



Redemption Theology in Mystical Convent Drama: “The Already and the Not Yet” in Hildegard of Bingen’s *Ordo virtutum* and Marcela de San Félix’s *Breve festejo*

A Teologia da Redenção no Drama do Mosteiro Místico: “O já e o ainda não” no *Ordo virtutum* de Hildegarda de Bingen e no *Breve Festejo* de Marcela de San Félix

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Resumo: Este estudo explora, de forma central, a divindade distintamente corporal revelada através de paradigmas místicos em duas peças da religiosa Hildegard de Bingen (1098-1179): *Ordo virtutum*, uma peça convincente atribuída à Marcela de São Félix (1605-1687), *Breve festejo que se hizo para nuestra Madre priora y a alegrar la comunidad la noche de los reyes deste año 1653*. Ela destaca e analisa o fato de que, em ambas as peças, várias relações triádicas apontam a presença essencial da segunda pessoa da Trindade, em Trindade mística. O principal argumento é que uma particular divindade cristocêntrica mística tem conotações teológicas que carregam investigação contra a problematização geral do elemento corpóreo na mística relacional e economia teológica ao longo do século XVII. O documento articula que uma divindade particular humana mística pode ter sido subestimada na prática cristã de misticismo a partir dos tempos medievais e exegetas, porque a tendência para a transcendência sobre a imanência no misticismo pode até ser considerada como teologicamente incompleta à luz da teologia da redenção cristã (católica). Ele termina mostrando como o "já e ainda não" é mencionado em ambas as peças, e tira algumas conclusões teológicas relevantes que estão em resposta à divindade transcendente geralmente privilegiada no misticismo, obedecendo a outras obras, tanto de Bingen e São Félix, para fundamentar a teologia que pode sem dúvida ser atribuída a eles. Ao longo do caminho, os aspectos relevantes de diferentes entendimentos de emoções, entre eles o conceito dos humores, a compreensão aristotélica da relação entre as virtudes (cristão) e o reino emocional, o papel central do eros na prática mística e implicações teológicas do mesmo será elevado, de acordo com o tema de um determinado volume.

Abstract: This study most centrally explores the distinctly corporeal divinity that is revealed through mystical paradigms in two plays by female religious:

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MALLORQUÍ-RUSCALLEDA, Enric (coord.). *Mirabilia 15 (2012/2)*
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Las emociones en el Mediterráneo antiguo y en el inicio de la era moderna
Emotions in Pre- & Early Modern Mediterranean

Jun-Dez 2012/ISSN 1676-5818

Hildegard of Bingen's (1098-1179) *Ordo virtutum* and a play convincingly attributed to Marcela de san Félix (1605-87), *Breve festejo que se hizo para nuestra Madre priora y a alegrar la comunidad la noche de los reyes deste año 1653*. It highlights and analyzes the fact that, in both plays, various triadic relationships point to the essential presence of the second person of the Trinity in the mystical Godhead. The central argument is that a particularly Christocentric mystical divinity has theological connotations which bear investigation against the general problematization of the corporeal element in the mystical relational and theological economy through the seventeenth century. The paper articulates why a particularly human mystical divinity might have been undervalued in the Christian practice of mysticism from Medieval times onward, and exegetes why the bias toward transcendence over immanence in mysticism might even be regarded as theologically incomplete in the light of (Catholic) Christian redemption theology. It ends by showing how the "already and not yet" is alluded to in both plays, and draws some relevant theological conclusions which stand in answer to the transcendent deity usually privileged in mysticism, hearkening to other works by both Bingen and san Félix to substantiate the theology which can arguably be attributed to them. Along the way, relevant aspects of different understandings of emotions—among them the concept of the humors, the Aristotelian understanding of the relationship between the (Christian) virtues and the emotional realm, and the central role of *eros* in the mystical practice and the theological implications of the same—will be raised, according to the theme of this particular volume.

Palavras-chave: Convento – Hildegarda de Bingen – Marcela de São Félix – Misticismo – Teologia da Redenção.

Keywords: Convent – Hildegard of Bingen – Marcela de San Felix – Mysticism – Redemption theology.

Recebido em 05.07.2012

Aceito em 07.08.2012

I. Introduction

Recent scholarship on what is commonly referred to as "convent literature" continues to honor the trajectory of earlier studies from the seventies and eighties, which introduced the nuns that penned this work and discussed their writings from different vantage points, but as serious artistic, literary and



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theological output.² The groundbreaking work of these initial scholars has both enabled and encouraged other studies, which have investigated the writing nuns in ever broader contexts. This paper will contribute to these efforts by contrasting two plays, one by German Benedictine Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) and the other attributed to Spanish Trinitarian Marcela de San Félix (1605-87). I have chosen these nuns in particular for two reasons.

First, and more pragmatically, Hildegard of Bingen honors the Medieval focus of the host journal, and her thematic connections to Marcela de San Félix allow the Spanish nun the wider academic audience of her better-known German Sister.³ Second, and more importantly, the two main works treated here, *Ordo virtutum* (c. 1141) and *Breve festejo* (1653), share striking commonalities along significant lines. Most centrally to this particular study, both plays reveal a distinctly corporeal divinity in mystically infused pieces, contributing to some important potential theological emphases worthy of discussion in this context.

Both nuns address the role of the second person of the Trinity—the Incarnate Word, or Christ—in a particularly mystical paradigm in ways that dialogue with important thinkers in the Christian doctrinal tradition whether knowingly or not,⁴ and we will reference some of these “connections” as well. Along the way, several aspects of the topic of this particular volume, emotions, will

² Such landmark studies on Hildegard of Bingen and Marcela de San Félix, the two nuns that will be discussed here, include for example Peter Dronke’s early essay “Hildegard of Bingen as Poetess and Dramatist” (in *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages: New Departures in Poetry 1000-1150*. [Oxford, 1970]) and Electa Arenal and Georgina Sabat de Rivers’ well-known annotated edition of Marcela’s extant literary production, *Literatura Conventual Femenina: Sor Marcela de san Félix, hija de Lope de Vega* ([Barcelona, 1988).

³ Given that most if not all of San Félix’s work is as yet not translated from the Spanish, it is directly unavailable to many scholars, and Marcella scholarship in languages other than Spanish is a very recent phenomenon as well.

⁴ Sabat de Rivers, a key scholar who focused on Marcela already in the 1980’s, indicates that the nun was almost certainly well versed in the Christian Neoplatonism of Augustinian theology (“Literatura manuscrita del convento: teatro y poesía de la hija de Lope de Vega en el Madrid del XVII”, in *Culturas en la edad de oro*, ed. José María Díez Borque [Madrid, 1995], p. 440.) Hildegard herself attributes her theological aptitude to divine inspiration through her visions alone. Although the Benedictine nun never cites sources, many scholars think that she was likely familiar with the writings of the Church fathers and many of the theological writers of her time. Like Marcela, she was certainly versed in the neo-Platonism typical of twelfth-century monastic theology.



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enlighten the treatment of the material in different respects, either informing the discussion indirectly or as more significant themes in the paper. For example, we recall the Medieval borrowing from Greek medicine of the concept of the humors, which supposedly controlled emotions, and thus to some degree determined spiritual proclivities.

To this extent, the “moist” and “cool” female was thought to be more emotive *and embodied* in her spirituality than the “dry” and “hot” (intellectual) male, and hence, inferior.⁵ These conceptions will inform our study of aspects of mystical practice and theology that are related more closely with female or male practitioners, respectively, most significantly that of the person of the Trinity that receives the greatest emphasis.⁶ Given that the dramatic pieces on study feature the (Christian) virtues aiding the soul in its battle against vice and into union with the Divine, some connections between the virtues and emotions will be discussed.

The paper will also include an examination of the role of emotions in mystical practice and the theological implications of the same, most significantly the erotic love expressed in mysticism, which calls to mind Christian eros’ necessary corollary: the “greatest” emotion perfectly expressed in God-love: *agape*, or *caritas*. Whereas the above illustrates how the emotions theme will aid our understanding of the issues at hand, the main trajectory of the first part of the paper will be an analysis of the plays in question, concerning, again, the distinctly corporeal divinity that they reveal.

The paper will continue with a discussion of why certain emphases in and influences on Christian mysticism might problematize a focus on the second person of the Trinity even as in other regards the same emphasis is paradoxically accepted and even championed. Concluding remarks will concern the theology that a focus on the corporeal Christ in mystical practice incorporates, thus legitimizing what is both potentially more recognizable in

⁵ For a recent detailed discussion of these associations, see for example E. Ann Matter’s “Theories of the Passions and the Ecstasies of Late Medieval Religious Women”, in *The Representation of Women’s Emotions in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, ed. Lisa Perfetti. (Gainesville, 2005), p. 21-42.

⁶ Of greatest importance here will be an issue that directly relates to the person of the Trinity implied or expressed: immanence versus transcendence.



female than male mystics and potentially for this reason less “prestigious” than the more common ultimately transcendental focus.

II. Hildegard of Bingen and *Ordo virtutum*

Recently, the name Hildegard of Bingen has likely become more widely recognized since she is slated to become the next doctor of the Catholic Church in October, 2012.⁷ Of course, most if not all scholars of the medieval western world know that she was a twelfth-century Benedictine nun and author of *Ordo virtutum*, the work on study here, since it has the distinction of being both the oldest surviving morality play and the only twelfth-century play whose author is known.⁸

Hildegard was born into a noble Bermersheim family, who vowed her to God and placed her in a local hermitage under the care of a noblewoman, Jutta, at the age of eight. Although the older woman was unschooled, under her care Hildegard learned how to read and write, and likely studied scripture, among other activities befitting to women such as meditation and prayer.

Hildegard was an important figure of her milieu for many reasons. She served as abbess (*magistra*) of the community of Disibodenberg after Jutta’s death in 1136, and founded convents for the order in Rupertsberg (1150) and Eibingen (1165). Outside of the convent community, as the only acknowledged female teacher in the Church,⁹ Hildegard went on preaching tours, and prophesied for popes, emperors and other important figures.¹⁰ Hildegard could claim a number of personal talents and titles: musician, artist, scientist of sorts,

⁷ Hildegard joins 33 other Church doctors, a rank which denotes theological acuity in particular. Aspects of her theological acumen in particular will inform this paper. (She is the fourth woman, the others being Catherine of Sienna and Teresa of Avila [both named in 1970] and Therese of Lisieux [1997]. Significantly, these women represent all of the most recent recipients of this honor.)

