was born on January 2, 1566, in the province of Cáceres, to a family of the lower nobility. At the age of six, her parents died, and she was raised under the care of an uncle. She showed a religious inclination from an early age, especially in works of charity, and refused marriage at the age of fifteen. When her uncle died in 1592, while they were living in Madrid, she bought a small house and began her life as a *beata*, but professing the vows of a nun: poverty, obedience, purity, and even martyrdom. It was probably in the period of 1593-1601 that she wrote a corpus of 48 poems included in Luis Muñoz's biography, *Vida y virtudes de la venerable virgen doña Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza*, and titled *Poesías espirituales de la Venerable Doña Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza, muestras de su ingenio y de su espíritu* (1632). In order to pursue her vow as a martyr, she went to England to help defend the faith and persecuted Catholics. She caused an uproar among the populace and authorities in London: she tore up antipapist posters, got into heated arguments and defied protestant authorities by establishing a convent in her house. She also had the quartered remains of executed Catholics dug up and brought to her house, where she would clean them and conserve them in lead boxes, and then venerate them as relics. She was put in jail twice. The first time when she got into an argument with a store owner who accused her of not being a woman, but a Roman Catholic priest dressed as a woman ("que no era posible sino que yo no era mujer, sino sacerdote romano en hábito mujeril"). Her second incarceration was as a result of establishing the aforesaid convent. Each time the Spanish ambassador had to bail her out. After the second time, the Bishop of Canterbury banished her from England. However, she died before leaving England in January, 1614, at the age of 48. Her body was transported to Spain the following year aboard the ship, *La Luisa de Londres*. Her body was laid to rest in the Real Monasterio de la Encarnación, Madrid.

Sor Marcela de San Félix

Sor Marcela de San Félix, born Marcela del Carpio, 1605, was the illegitimate daughter of Lope Félix de Vega Carpio and the actress Micaela de Luján. After the death of her mother and the death of Lope's second wife, she and her younger brother Lopito went to live with Lope and his mistress Marta de Nevares, by whom Lope had other children. Perhaps because of a chaotic domestic situation, the little love she says she received from her

father, while at the same time, at the age of 13 or 14, copying the love letters between her father and Marta de Navares (because the Duque de Sessa, Lope's patron, wanted copies of all his correspondence), at the age of 16 she took to a convent, as the convent archives relate: "había venido al sagrado como los delincuentes cuando huyen de la justicia." Nonetheless, she was a very pious woman. She entered the convent of the Trinitarians, in Madrid, which followed the Theresian reform. Her father visited her every week, except when he was out of town or womanizing. Once when he remarked to her how beautiful she was, she refused to see him for five years. When Lope died in 1635, she arranged for the funeral procession to pass the convent and which she watched from a window (see the plate in Olivares & Boyce, 643).

Sor Marcela inherited her father's literary talent. She wrote various religious plays, in verse form, and 40 other poems, many quite lengthy. She had other writings, including an autobiography, which her confessor ordered her to destroy, and which she did. She died January 9, 1697.

Sor María de la Antigua

Sor María de la Antigua was born in 1566 in an open field twelve leagues from Sevilla, apparently during cold weather, as immediately her parents took refuge in a hermitage consecrated to the Virgen, whose name she took. From there they went to Utrera where the nuns accepted her in the Convento de Nuestra Señora de la Antigua, whose name she also later would take. The nuns also took in her parents as servants. She lived there until the age of six when, to recover from an accident, the nephew of the prioress took her to Sevilla, with whom she lived six years, during which time she demonstrated a religious inclination and the desire to become a martyr. When her foster parent died, her father brought her to his house, but she refused to live with her parents. The nuns of the Convento de Santa Clara in Marchena took her in as a *donada*, without a dowry. She was thus a "monja de velo blanco," a white-veiled nun, who served the black-veiled nuns. She mostly served in the kitchen, where she experienced many of her visions, including one, for example, in which she saw Christ in a dish cloth: "¿Que en un trapo de cocina / vuestras hazañas mostráis?" She wrote because God told her to do so, as did her confessor. Sor María de la Antigua died on Jan. 22, 1617, in the Convento de la Concepción de Religiosas Descalzas de la Merced en la Villa de Lora. Her writings were collected and published in 1678 as *Desengaño de religiosos y de almas que tratan de virtud*.

Sor Violante del Cielo (do Ceo)

Sor Violante del Cielo was born in Lisbon, May 30, 1601. Little is known of her life, other than that she entered the convent of Nossa Senhora do Rosário, where she took her vows on August 29, 1630, at the age of 29. She did not assume the religious life out of purely religious reasons. Her book of secular poetry that includes love poetry to women (see Olivares & Boyce 1995), *Rimas Varias*, was published in Rouen in 1646, by her patron the Portuguese ambassador to France, Vasco Luis de Gama, descendant of the famous navigator. Her *Parnaso Lusitano de Divinos e Humanos Versos*, 2 vols., of mainly religious verse, were published posthumously in 1733.