⁸ Eckehard Simon, “Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) and Her Music Drama *Ordo virtutum*: A Critical Review of the Scholarship and Some New Suggestions”, *Medievalists.net* (2011), p. 13, p. 1-16. Web. 5 July 2012.

⁹ Patricia Ranft, *Women and the Religious Life in Premodern Europe* (New York, 1996), p. 58.

¹⁰ Her adherents include popes Eugene III, Adrian IV, and Alexander III. Bernard Clairvaux, Thomas Becket, Kings Henry VI of Germany and Henry II of England, Eleanor of Aquitaine, and Emperors Conrad III and Frederick Barbarossa were also her correspondents and spiritual enthusiasts.



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ethicist, cosmologist, dramatist and author; unsurprisingly, she is widely considered the greatest female genius of her time. Hildegard's writings, too numerous to catalogue here, include musical, scientific, literary and visionary works.

They reveal an understanding of classical and contemporary literatures and a familiarity with the writings of the Church Fathers and most of the theological writers that were important to her milieu, most notably Saint Augustine. Scholarly opinion is divided as to the nun's education; some believe that she had no formal instruction while others posit some formation in medieval rhetorical arts. Writing down her visions at the behest of a *magister*, Hildegard herself notes that her learning is divinely infused, as she "understood the writings of the prophets, the Gospels, the works of other holy men, and those of certain philosophers, without any human instruction..."¹¹

Indeed, the Benedictine nun's visionary status is one of her most remarkable and central characteristics, and it is certainly of primary concern for this study. Hildegard acknowledges that her visions began at the tender age of three. If we are to believe her own testimony, her visions provide at least some of her knowledge, inspire her sermons and provide the subject material for her prophetic exchanges with important personages, among other things. Hildegard's visionary literature includes mystical poetry, three main texts that detail her prophetic revelations, and the play *Ordo virtutum*. The nun's three main visionary texts include one of her most famous works, *Scivias* (1151), meaning "know the way," a comprehensive general treatise of Christian doctrine.¹²

Readings of early portions of this work led Eugene III to approve of Hildegard's visionary writings and to encourage further work along the same lines. Two immediate results of such papal support included a commentary on the Athanasian creed for use by her fellow Sisters and the *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum* (symphony of the harmony of heavenly revelations), which concluded with *Ordo virtutum*, also likely written in 1151 when Hildegard was in her early fifties. It is to this piece that we will now turn, bearing in mind the

¹¹ In Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua (d. 203) to Marguerite Porete (d. 1310)*. (Cambridge, 1984), p 145.

¹² The other two are *Liber vitae meritorum* (book of life's rewards/merits) and *Liber divinatorum operum* (book of divine works). They are also works of visionary theology.



intended emphasis here on the Christocentric corporality of the divinity expressed in the two pieces to be addressed.¹³

Although *Ordo* is most widely known as the oldest surviving morality play, many scholars have spoken to the fact that it diverges from later ones in its lack of the “lurid detail”¹⁴ that denotes the sin from which the penitent sinner must divest him/herself in order to achieve true relationship with God. This difference might be attributed to an important dynamic of the play, which arguably reserves the created realm for a different purpose: that of ultimately supporting the divine one¹⁵ rather than that of representing the travesty of sin. This choice can be attributed in part to the Neoplatonic Augustinian theology operative in medieval Christian philosophical ontology, by which created things carry humans created in God’s image forward to uncreated realities, expressed as divine truths.

In this particular play, the truth to which the believer is drawn, again a particularly Augustinian emphasis, is that of the ultimate reality of “the soul as a small reflection of the Trinity”¹⁶ in all its persons. Where this is concerned, more than anything, *Ordo* both artistically highlights and theologically defends the role of the Christ in this negotiation. In order for the mystic unity between the humanly corporeal and spiritual realms that is the design of the play to take place, “the finite must ascend to the infinite by means of intermediaries...,” notes Christine Jolliffe.¹⁷ On a distinctly human plane, the intermediary is the author, Hildegard, herself, of whom her contemporaries, the monks of Villers, famously noted:

Hail, after Mary full of grace: the Lord is with you! Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the word of your mouth, which brings the secrets of the

¹³ Since Peter Dronke’s 1970 study, *Ordo* has been much and well analyzed. My main goal here is to generate certain emphases that are reminiscent of what we will see in *Breve festejo*, a play generally believed to have been written by Marcela de San Félix that has received scant critical attention thus far.

¹⁴ Ekehard Simon, *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁵ Most notably in the twelfth century, natural objects came to be regarded as expressive of a higher presence operative in them; here again, see E. Ann Matter, *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁷ *Neoplatonic Influences in Hildegard of Bingen’s Ordo virtutum: With Latin Text and English Translation of the Play* (Montreal, 1991), p. 12.



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invisible world to men, unites heavenly things with earthly, and joins the divine to the human.¹⁸

On another level—the quasi-metaphysical—the intercessors are the Virtues, who guide the *Anima* (Soul) back to the divine. And on yet another, this role is carried out by a figure who ultimately unites Flesh and Spirit: Christ. The trajectory of *Ordo* demonstrates how these latter two arbitrate forces work together and, indeed, depend on one another to complete this task.

Ordo virtutum thus opens not with a directionless-but-searching *Anima*, “a Psyche who impetuously wants to see the divine Eros before God is ready to reveal himself”,¹⁹ but with the presentation of the Virtues, drawn into this history by “Patriarchs and Prophets” who acknowledge their presence in the first line of the drama: “Who are these, who seem like clouds?”²⁰ This query, of course, references Hebrews 12: 1-2.²¹

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let

¹⁸ In Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley, 1989), p. 2.

¹⁹ Peter Dronke, *Poetic Individuality, Ibid.*, p. 174.

²⁰ Hildegard of Bingen, *Ordo virtutum*, in *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, ed. Peter Dronke (Cambridge, 1994), l. 1, p. 160-81; trans. Peter Dronke. The answer to the question put to the Virtues as to their “identity” will soon be determined in the play, but has many responses within the Christian female monastic tradition, as might have occurred to anyone in the convent audience listening to the inquiry. As Diane Willen notes in “Religion and the Construction of the Feminine,” (in *A Companion to Early Modern Women's Writing*, ed. Anita Pacheco [Blackwell, 2002], p. 22-39) the Christian virtues *per se*—she mentions chastity, obedience, silence, piety, humility—are particularly embodied in women, who express their faith behaviorally and emotively, in contrast to men, who represent their faith intellectually. The staged “Virtues,” then, encourage women to behave decorously in general. (This means of conceiving emotions was common in Medieval Europe; as per Thomas Aquinas, for example, emotions were not thought of outside of moral constructs.) On another level, the Aristotelian, the virtues as “emotional regulators” (James J. Paxon “The Allegorical Construction of Female Feeling and *Forma*: Gender, Diabolism, and Personification in Hildegard of Bingen's *Ordo Virtutum*”, in *The Representation of Women's Emotions in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, ed. Lisa Perfetti [Gainesville, 2005], p. 48, p. 43-62) directly dictate the baser passions, as in *Nicomachean Ethics*, in which the contemplative life is decreed as the best route toward real happiness. (For example, see Robert C. Roberts, “Aristotle on Virtues and Emotions”, *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytical Tradition* 56:3 (1989), p. 293-306.) Hildegard's “Virtues” play just this role also.

²¹ All biblical citations are taken from the New International Version of the Bible.



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us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Thus, from the very beginning of the piece, the Virtues are acknowledged as supporters toward a better goal of those caught in sin; more than that, however, they confess a Second-person deity who is eternal and transcendent, sitting at the right hand of God, and at the same time a human in history, as is attested directly in their response to the Church Fathers, as they wonder: “why do you marvel at us? The Word of God grows bright in the shape of a man, and thus we shine with him, building up the limbs of his beautiful body”.²² These limbs are reminiscent of John 15: 5-8, which again attests to the earthly goal of human believers in anticipation and fulfillment of an eternal one:

5 I [Christ] am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. 6 If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. 7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

The Virtues attend to the human *Anima* in *Ordo*, in order to ensure that she does ultimately “remain,” rather than flee, carried away by her own desires. When the Soul is introduced in the piece, she is originally enthusiastic in her eternal goal, but only briefly so. Addressing the “sweet divinity” the “Living Sun”, she “sighs for [him], and invokes all the Virtues”,²³ but later flags when she discovers that she cannot go straight to Heaven, but must first fight on earth, as the above biblical verses also indicate. The Soul is quickly seduced away to worldly pursuits, and the next portion of the drama concerns the Virtues identifying and describing their role in “[seeking] and [finding] the drachma that is lost and crown[ing] her who perseveres blissfully”, led by Humility.

The Devil, meanwhile, who holds Soul in his thrall, taunts the Virtues, insisting that their goal of leading the Soul on a mystically infused journey

²² *Ibid.* l. 2-5, my emphasis.

²³ *Ibid.*, l. 16, 13, 19.



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back to “the royal wedding-chamber”²⁴ is in vain: “What is this great . . . love? Where is the champion? Where the prize-giver? You don’t know what you are worshipping!”²⁵ The play is thus one of identification and encounter, as the Virtues define both who they are and whom they worship, finding Him through their work with *Anima*. At the same time, *Anima* eventually identifies herself through them as they through her. All of this concretely occurs through the figure of the historical Virgin Mary, who is finally shown to embody the Virtues perfectly, as *Anima* by implication should as well. In parallel fashion, the “mirroring” relationships between the persons of the Godhead itself facilitate ultimate union of the Soul with God. We will now take a closer look at how the play accomplishes all of this, focusing on the Virtues, the Divinity, and the human mystical communicant.

As previously mentioned, the Virtues are quasi-metaphysical intercessors between the Godhead and the human seeker; thus, they need embodiment to be fully effective, which they receive through both through Christ-as-man and humans. This is acknowledged first at the outset, since the Virtues only “shine with [Christ]” when he is “in the form of a man,” and also later on, given that the Virtues are the “boughs” to the Church Fathers’ “roots”,²⁶ when they receive human embodiment through the historical Virgin Mary at the end of the drama.

On their own, the Virtues “dwell in the heights”, with access to the divinity, whose out-of-time punishment of Lucifer they witness,²⁷ but not to His “lost sheep” (elsewhere “drachma that is lost”) whom they must help rescue, as emissaries of Christ. The play suggests that the Virtues do as much to attain their own heavenly prize, expressed unambiguously in the language of the

²⁴ *Ibid.*, l. 70-71, 75. The Latin here, *thalamo*, is the same as that used in *Breve festejo*, attributed to Marcela de San Félix: *tálamo*. In both languages it can refer to the place where marital unions are celebrated, as well as where they are sexually consummated. It can also mean “conjugal bed,” more generally, implying offspring. Thus, the role of the female Christ-seeker as both wife and mother is alluded to. This important multiple role is emphasized in various ways in both plays.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, l. 83-85.

²⁶ “We are the roots, and you, the boughs, / fruits of the living eye, / and in that eye we were the shadow”. *Ibid.*, l. 6-8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, l. 67. “My comrades and I know very well / that you are the dragon of old / who wanted to fly higher than the highest one: / but God himself hurled you into the abyss,” says Humility. *Ibid.*, l. 63-66.



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mystic Unitive: “Because of this, beloved daughters, I’ll keep your place in the royal wedding-chamber”, later described as “your homeland and . . . the kiss of the King”.²⁸ The majority of the short play explicates how the Virtues attain this goal, by mirroring one another in humble action:

Virtues: (speaking to Obedience, who now leads):²⁹ Sweetest summoner,
it is right for us to come, most eagerly, to you.

Faith: I am Faith, the mirror of life:
precious daughters, come to me,
and I shall show you the leaping fountain.

Virtues: Serene one, mirror-like, we trust in you:
we shall arrive at the fountain through you.

This exchange also models how the Godhead mirrors itself in the Redemptive action to which it enjoins the Virtues. With its own reflecting surface, the “(leaping) fountain,” clarified elsewhere in the play as the incarnate Christ as it flows in “firey love”³⁰ from the Father,³¹ symbolically intimates the Triune presence it represents. This juxtaposition also serves to remind us, again, that the Virtues are ultimately delegates of the Godhead on earth, as a bit further along: “climb[ing] up to the fountain of life” and denying the “wretched, exiled state on earth” necessitates “fight[ing] Christ’s battles” first.³²

Of course, the same is true for the predominant divine presence, Christ Incarnate, who is clearly emphasized as an ambassador on earth. We have already seen acknowledgements of this; another central one, given the mystical paradigm in operation here, is how the promised Unitive is expressed. The before-mentioned “place in the royal wedding-chamber” is described by

²⁸ *Ibid.*, l. 169, 74-75, 90.

²⁹ In another act of mirroring, the Virtues take turns leading and being led, and speaking to their individual qualities and collective ones, as in this chorus.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, l. 91-97, 248.

³¹ Biblical support of this connection can be seen, for example, in Zechariah 13: 1. These verses also reference the original historical recipients of Christ’s redemptive promise, whom Hildegard brings into her play as well: “The Lord declares, ‘On that day a fountain will be opened for David’s family and for those who live in Jerusalem to wash away their sin and stain.’”

³² *Ibid.*, l. 118, 115, 119.



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Charity, “the flower of love” as the radiant light of the flower of the rod”.³³ This unambiguously sexual reference³⁴ is also evocative of Isaiah 11: 1: “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit”,³⁵ referring specifically to Christ’s earthly kingship as a descendent of the line of David of Israel, God’s chosen people.

Later, in the same wedding chamber (*thalamo*), the following union takes place between Virginity and the Divine: “How sweetly you burn in the King’s embraces, / when the Sun blazes through you, / never letting your noble flower fall”.³⁶ This time, illustrating the believer’s role as Divine imitator,³⁷ the flower belongs to the beloved, who is ravished by the King, expressed specifically as the Sun.

This reference is also evocative of a foreshadowing of Christ and his redemptive work in the fourth chapter of Malachi (1-2): “says the Lord Almighty, ‘Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.’” This mystical union, then, also brings together the three main personages of the play. Christ, the “Branch” of Isaiah, evokes the “boughs” that are the Virtues at the outset of the play, who then recall the need of human disciples to also model Christ and the virtues, rather than following the Malachi model, in order to burn sweetly and brightly as the Sun, rather than burn up.

Near the end of *Ordo*, the wayward human Soul does return to the stage, drawn by the same “Sun”/“home(land)” as the Virtues themselves: “You royal Virtues, how graceful, / how flashing-bright you look in the highest Sun, / and how delectable is your home, / and so, what woe is mine that I fled from you!”. Having served her didactic role to the viewing nuns, she is dispatched rather quickly, though—“Now I am escaping to you—so take me up! (...) that in the blood of the Son of God I may arise”³⁸—and the focus of the

³³ *Ibid.*, 76, 78.

³⁴ The Latin translated as “rod” is *virge* (from *virga*), which also refers figuratively to the male sexual organ, more commonly than “rod” in English.

³⁵ The Septuagint renders it thus: “a flower shall arise from the root” (*Biblos.com*).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, l. 105-107.

³⁷ Ephesians 5: 1-2: “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children² and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

³⁸ *Ibid.*, l. 161-64, 188, 182.



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play remains on the Virtues and Christ. It seems that rather than representing the journey of one nun-Soul, the focus is really on what *all* viewing nuns might accomplish.³⁹

Therefore, and perhaps also because her example is so poor, the Virtues' real human embodiment here is not the one Soul, then, but the Virgin Mary, who can more convincingly serve as a model for others than the errant sinner *Anima*. Having established earlier that by themselves they exist on a metaphysical plane, and thus need human embodiment to be complete, the Virtues return to this idea at the end of the play. In the voice of Chastity, they say the following: "In the mind of the Highest, Satan, I trod on your head, / *and in a virgin form* I nurtured a sweet miracle / when the son of God came into the world; / therefore you are laid low, with all your plunder..." The Devil, who has been taunting them all along as to their identity and function, has a final important parry at this point.

Throughout *Ordo*, the Virtues have described their role variously. Harkening specifically to their position *vis a vis* the Triune Godhead, they are at once daughter, mother and bride: Discretion is "fairest mother," for example, and Humility, "daughter Zion" and all are the mystically understood Beloved. Embodied specifically through the Virgin Mary, the Virtues represent all three roles perfectly. Thus, when the Devil again tells them again that they "don't / even know what [they] are!", this time because they are "devoid of the / beautiful form that women receives from man"⁴⁰—arguably both the male sexual organ and a child *in utero*—they dismiss him definitively. This dismissal is motivated both by what he is saying and for its source: "How can what you say affect me? / Even your suggestion smirches it with foulness".

The Virtues' final triumph is the following, hearkening back to the beginning of the drama: "I did bring forth a man, who gathers up mankind / to himself, against you, through his nativity". They have proven Satan a liar, developing and defending their role in the redemptive task and defeating the metaphysical Foe, both dialogically and theologically. The play does not end with this,

³⁹Christine Jolliffe suggests another possible reason for the de-emphasis, stating that the "doctrinal and ontological significance" of the play "supersedes any didactic purpose [it] might have" (*Neoplatonic Influences in Hildegard of Bingen's Ordo virtutum: With Latin Text and English Translation of the Play*, Thesis [Montreal, 1991], p. 21).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, l. 229-32, 237-38, 235-36.



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however. Much as the Devil has brought into question, albeit negatively, who the Virtues “are,” the Virtues, in turn, ask God who *He* is, albeit rhetorically in form of an exclamatory statement: “Who are you, God...!”⁴¹ (*quis est tu*). The answer, provided by the chorus of Virtues as an emphatic universal reminder of sorts, is this:

[You] held
such great counsel in yourself,
a counsel that destroyed the draught of hell
in publicans and sinners,
who now shine in paradisaal goodness!

(...)

Almighty Father, from you flowed a fountain in firey love:
guide your children into a fair wind, sailing the waters,
so that we too may steer them this way
into the heavenly Jerusalem.⁴²

This last part of the play reemphasizes the Godhead in the respects highlighted throughout: the Divinity’s Triune nature—“counsel in yourself,” and the mention of the Father and the fountain-Son—and redemptive impulse. However, in what contemporary scholars have marked as *Ordo*’s “Finale” or “Processional,”⁴³ the “champion,”⁴⁴ earlier questioned by Satan, appears on stage as well, a Second Coming.

In so doing, he references the Beginning of Time—“in the beginning all creation was verdant”—and intimates that the End of Time is not yet nigh: “the golden number is not yet full”⁴⁵, he states, as he reminds the Father of

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, l. 238-39, 240-41, 242.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 242-46, 247-50.

⁴³ As Sophie Tomlinson indicates, prior to the mid-seventeenth century, European women “published their plays as literature, rather than as texts conceived for performance” (“Drama”, in *A Companion to Early Modern Women’s Writing*, ed. Anita Pacheco (Blackwell, 2002), p. 315, p. 317-35). As such, contemporary scholars have had to edit these works to aid in their interpretation. As she and others indicate, however, this does not mean that women did not write with performance in mind. Among others, Eckehard Simon speaks directly to the likely motives and occasions for the stagings of *Ordo virtutum*, giving rationales thereto.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, l. 84 and 255.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, l. 252, 256



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the latter's promise after the Fall: "then you resolved / that your eye would never fail / until until you saw my body full of jewels".

Christ's last statement, "Father, behold, I am showing you my wounds", is thus also a plea that, ultimately, makes theological sense of the particularly and inescapably incarnate mystical Christ. To focus overmuch on the transcendent Jerusalem ahead of the Second Fulfillment would seemingly be let the root of Jesse die unnecessarily, to potentially allow for more of Malachi's burnt branches, which, in the end, Christ argues might "need not have grown dry",⁴⁶ and will not, through His continued intercession on their behalf.

III. Marcela de San Félix and *Breve festejo*

About five hundred years later, a Spanish Trinitarian nun would also write a drama, this one entitled *Breve festejo que se hizo para nuestra Madre priora y a alegrar la comunidad la noche de los reyes deste año 1653*. By the title we note that this play was composed, much as Hildegard's *Ordo*, for the community of nuns itself. Also like the twelfth-century morality play, this drama uses an unambiguously mystic paradigm to present a series of mirroring relationships in which two main ones predominate; on the one hand, we have a distinctly Triune Divinity in which Christ Incarnate receives the greatest emphasis, and on the other, the Virtues, a nun figure and the Virgin Mary.⁴⁷

As in the Benedictine's piece, the immanent Christ in *Breve festejo* reflects the Godhead on earth under circumstances that permit both the quasi-transcendent Virtues and the nuns, acting together, access to the Virgin Mary, as it is through her specifically that they define themselves in Christ.⁴⁸ Like Hildegard of Bingen, Marcela de San Félix, almost certainly the author of the

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, l. 262-64, 266, 261.

⁴⁷ Speaking about two other Early Modern Spanish Sisters, Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau note that "to nun intellectuals recognition of the interrelatedness of things laid the foundation for interpretation, whether they were thinking about Christ, the Virgin . . . [or] religious mothers and sisters . . ." ("Leyendo yo y escribiendo ella: The Convent as Intellectual Community", *JHP* 13 [1989], p. 219, p. 214-19.)

⁴⁸ Arenal and Sabbat de Rivers acknowledge this relationship thus: "los personajes alegóricos comparten su identidad con personas reales y . . . las reales, las monjas, viven ansiando lograr la perfección de las virtudes espirituales" ("Introducción", *Ibid.*, p. 49.)



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Trinitarian play,⁴⁹ had the intellect and impetus to forefront doctrine in her work, even as she used it to entertain and teach her fellows.⁵⁰ Given that she was a confessant in a Post-Tridentine convent in Spain, these goals should not surprise us. Before being influenced by this milieu, however, she was likely shaped in childhood by her dramaturg father, Lope de Vega y Carpio.

Marcela de Luján (or “del Carpio,” as she is also known) was born in 1605 to one of Spain’s most famous literary figures, Lope, and his then mistress, actress Micaela de Luján. Lope, who wrote between 1,500 and 800 *comedias* and some 400 *autos sacramentales*, was as contradictory as he was prolific; for example, having confessed as a priest after his second wife passed away, he nevertheless continued to take mistresses and produced further illegitimate offspring. It is likely that Marcela’s somewhat turbulent upbringing was as key

⁴⁹ Even in the most up-to-date scholarly work on san Félix, no mention is made of *Breve festejo* when her work is catalogued. For example, Lisa Vollendorp’s *The Lives of Women: A New History of Inquisitional Spain* (Nashville, 2005), which is the first book on the general history of the milieu to dedicate significant space and analysis to Marcela de San Félix, and thus a substantial recent contribution to Marcela scholarship, does not mention the play. Here as elsewhere, *Breve festejo* is likely not referenced because, as has already been indicated, Marcela’s authorship is not absolutely definitive. However, the one-act allegory was located in Marcela’s convent, San Ildelfonso, by scholar Susan Smith in the late 1990’s, and in a 2000 article she makes a strikingly convincing case for Marcela’s authorship, mentioning along the way that there are no other likely candidates. Furthermore, given that the play certainly deserves more scholarly attention, and that further analysis of it alongside some of Marcela’s other drama might contribute something to the case for her authorship, I will treat it as hers here, anticipating the opportunity to draw further parallels in another study. (Interestingly, although I have found no scholarly work beyond Smith’s that mentions *Breve festejo*, it is listed on Spanish Wikipedia as one of her more noteworthy pieces: “Cabe destacar *Las virtudes*, *Muerte del apetito* o *La estimación de la religión* y varias de las loas, muchas de ellas dedicadas a la profesión de una compañera, así como un *Breve festejo*, pieza alegórica representada la noche de Reyes de 1653.”)

⁵⁰ The growing number of scholars who have focused on San Félix have spoken in agreement to the purpose of Marcela’s dramatic *oeuvre*. Sabat de Rivers, for example, mentions the “mutual function” of dramatic production that presents the “doctrina Cristiana básica que era la que convenía a un grupo de mujeres de variado nivel de instrucción cuya meta era practicar las virtudes.” (“Literatura manuscrita de convento”, *Ibid.*, p. 48-49.) Susan Smith sums it up nicely thus: “she presents a doctrinal belief on one level, while at the same time the spectator receives instruction in the importance of virtue and recognizes practical advice for shared conventual life” (“Notes on a Newly Discovered Play: Is Marcela de San Félix the Author?”, *BCom* 52.1 (2000), p. 163, p. 147-170.)



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to her entry in the convent as were her illegitimacy (which would prohibit a worthy marriage) and her own spiritual fervor.

Young Marcela was witness to many stagings of her father's plays in his household as well as to dubious morality, however, and Lope's surviving epistolary corpus indicates his love for his daughter, as well as his admiration for her early poetic talent. He saw to it that she had a good dowry when she entered the convent of san Ildelfonso in Madrid at age sixteen, and celebrated her profession poetically: "despojadas / las galas de novia, / piedras y oro, / las vi en sayales toscas transformadas...."⁵¹

These favorable aspects most likely influenced the nun too, and certainly she inherited her father's talent, as has been admitted by literary critics from mid-nineteenth century giant Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo, to the best-known Marcela scholars of today: Marcela's was "una obra literaria que quizá no ha llegado a alcanzar lo mejor de Lope, pero que no le queda a la zaga en muchas de sus composiciones".⁵²

These works consisted of a few more than 500 pages, given that Madre Marcela had burned four or five other tomes of her writings, perhaps at the directive of her confessor. What has survived includes six one-act allegorical dramas, or *coloquios*.⁵³ One of these, *Coloquio espiritual del nacimiento*, will contribute substantiating information to our analysis of the main text.

Breve festejo begins with Fortaleza, who holds the "organizing role"⁵⁴ in the play as she is the link between viewing nuns and a trio of Virtues: Obediencia, Pobreza and Castidad. As Smith convincingly argues, Fortaleza is the figure of human agency in the play: "like the Soul, [she] would be considered by the listeners as united to virtue in the sense of a reciprocal relationship: spiritual strength enables the practice of virtue and virtuous behavior strengthens the spirit".⁵⁵

⁵¹ In Electa Arenal and Georgina Sabat de Rivers, "Voces del convento: Sor Marcela, la hija de Lope", *Actas del IX Congreso de la Asociación de Hispanistas*, vol. I, (Berlin, 1989), p. 593, p. 591-600.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 593.

⁵³ Seven introductory dramatic poems (*loas*), a number of poems and a short biographical *vitae* of another nun also remain.

⁵⁴ Susan Smith, *Ibid.*, p. 161.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 162.



As in *Ordo*, the mysterious relationship between the allegorized Virtues and the nuns evoked in the play likens them to a third party, the Virgin Mary, through whom this “trinity” has access to the Divine one, led by the infant Christ. Before exegeting these enigmatic connections, however, Fortaleza heralds the coming of Christ to earth, using a juxtaposition of physical and spiritual astronomical bodies that will lend significance to the entire play.

Christ, the “nuevo sol que en el valle, / ha descendido del monte”,⁵⁶ outshines both the physical sun, “farol hermoso del día, / dando claridad al orbe”, and the “brillantes astros, / [que] todo el firmamento borden”, who must not compete with Him. Christ has come to earth out of love for humankind, “a breve forma reduce / la grandeza”,⁵⁷ and the event is represented by further cosmological imagery, as the glories of transcendent Heaven are traded for something quite less. “Cielo es ya el pequeño sitio”, which nevertheless announces the holy birth through meaningfully inclement weather (a metaphor for Christ’s ultimate sacrifice, as He will be “sujeto a las vejaciones / de la mayor inclemencia”) and serves as the space for the announcing Angels: “las melifluas armonías / que avisan a los pastores”.⁵⁸

A further celestial body connects the next portion of the drama to the first, as the Three Kings are introduced. These royal visitors follow their own star—“un astro siguen veloces”—which in this context of course represents both the heavenly body they follow in the biblical narrative and the Christ child.

At this point in the play, Fortaleza begins to establish meaningful linkages between other interdependent triadic groupings that eventually lead the Trinitarian nuns to Christ. This ultimate goal of the play, to help all Souls to find imitative relationship with Christ, starts with the Three Kings. These earthly kings must be “imitated” by “almas puras” that “tiernos afectos descorren”.⁵⁹ Just as we saw in Hildegard’s *Ordo*, human beings (Souls) are readied for service by emotions (“afectos”), or Virtues, which otherwise have no embodiment.

⁵⁶As far as I know, this play is as yet an unedited manuscript, save for its inclusion in Smith’s article. My citations of the play come from this article (here, lines 11-12); I have not seen the original manuscript. As such, I am directly and gratefully indebted to Dr. Smith for her discovery of and work on this play.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, l. 3-4, 5-6, 29-30.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, l. 37, 34-35, 39-40.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, l. 48, 51, 50.



This commerce is carried out in *Breve festejo* through Fortaleza, who represents the nuns. The representative Virtues (Obediencia, Pobreza and Castidad) are introduced at this point, significantly, as three-in-one: “[e]mblema de todas juntas / tres virtudes corresponden” the love that is potentially demonstrated by the nuns, “este rebaño ilustre”. As in *Ordo*, the Virtues of the Spanish play are then led out to speak individually and specifically to their role, as attendant nuns are enjoined to listen by Fortaleza: “Hágase salva a su entrada / que ya resuenan los motes, / suspensión pido entre tanto / que oygáis sus plausibles voces”.

To the Virtues, who come “imitando a los Reyes”⁶⁰ in that they bear gifts, Fortaleza again suggests their function *vis a vis* the Sisters: they serve as positive role models—“a todas las mejoráis”.⁶¹ The Virtues respond to Fortaleza individually also, each indicating their need of her to embody them to complete the labor of love at hand:⁶² a visit to the Christ Child. Fortaleza responds positively, and in language that is strongly evocative of the divine Trinity, whom the Virtues are here more directly shown to emulate: “Todas juntas me tenéis / tan perfecta y tan unida, / que fío en vuestra acogida / jamás no me dejaréis”.⁶³ With this, a mystically infused visit to the Baby Christ to which all “hermanas” must seemingly attend⁶⁴ begins: “Y así . . . comenzad / del Infante enamoradas, / a discurrir [in]flamadas / y los afectos mostrad”, enjoins Fortaleza, the invitation itself suggesting a mystical union that will also come to pass on the day the play celebrates:

Obediencia: Dios, hermana, lo que a este ser te trujo,
la obediencia mayor rendida al Padre,
y amor en niño tierno le redujo;

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, l. 53, 65-68, 73.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, l. 79.

⁶² Obediencia merely relies on Fortaleza’s courtesy, but Pobreza indicates more clearly her need for Fortaleza’s reciprocity—“se promete mi pobreza / si tú le das la riqueza / de ofrecerle tu sagrado” (*Ibid.*, l. 98-100)—as does Castidad: “Yo más de ti necesito / pues conservo mi candor / influyendo tu valor” (*Ibid.*, l. 101-103).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, l. 105-107.

⁶⁴ The “hermanas” (*Ibid.*, l. 109) whom Fortaleza addresses as she invites them to reveal their gifts before the King are formally the Virtues, as they are Fortaleza’s interlocutors. At the same time, they reveal virtuosity (“los afectos mostrad”), and thus the larger context implies human agency. Of course, the “hermanas” address in a dramatic setting would encourage the nuns to include themselves, as well. Especially since there are further examples of it, as we will see, this ambiguity seems intentional.



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dan lo principio en tí, a nacer de madre
en quien la perfección como en dibujo
el Altísimo puso, porque cuadre
en tí, aquesta virtud por excelencia,
derivándola a todas con clemencia.

Hoy a tus haros sacros, dan un vuelo
rendidos y devotos los afectos,
con ansia enamorada, y con desvelo,
sin discurrir, consiguen los efectos.
En aquesta virtud que con anhelo,
estorbarla procuran los defectos,
siendo su norte tú que vivificas,
la libre voluntad, que mortificas.

Recibe, tú, benigno, generosos
cautivos, si ya libres corazones,
que en víctima te ofrecen amorosos,
con ansias inflamadas, estos dones,
y de ser tu despojo, ya gozosos
en recibirlos tú, fundan blasones,
que el amor que es más firme en la fineza
se queda en tus prisiones con firmeza.

Pobreza: Oh, grandeza reducida
a un establo tan pequeño,
que siendo del cielo dueño
es la tierra su homicida
háceslo por darnos vida.
Y a ejemplo de tu pobreza,
despreciando la nobleza
que el oro en sí mismo encierra,
derramado por la tierra
le ofrecen a tu belleza.⁶⁵

This retelling of the encounter at the manger explicates the mystically infused relationships between the main figures in the play, as the Virgin Mary joins figures introduced before: Fortaleza, the Christ, all Virtues represented by the three named ones, and the viewing nuns as “almas.” The riddlesome language used here—expressed in another context by Alison Weber as “mysterious

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, l. 109-112 and 113-146.



ungrammaticality”⁶⁶—emphasizes, and upon a few readings, “clarifies” what is at hand, even if it contributes to uncertainty at first. The “hermana” addressed at the outset by Obediencia is, by traditional cues, Fortaleza, who has just spoken. Under the divine metonymic economy seemingly at work here, however, “hermana” may also include listening nuns, and the Virtues are perhaps implied as well by way of previous direct association.

In any case, “este ser,” who is clearly the divine “Infante,” is brought to “hermana.” The subject of “traer,” the power bringing Christ to the “hermana,” however, presents another ambiguity, “lo que” being a neutral nominalizer. It is perhaps most defensibly God (“Dios”). However, it could also be “la obediencia mayor rendida al padre,” which thus would then confer the power to Christ, himself. However, if we accept God as the subject, then “obedience” would refer most clearly to the seeking “hermana” as a Christ-follower.

Thus, the grammatical uncertainty both positions *God and Christ* (through agency in the first case, and obedience in the second) as the driving force behind the Redemptive action, and allows for *Christ and the “hermana”* to take the “obedient” role, both following the will of the Father. In either case, it seems as if Marcela is now suggesting yet another triad: the same complex relationship between the Virtues, the human adherent and the Christ that we saw in *Ordo virtutum*.

A further meaningful lack of grammatical clarity can be noted immediately thereafter, one which leaves the reader to ponder, and finally solve, an enigma: just *how* female religious best find their way to Christ. First, certain entities “*dan lo principio en ti, a nacer de madre,*” and it is unclear what they are, exactly. Depending on how the first ambiguity is interpreted, it seems as if “amor,” “niño tierno” and “obedience” could all finally be meant. Secondly, and more importantly, we are left to wonder who the second person singular refers to: “*dan lo principio en ti.*”

Traditionally, it would be Fortaleza, the nun addressed to whom (“te”) the Christ child was brought. As we have suggested, however, such would open

⁶⁶ “Could Women Write Mystical Poetry? The Literary Daughters of Juan de la Cruz”, in *Studies on Women’s Poetry of the Golden Age: Tras el espejo la musa escribe*, ed. Julián Olivares (Woodbridge, 2009), p. 200, p. 185-201.



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up the category to include the Virtues and other nuns, all as fosters for the pregnant Virgin Mary: another three-in-one.

This interpretation is supported not only by what we have seen in *Ordo* and *Breve festejo* until now in terms of complex symbiotic relationships, but also by previous purposeful mixing of singulars and plurals in the second play, and by clearer references to the nun-Mary affiliation in others of Marcela's dramas.

In *Coloquio espiritual del Nacimiento*, for example, we read that the "virgíneo claustro" pertains also to souls through the application of a virtuous life: "y pues les da liberal / su carne y persona propia, / cada una de las almas / se puede llamar gozosa / madre de Cristo". Just as Christ grows in vestal wombs, so does virtue in the nuns through the perfection reached for in emulating the Virgin, most specifically in *Breve festejo*, "aquesta virtud por excelencia".⁶⁷

Here as before, however, an unclear antecedent leaves one to ponder the play's intentions: what virtue is meant? Perhaps it is Chastity, since the Virgin birth is being discussed, and Chastity is a main character in the play. It is also possible that Marcela here alludes to perfection, and/or love, other virtues recently mentioned.

However, Obedience, the last personified Virtue mentioned by name in line 114, is another possibility, and a significant one. If Obedience is the virtue meant, we remember that this virtue arguably adheres to Christ and "hermana," as discussed previously, but also to Mary and all of the nuns (since the virtue in question, whichever it is, is "derived to all" in line 120). Hence, through Obedience, we have the manifestation a final group of three, this one the most important: The virtue-infused nuns, the Virgin Mary, and the Christ.

This ultimate triadic association is also strongly intimated by the fact that, at this point in the play, the "tú" reference shifts without any cue. The second person singular that referred ambiguously to various female human figures before (including Mary and the Virtues/nuns) now abruptly references a male Divinity, as *Fortaleza* continues with "[h]oy a tus haros sacros, dan un vuelo / rendidos y devotos los afectos...."⁶⁸ "Tú" is now clearly Christ, who,

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, l. 187, 195-99, 119.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, l. 121-122.



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significantly, is both newly-born Man and, as the “haros” might suggest⁶⁹ and other clues certainly do, the mystic Husband.⁷⁰

Coloquio espiritual del Nacimiento, one of Marcela de San Félix’s master works, also traces a clear relationship between mystical pursuit and participation in the historical birth of Christ. As the shorter play does not, the *coloquio* directly argues that the mystical pursuit that marks the nuns’ daily lives prepares them to travel to the “sigunda persona / de la Trinidad sagrada”⁷¹ physically, since it is also a means of approaching the Divinity, and one that they have already experienced. Making this point, one Virtue, Contemplación, says to another, Regocijo:

Todo lo vil y grosero,
todo lo sensible arroja
y echa de sí con espíritu,
el espíritu que logra
íntimamente finezas
que le elevan y enamoran,
que le elevan de lo bajo,
y en lo supremo colocan.
Y por esto, Regocijo,
espirituales pastoras
somos de este nacimiento

(...)

vamos caminando solas
sin afectar interés
de humana u divina cosa.
A Dios buscamos por Dios
sin que nada se interponga,
que en su puro ser inmenso

⁶⁹ The word “haros” is not modern Spanish, but is most likely “faros,” which means, among other things, “beacon,” or guiding light. This symbol both hearkens back to the cosmological imagery at the outset of the play, and intimates the Illuminative Way of mysticism, which is typically expressed as a flight (“vuelo”), as we see here.

⁷⁰ Marcela makes this association in *Coloquio espiritual del Nacimiento* as well: No veis al Niño y su madre? No veis su guarda mayor, / el santo y divino esposo / ardiendo en fuego de amor?” (in *Literatura Conventual Femenina: Sor Marcela de san Félix, hija de Lope de Vega*, eds. Electa Arenal and Georgina Sabat de Rivers (Barcelona, 1988), l. 845-48, p. 215-45). This play is also a mystically imbued journey to the manger.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, l. 232-33.



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*ya vivimos sin congojas.*⁷²

More than this, however, the lines suggest that celebrating the birth *is* a mystical pursuit of sorts, an idea which the rest of the play supports. How the play characterizes Mary both sustains this assertion and reinforces the connection. As in *Ordo*, nuns who emulate Mary through the virtues are both mother and wife, since in accepting Christ's gift of Himself, they receive both his historical and present/future love, which is at once his flesh and his mystical "person:" "cada día se aposenta / se regala y enamora, / y . . . les da liberal / su carne y persona propia..."⁷³ Therefore, concludes the play, "que convengan / con ser madre y ser esposa".⁷⁴ It seems that *Breve festejo* shares these understandings with the *coloquio*, even though it does not develop all of them directly.

As we have seen so far, the Virtues-nuns who approach Christ in the briefer drama also do so through a mystic paradigm, and in the present; yet, the journey is also somehow a physical one, and the object of their affection, a historical baby: "grandeza reducida / a un establo tan pequeño."⁷⁵ Moreover, the wife-mother designation clearly illustrated in the *coloquio* is certainly implied in *Breve festejo*, making sense of the mystical journey and union that follows on the visitation.

We have already noted some of the aspects of the play that anticipate the seamless progression from birth to mystical union, the moment of encounter at the manger being a key one ("Hoy a tus haros sacros, dan un vuelo / rendidos y devotos los afectos."). Beyond this pivotal meeting, the connection becomes even clearer, as "almas" in love ("enamoradas") with the Christ child describe the experience through the mystical language of transverberation:

Con el corazón herido,
quedan siempre aprisionadas.

⁷² *Ibid.*, l. 221-31, 240-46, emphasis mine.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, l. 193-196, emphasis mine.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, l. 205-206

⁷⁵ In this we most clearly see an important aspect of Marcela's dramaturgy that is reminiscent of the Medieval mystery play: "the action is at once the reenactment of sacred history and the actual event taking place in the present" (Ronald Surtz, *The Birth of a Theater: Dramatic Convention in Spanish Theater from Juan del Encina to Lope de Vega* [Princeton, 1979], p. 88).



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de esos soles vulneradas,
hacen aljaba su pecho
para que vengan derecho,
negándose, generosas,
en la nada, venturosas...”⁷⁶

Their hearts have been pierced, rent asunder by “suns” that are reminiscent of the Christ-sun at the beginning of the play. The result is an exchange of agapic love between the Divine “tú” and a third-person beloved⁷⁷ that spiritually prefaces eroticism of the mystic union to come thus: “en la fineza de amarte, / lo que le das, ofrecerte”.⁷⁸

As the play anticipates the moment of union for which the soul is prepared though transverberation, it turns again to the nature of the Divinity involved in this congress. As we have seen, a Triune God is strongly implied, beginning with the Three-Kings motif, which is not surprising given that the author of the play comes from an order that emphasizes this doctrine in particular.

Nevertheless, we also again witness the centrality of the corporeal Christ figure, emphasized by what follows: the God invoked as the mystical journey truly begins⁷⁹ reflects the Father as “Espejo del Padre”, but is nevertheless, reemphasized specifically as the Son: “Infante Divino”, “Pastor”, and “Divino Niño”.⁸⁰ Paralleling these unequivocal addresses, the descriptions of the mystic journey in *Breve festejo* emphasize its relationship to the birth of the

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, l. 149-55.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, l. 159-160. The sudden switch from the intimacy of exchange between the divine “tú” and the almas to a masculine third-person, “[e]l que llegó a conocerte / poco hizo en adorarte, / y en la fineza . . .” (*Ibid.*, 157-59), is odd, but explicable. As Evelyn Toft convincingly argues in another context, female mystic writers sometimes used the third person and other rhetorical strategies to “create[] distance between the event narrated and the beloved who is the subject of the experience” (“Cecilia del Nacimiento, Second-Generation Mystic of the Carmelite Reform”, in *A New Companion to Hispanic Mysticism*, ed. Hilaire Kallendorf [Leiden, 2010], p. 241, p. 231-52).

⁷⁸ These lines evoke the notion of agapic love, or *caritas*: the perfect love of God, returned to God and others only through God’s power. Such God-love is especially evidenced, according to adherents such as Saint Teresa of Avila, through transverberation and entry into spiritual marriage, as Jane Ackerman points out (in “Spanish Mystical Practice and Writing in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance”, *Studia mystica* 18 (1997), p. 1-35). This close association is strongly suggested here.

⁷⁹ The Purgative Way is suggested with “dejando el sentido [a] oscuras” (l. 163).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, l. 175, 167, 171, 179.



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Christ, just as the Unitive descriptions in Hildegard's *Ordo* referenced Christ as earthly King:

Yo...
en cifra presento
pureza de bronce.

Lloras y esas perlas
el alba las coge
para dar los frutos
donde siembra flores.
(...)

Entre dulces lazos
flechas los arpones,
asestando el tiro
a los corazones.

Azucenas puras
te exhalan olores
y enamorados lirios,
mortificaciones.

Pensil es ameno
esa choza pobre,
hospicio de reyes,
de frutos entonces.

Ay, majestades,
las coronas cobren
pues, tan diligentes
llegaron veloces.

Y pues franqueas
benignos favores,
néctares derramas
entre tus consortes.

Cándidas y tersas,
te siguen acordes
al tálamo ilustre
que contigo logren.⁸¹

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, l. 199, 201-206, 215-38.



Indeed, the particularly mystic emphasis on the Man-Christ is as clear in Marcela de San Félix as in Hildegard of Bingen. The typical bucolic environment of the Unitive is crafted by a Baby who is also Creator-Father; His tears create the pods that produce flowers, later clarified as lilies, which also reference the nuns—“[a]zucenas puras,” “enamorados lirios”—who worship Him.

This landscape now becomes a fruitful garden (“pensil”) evocative of Eden, which bears a metonymic and symbolic relationship to the stable, the “choza pobre.” This space, which once bore fruit and now gives refuge to kings, evokes the Trinity that Christ represents, but also houses the three visiting royals,⁸² who are ultimately also ultimately humans in need of redemption. The union that ultimately takes place between the Divinity and the female adherents (“cándidas y tersas”) therein, is thus between a distinctively corporeal Christocentric Divinity whose presence in that particular location evokes and restores a lost Paradise—and a lost relationship. We note however, that this restoration is as yet potential, unfinished, as is indicated by the subjunctive used: “al tálamo ilustre / que contigo *logren*” (my emphasis).

In short, Marcela’s once-Edenic mystic stable is Hildegard’s parting “in-between” space, representing the time between the Garden and the fulfillment of the Second Coming: “In the beginning all creation was verdant (...) remember (...) the fullness which was made in the beginning (...)” the only rejoinder to which is: “I know it, but the golden number is not yet full”.⁸³ In both plays, in the final analysis, very pointed theological sense is made of the emphatically Incarnate mystical Christ, also a Redeemer Christ whose birth (San Félix) and wounds (Bingen) at some level evoke a seemingly necessary or desired lack of completion evinced in a *future* Union, an *anticipated* marriage bed, and an unattained “golden number”.

IV. Christocentric Focus in Mysticism: Immanence versus Transcendence

Thus far, we have seen what two mystically-imbued plays with a particularly human Second-Person focus have in common, and that the common choice on the part of the writing nuns seems to have similar messages, and perhaps

⁸² The “majestades” referred to would logically be the Three Kings of the celebration.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, l. 252, 260, 256.



potential motivations, in terms of Redemption theology.⁸⁴ Before continuing to discuss doctrinal import of the plays' final allusions and drawing some connections and conclusions, it will be helpful to remember in very broad terms some of the basic theology of the practice of Christian mysticism, and recall general attitudes about a distinctly Christocentric focus within the practice in particular.

As Gillian Ahlgren reminds us, Saint Teresa of Avila, the sixteenth-century Spanish reformer and mystic, was a key motivator behind the Catholic Church's sanction of "the mystical way as an important part of Counter-Reformation Catholic identity."⁸⁵ Not only so, but she was a primary figure, along with San Juan de la Cruz, in revitalizing the mystic practice in the Spanish Church during this time period, a tradition which in Spain knew very few medieval adherents⁸⁶ in spite of the fact that, as Jodi Bilinkoff states, "medieval spirituality" elsewhere in Christian Europe was largely associated with mysticism.⁸⁷

Ironically, although Teresa's didactic works on mysticism (such as *El camino de perfección* and *Castillo interior*) were highly regarded, and spite of her central role in the flowering of Spanish Christian mysticism, she was chastised for her Christocentric inclinations, presented thus in her *Libro de la Vida*:

porque en algunos libros que están escritos de oración (...) avisan mucho que aparten de sí toda imaginación corpórea y que se lleguen a contemplar en la Divinidad; porque dicen que, aunque sea la Humanidad de Cristo, a los que llegan ya tan adelante, que embaraza o impide a la más perfecta contemplación

⁸⁴ As Sabat de Rivers indicates, "el amor al Niño Jesús como una primicia del Cristo redentor" ("Literatura manuscrita del convento", *Ibid.*, p. 41.) is a common theme in Marcela's dramaturgy, particularly in *Coloquio espiritual del Nacimiento* and *Coloquio espiritual del Santísimo Sacramento*. We note it now too, in *Breve festejo*. Interestingly, as Ronald Surtz notes, the juxtaposition of Incarnation and Redemption in a play is, as a general rule, "highly unusual" ("The 'Franciscan Connection' in the Early Castillian Theater", *Bulletin of the Comediantes* 35.2 (1983), p. 142, p. 33-43). That both women do this here would seem to indicate a purposeful choice on their behalf, rather than an imitative tendency.

⁸⁵ Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, "Negotiating Sanctity: Holy Women in Sixteenth-Century Spain", *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture* 64.3 (1995), p. 380, p. 373-88.

⁸⁶ Ramón Llull is a noteworthy exception.

⁸⁷ "Navigating the Waves (of Devotion): Toward a Gendered Analysis of Early Modern Catholicism", in *Crossing Boundaries: Attending to Early Modern Women*, eds. Jane Donawerth and Adele Seefe, (Newark, 2000), p. 163, p. 161-72.



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(...) Esto bien me parece a mí, algunas veces; más apartarse todo de Cristo (...), no lo puedo sufrir.⁸⁸

Hence, she later reneged on this sentiment later in *Libro*, perhaps in her particular context out of fear of reprisal or criticism of those Counter-Reformation authorities who feared the distinctly human overtone and its “dangerous” approximation to *alumbrismo* and certain Protestant practices:⁸⁹

es oración sabrosa, si Dios allí ayuda, y el deleite mucho. Y como se ve aquella ganancia y aquel gusto, ya no había quien me hiciese tornar a la Humanidad, sino que, en hecho de verdad, me parecía que me era impedimento.⁹⁰

Of course the history of Medieval and Early-Modern Christian mysticism provides earlier reasons why the “humanity of Christ” might be, if not regarded as suspect, otherwise disesteemed. First, we again recall that from times of antiquity, women were associated in humorial terms with “moist” and “cool” to men’s “dry” and “hot,” designations which made their way into medieval and early-modern Christian spirituality, connecting females with the body (physical realm) and males with the intellect (metaphysical realm).

This dichotomy became deeply rooted in the psyche of the Church, to such an extent that a fifteenth-century Inquisitor’s reference, *Malleus maleficarum*, linked “women with the body in an exclusively negative way, in which women, because of their corporality, are intimately associated with the devil”.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Ed. Guido Mancini (Madrid, 1982), p. 163.

⁸⁹ Many scholars have argued in this direction, including, for example, Jodi Bilinkof, in “Navigating the Waves (of Devotion)”, *Ibid.* In *The Mystic Fable*, interestingly, Michel de Certeau presents an entirely different perspective, suggesting that Counter-Reformation politics would favor what he variously calls “ostentation” and “a strategy of the visible,” since “[t]he inner crusade . . . was concerned with reestablishing the link between that ‘mystic’ life and the ecclesiastical apparatus” (*The Mystic Fable: Vol. 1. The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Micheal B. Smith [Chicago, 1992], p. 86). Cristocentrism in mysticism would then seemingly be desirable to early-modern Catholicism, since it demystifies the practice: “mystical reality became identified with mystical meaning Moreover, it consolidated the clerical power on which it was dependent This Eucharistic (Christocentric) ‘body’ was the ‘sacrament’ of the institution, the visible instituting of what the institution was meant to become, its theoretical authorization and its pastoral tool” (*Ibid.*, p. 86). These divergences, of course, point to the complexity of the issue at hand.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁹¹ E. Ann Matter, *Ibid.*, p. 28.



Because females, singularly “embodied,” were associated in such an essentialist way to sin, they had to somehow overcome the negative associations of their corporality through spiritual practices that redeemed or sanctified it, as Alghren notes: “[b]ecause women’s bodies were considered their point of weakness, they had to demonstrate some kind of special relationship to [them]”.⁹²

Many women practitioners of mysticism arguably did this by emphasizing a connection with a distinctly corporeal divinity in the figure of Christ.⁹³ One potential result of this was that the emphasis of their spiritual practice, by association, was devalued. Certainly this bias toward transcendence over immanence in mysticism had other complex motivations, though, beginning with Neoplatonic ideology. To the Greek Philosopher’s way of thinking, we recall, the corporeal realm is inferior, conceptually useful only insofar as it leads back to true beauty.

On the level of metaphysical systems, this notion creates a disparity between the sense-perceptible and intelligible realms, true reality presumed to adhere to the latter. According to Guillermo Serés, Christian thinkers “sacrilizaba[n] lo sacrilizable de Platón [e] intentaba[n] conciliar su prestigiosa doctrina con las verdades y misterios de la fe”.⁹⁴ As such, in mystical Christianity, a hierarchy existed through which the further one got away from the created realm, including Christ Incarnate, the better, as it tended to represent carnal habits that disallowed mystical pursuit. Examples of the influence of such thinking in Christian mysticism, although tempered by Christocentric theology, were nevertheless quite common, dating back to antiquity.⁹⁵

One that approximately represents Hildegard of Bingen’s milieu is fellow German Meister Eckhart (1260-1327). Donald H. Bishop, an expert in medieval mysticism, discusses Eckhart’s emphases along these lines. He states that for the Dominican theologian there was always a “juxtaposition of the immanent and the transcendent, and that while they may be conceived of and

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 387.

⁹³ Matter discusses, among other things, the singularly “bodily nature of female mystics in contradistinction to their male counterparts” (p. 26).

⁹⁴ *La transformación de los amantes: Imágenes del amor de la Antigüedad al Siglo de Oro* (Barcelona, 1996), p. 28.

⁹⁵ A good Classical example is Origen (184-253), and from the early Medieval period, Pseudo Dionysius (650-725).



verbalized as separate, they are interrelated, interdependent, or interfused”.⁹⁶ Bishop goes on to say that as a mystic practitioner, Eckhart nevertheless held to a slightly different inclination: while “the first view of Divine Reality as personal, in which one is united with God through Christ, was sufficient for the majority, it was not for himself.

He could not rest until he had gone beyond that to an experience of the root of all existence, the Godhead itself”.⁹⁷ A contemporary of Marcela de San Félix, sixteenth-century Spanish mystic and writer Malón de Chaide evokes the same hierarchicalization thus: “Dicen los filósofos morales que es un deseo de hermosura (...) [y que] de la divina hermosura nace el amor, que nos lleva a Dios (...) el amor, en cuanto comienza y nace de Dios, se llame hermosura; en cuando llegando al alma, la arrebatada, se llama amor; y en cuanto la une con su Hacedor, se llama deleite”.⁹⁸

Again, connection with the transcendent Godhead is privileged, and according to José Luis Sánchez Lora, unsurprisingly: “ningún místico español prescindió nunca, cuando menos, de la humanidad de Cristo, pero la estrujaron para trascenderla”.⁹⁹

Just as one can argue that such things as women’s association with corporeal spirituality and Neoplatonic influences might assist in categorizing embodied faith as somehow inferior in Catholic sacred economy, however, it is also true that women especially were known and esteemed for the very same. This is perhaps especially so during Hildegard of Bingen’s milieu, affected as it likely also was by the active, heart-felt, ontological spirituality of such as Saint Francis of Assisi.

⁹⁶ “Three Medieval Christian Mystics”, in *Mysticism and the Mystical Experience: East and West*, ed. Donald H. Bishop (Selinsgrove, 1995), p. 75, p. 62-109.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁹⁸ In José Luis Sánchez Lora, *Mujeres, conventos y formas de religiosidad barrocas* (Madrid, 1988), p. 188.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 226. Limited space here does not allow for further discussion of the influences on and permutations of immanence versus transcendence in the mystic imagination of medieval and early modern European Christianity. These conversations have been articulately and meticulously held elsewhere: Donald H. Bishop, Mark A. McIntosh (*A Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* [Oxford, 1998]), José Luis Sánchez Lora, Guillermo Serés, and many others.



Indeed, as Matter emphasizes, studies like Caroline Walker Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*¹⁰⁰ have lead many scholars of medieval Christianity to reevaluate the affirmative influence of the corporeal in women's medieval spiritual practices, such as ecstasies,¹⁰¹ as well as reconsider how these influences might have been received.

While specific admiration for women along these lines might have diminished somewhat by the sixteenth century for reasons alluded to above, it is also true that the likes of Spanish Reformer Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) championed embodied mystical spirituality, and many nuns' writings held it up as exemplary, even preferable, for female religious.¹⁰² And, as Barbara Diefendorf notes, in Counter-Reformation Europe, the "rich literature of (...) affective spirituality (...) influenced the way that [authorities] (...) interpreted the religious experiences of their subjects",¹⁰³ and women were still regarded affirmatively for "a wisdom that was all the more respected in that its origins were seen to lie in direct communion with the divine",¹⁰⁴ intercourse which somehow very often had a physical inclination or symbolism.

In any case, what seems clear is that women's spirituality was associated essentially with the body in many ways, both positive and negative, and that women generally seemed to understand mystical theology much more corporeally than was generally favored. Thus, it makes sense that they might want to somehow explain or even defend the body's role as they saw it in the spiritual realm and transcendental relationships, as Teresa tried to do. Both Hildegard and Marcela do this, each in her own way.

As Dronke points out, Hildegard was a scientist, even an "empiricist;" as such she cannot or will not "demarcate physical principles from metaphysical

¹⁰⁰ *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, 1987).

¹⁰¹ Matter, *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁰² Where Spain is concerned, Teresa of Avila herself regularly articulated her case for practical theology. An example of a nun who privileged practical spirituality is María de San Alberto (1568-1640).

¹⁰³ "Discerning Spirits: Women and Spiritual Authority in Counter Reformation France", in *Culture and Change: Attending to Early Modern Women*, eds. Margaret Mikesell and Adele Seef (Newark, 2003), p. 246, p. 241-66.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 258.



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ones”.¹⁰⁵ He goes on to discuss the tension that this produces in the “committed mystic”,¹⁰⁶ which shows itself especially in her medical text, *Causae et curae*. He then describes the way in which Hildegard conceptually and doctrinally negotiates this difficulty, suggesting “one of the few ways open to the scientist-mystic of transcending the physically conditioned world...”.

In Hildegard’s scheme, “the soul ris[es] victoriously *over its irredeemably corrupt body* [and] is then transfigured: the divine realm—*which does not necessarily exclude the physical*—rises, conquering that of Lucifer”.¹⁰⁷ In the *coloquio* that we have seen on the birth of Christ, Marcela supports a similar determination, although her “theology” is couched in symbolism, metaphor and humor. Returning to the fact that celebrating the birth of Christ becomes a mystical pursuit in this play as in *Breve festejo*, we recall, for example, that the nuns approach the Christ apart from all sinful baggage: “todo lo vil y lo grosero / todo lo sensible arroja...”.

However, Marcela also suggests in the *coloquio* that there is an embodiment that *supports* the approach to the King, even as there are physical entities that get in the way. For example, at one point, Regocijo, the nun/human figure of the play, points out that physical nurture is necessary for the trip to the manger, asking for *migas*, a dish of bread crumbs typically eaten by shepherds. Virtue Devoción retorts, disappointedly: “entendimos todas que eras espiritüal”.¹⁰⁸ Regocijo then jocularly but meaningfully responds: “¿Quién dice menos, señoras? / Si no como, ¿qué he de ser / sino espíritu o la sombra / del cuerpo, que ya me falta / por la hambre que me sobra?”.¹⁰⁹

Along with the the typical Marcelian quick-wittedness, what we have here parallels Hildegard’s thoughts, as above. In the larger context of the play, which draws significant connections between Christ’s birth and Redemption *and* significant parallels between Christ and His followers, these and other lines suggest something important: “Spirit” by itself is seemingly not enough. Without the capable body (and Body), “espíritu” is in jeopardy, and can fall to “la sombra del cuerpo,” earlier Hildegard’s “irredeemably corrupt body” in

¹⁰⁵ *Women Writers of the Middle Ages, Ibid.*, p. 171.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 172, emphasis mine.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, l. 270-71.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, l. 272-76.



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juxtaposition with that physical aspect which is not cast aside, but transfigured. In other words, *properly understood or appropriated physicality* (and Physicality) is somehow necessary for the mystically imbued arrival, even as without it, there is no arrival at all. In short, since without Immanence there is no mystic transcendence, it is logical that these women would wish to associate the two, both conceptually and as events.

In her famous essay “The Way of the Feminine,” Luce Irigaray suggests what the source of this properly appropriated physicality might be, at the same time as she clarifies what it is not. Talking about affective monastic spirituality among women, she asserts: “[n]ow, the devotion expressed by a good number of enclosed nuns (...) takes the form of a very human effective and corporeal bond. The tenderness may very well be an idealized human emotion, but that does *not mean* that it [can be] extrapolated from *our* nature in the name of a mystery pertaining to the beyond”.¹¹⁰

While her application is slightly different, what this sentence is saying for our purposes alludes to basic Christian theology: *our* emotions and corporality do not define the Divine’s, somehow sully them with any contact; rather, it is the other way around: Christ’s “emotions”—most notably, Love¹¹¹—shape ours, as His once-broken body redeems ours. From this standpoint, then “emotionality” and “corporality” in religion, when properly understood, are not only important concepts, but doctrinally central.

I believe that it is quite possible that Hildegard of Bingen and Marcela de San Félix may have been attempting to articulate at least some of the above through their plays, but even if they weren’t, these issues are central to the current discussion. Therefore, to conclude, we will return to the plays from this perspective, and take a look at how mindfulness of this “other way around” can elucidate some important aspects of Christ’s emotional presence in *Ordo* and *Breve festejo*. Finally we will revisit the issue of transcendence and immanence through the lens of End-Times theology and pose some closing theological considerations.

¹¹⁰ Trans. David Macey, in *New Trends in Feminine Spirituality: The Holy Women of Liège and Their Impact*, eds. Juliette Dor, Lesley Johnson and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (Turnhout: 1999), p. 321, emphasis mine.

¹¹¹ John 13: 34: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."



V. God-Love and Corporality in Mysticism: *Caritas* and *Eros*

The place of erotic love in Christian mystic literature has, of course, received a lot of critical attention. In general, as Serés disucusses in *La transformación de los amantes* for example, Christian mystics borrowed *eros* from Platonic thought, as it was a love that was born corporeal (immanent, sexual) and hence needed to be transformed by the transcendent (or knowledge of beauty), “ceñi[éndose] al primero, al puro, al único por el que el alma puede salvarse”.¹¹² *Eros*, then, was generally perceived as somehow contributing to a desire for and knowledge of spiritual truth, or as related to the very essence of that desire within the human subject itself.

In Christian language, “*Eros* is the force, in humanity, which stirs us to seek God”.¹¹³ These specific associations, in combination with the overwhelming influence of Neoplatonic ideology on Christian spirituality in general, make some symbolic sense out of the use of erotic imagery in mystic literature, as well as provide a more fundamental rationale for the practice. Other general contributing explanations exist, of course. For example, Bernard McGinn suggests that *eros* is a general metaphor for intensity,¹¹⁴ Foucault discusses repressed alterity, and Serés reminds us of the “divinización de la dama”¹¹⁵ in the *amor cortés* tradition in which sexual desire is repressed in favor of Godly love.

Those who have spoken to it suggest that nuns had “limited access to th[e] tradition” by which they could have understood the spiritual meanings beneath the story of carnal desire,¹¹⁶ and scholars have suggested other motivations for the nuns’ use of erotic imagery in particular. Arenal and Sabat de Rivers, for example, suggest that intensely ascetic practices were not as attractive to women,¹¹⁷ and Arenal and Schlau suggest a sublimation of real-

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹¹³ Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, “Julian of Norwich’s Theology of Eros”, *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 5.1 (2005), p. 38, p. 37-53.

¹¹⁴ “The Language of Love in Christian and Jewish Mysticism”, in *Mysticism and Language*, ed. Stephen T. Katz (New York, 1992), p. 205, p. 202-35.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, “Introducción”, p. 51.



world sexuality in favor of “the spiritualized erotic imagination”,¹¹⁸ and elsewhere, “idealized human erotic passion”.¹¹⁹ Of course, as for men, Song of Songs would have served as a model, as would have men’s mystical works in general. While these rationales are convincing in and of themselves, within the context of this discussion they are incomplete, in that they seem to ultimately emphasize *eros* as the *particularly human* element in the exchange. As biblical theology on all love suggests, however, properly understood, *eros* only rightly exists in *caritas*, and indeed, comes from *caritas*;¹²⁰ it is itself, at its best, an originally Divine love.¹²¹

This idea, of course, is ultimately sustained by the same theologians under whose influence mystics such as Eckhart, Chaide and Saint John of the Cross privileged a thoroughly transcendental union, beginning with Augustine and Origen. Nevertheless, for these practitioners, the Platonic model is the “[modelo] propiamente místico” under which no alteration could ultimately be brooked in favor of a less-than-transcendent Union in Christ: the so-thought best practice, thus “assume[] la pasión de Cristo (...) morosamente (...) sólo para luego trascenderlo en Cristo resucitado”.¹²²

¹¹⁸ “Stratagems of the Strong, Stratagems of the Weak: Autobiographical Prose of the Seventeenth-Century Hispanic Convent”, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 9.1 (1990), p. 30, p. 25-42.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, *Untold Sisters*, p. 13.

¹²⁰ I will leave development of these ideas for a future article on *eros* and *caritas* in mystical convent literature. Here we will limit ourselves to what others have brought to a more limited topic: elements of divine erotic love that contribute to a fuller understanding of *caritas*. In a 2007 keynote address, “The Theology of *Deus Caritas Est*” Micheal P. Sweeny contributes several connections: *eros*-infused *caritas* suggests exclusivity, “designating ‘this one’” ([2007, June], Keynote address presented at Holy Names University, Oakland, CA.), and is the conduit by which *caritas* is received by humans. For her part, Ahlgren suggests “desire for union” and “connectivity, intimacy” (“Julian of Norwich,” *Ibid.*, p. 38-39). Finally, McGinn posits that *eros* intimates service though its associations with the marriage bed and children (*Ibid.*, p. 214). Medievalist and Christian apologist C. S. Lewis’ wonderful book, *The Four Loves*, provides a wonderful and detailed accounting of the inter-workings of all loves (San Diego, 1960).

¹²¹ As C. S. Lewis notes, “[w]ithout Eros sexual desire . . . is a fact about ourselves. Within Eros it is rather about the Beloved” (*Ibid.*, p. 95).

¹²² Sánchez Lora, *Ibid.*, p. 214 and 215.



Thus, any sort of body-centric Christ in the mystic paradigm, which Hildegard and Marcela seem to honor, was deemed “vía para principiantes”.¹²³ It seems, however, that this way of thinking is defensible more under a misappropriation of Platonic-influenced mysticism than under a true understanding of Biblical love; As C. S. Lewis would have it: “the Platonic (...) type of erotic transcendentalism cannot help a Christian”.¹²⁴ Under Plato, the truth and beauty, the Ultimate, are transcendental, and *eros* or corporality, in the final analysis, human and inferior. It is under this economy in particular that *Christ’s* humanity and corporality are diminished; thus, perhaps it is for this reason rather than a truly biblical motivation that the corporeal Christ was finally diminished in much of mystic theology.

VI. Redemption Theology in *Ordo virtutum* and *Breve festejo*: The Already and the Not Yet¹²⁵

Indeed, perhaps it is an over-identification with Neoplatonism that allows the mystic Christians referenced here to deemphasize the fact that, just as God-love defines ours, it is Christ’s corporality that determines our own, rather than vice versa. Perhaps the male-driven nature of mysto-theological texts also provides an explanation, since as Irigary reminds us, “for men, God represents a transcendental that is inaccessible to the senses, and even to thought made flesh”.¹²⁶

In other words, although the paradox of Christ’s humanity-in-divinity was accepted, prevailing preferences, rather than precise theology, tilted the interpretation of it as concerned mysticism in an incorporeal direction. Going back to the perfection of Eden can help us recall this issue in biblical terms, and also permit us to return to Hildegard and Marcela’s plays, which evoke the Garden. In the pre-fall Genesis account, the serpent induces God’s human creatures to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, a tree which God had commanded them not eat from nor to even touch (2: 17 and 3: 3).

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹²⁵ This term was coined in the twentieth century by Gerhardus Vos, a Princeton scholar known for his Kingdom eschatology.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 320.



When they do anyway, the precise nature of their disobedience is that they have sought something outside of relationship with God. In this case, interestingly, that thing is knowledge, not a piece of fruit, as some think, blaming the “apple.” The point this proves is that *disobedience* is the fundamental sin, which, tellingly for our purposes, adheres to knowledge rather than something physical. “Corporality” *per se* is not wrong; disobedience is. From here, Christ’s capacity to redeem us through it provides no philosophical problem whatsoever, and nor should the admission within a discussion on mysticism that *flesh comes from the Godhead* present any tension.

Again, Christ’s perfect corporality determines ours; we do not somehow sully the Godhead through our imperfect fleshly Image-bearing inasmuch as we do not fundamentally degrade God-Love with our own imperfect mirroring. These truths, going back to the nuns, unproblematically permit transfigured human flesh into mystical exchange, as much as they allow transformed human love into Hildegard’s “diviner realm”.¹²⁷ They allow the communication of Marcela’s mysticism¹²⁸ to be distinctly corporeal: “cuerpo entero de Cristo / ha de guardar con su alma, / y todas las tres personas / que están por concomitancia, / tan iguales y conformes, / de la Trinidad sagrada. / Su *divinidad me entrega*, / *su humanidad con mil gracias*, / *su cuerpo, su alma santísima*”.¹²⁹

Going beyond permissible, however, this conception of mystic practice actually hearkens to the “not yet” aspect of Redemption, which both Hildegard and Marcela allude to at the end of their plays with a particularly robust theology. Far from excluding the corporeal, biblical Trinitarian theology embraces it: “[f]or in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form . . .” (Col. 2: 9). Far from transcending his body, Christ, through His Ascension, *remains* embodied, even as the entire Godhead does.

This divine Corporality, in turn, anticipates the End Times, a point at which all believers will reflect the Godhead wholly (in spirit and body), perfectly and

¹²⁷ Peter Dronke, *Women Writers, Ibid.*, p. 172.

¹²⁸ In the quote that follows, taken from *Coloquio espiritual del Santísimo Sacramento*, Marcela refers directly to the Eucharist, but as in *Coloquio espiritual del Nacimiento*, the mystic journey is one and the same.

¹²⁹ in *Literatura Conventual Femenina: Sor Marcela de san Félix, hija de Lope de Vega*, eds. Electa Arenal and Georgina Sabat de Rivers (Barcelona, 1988), l. 560-68, p. 273-315.



eternally, as they cannot now *even in heaven*, during the in-between time evoked at the end of both *Ordo* and *Breve festejo*.¹³⁰ That said, the clarifications that End-Times theology makes as concerns mysticism does not draw the believer forever into a mystical idealism that is even more remote than any we have seen thus far. Symbolically, the predominance of the Body makes sure of that, even as theological reflections do. As Hildegard puts it beautifully in *Canae et curae*, the End Times merely perfectly reflect what happens now, as is also attested though the use of a similar “dress” metaphor in *Ordo virtutum*.¹³¹

After the last day the soul will desire its dress from God, to draw that dress to itself (...) so too God has drawn to himself his dress, which was eternally hidden in him. And in this way God and man are one, as soul and body (...) As each thing has its shadow, so too man is the shadow of God, *and this shadow is the showing of creation*, and man is thus the showing of the almighty God in all his miracles (...) Thus the *whole celestial harmony* is the mirror of divinity, and man the mirror of all God’s miracles.¹³²

In other words, in the final analysis, Hildegard of Bingen’s “theology,” as that of Marcela de San Félix, seems to have a particularly Assisian articulation in action, as finally “cosmic and ecclesiastical outpouring of divine love is not simply a vast backdrop for theology but the inner dynamic of theology itself..

Theology is really an aspect of the mystical journey by means of which God is leading creation back into unity with the divine life. Theology is [first and foremost] and attempt to notice how this is happening”.¹³³ What seems at least defensible by now is that though *Ordo virtutum* and *Breve festejo*, Hildegard and Marcela have shown that they, indeed, have noticed, and are asking their viewers to do the same.

¹³⁰ John 5: 28-29, among other texts, references the doctrine of the future union of the bodies of believers with their eternal souls at the Second Coming.

¹³¹ “Look at the dress you are wearing, daughter of salvation: / be steadfast and you will never fall” (*Ordo virtutum*, *Ibid.*, l. 34-35). This dress, as the body, has its opposite in a dress that inhibits, rather than helps, pursuit of the Divinity: “Oh grievous toil, oh harsh weight / that I bear in the dress of this life: / it is too grievous for me to fight against my body” (*Ibid.*, l. 26-28).

¹³² In Peter Dronke, *Women Writers*, *Ibid.*, p. 175, emphasis mine.

¹³³ McIntosh, *Ibid.*, p. 156.



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