

*Essays in Medieval Studies 15*

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**page 115****Spirituality and Self-Representation in *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*****Katheryn M. Giglio**

In her introduction to *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, translator Margot King acknowledges the personal fascination that lay between the lines of her scrupulous scholarship. In a brief autobiographical gesture, King notes:

I must confess that it was not only Christina's dendrite practices which first attracted me [to the work]. I have always been more than a little attracted to outrageous behaviors and certainly the life abounds with bizarre episodes.<sup>1</sup>

After reading King's confession, I began to examine more closely the textual elements that pulled me, without the context of a classroom, back to Christina's life. I am usually neither drawn to nor at home with the excessive behavior of others: the first thing I mastered upon moving to Chicago was how to deftly slide away from any people cackling to themselves on the train. After all, I have been successfully socialized into a process of erasure. My aunt Helen, for example, had only three fingers on her right hand and was institutionalized most of her life for something my family called "nervousness." I don't know if her lack of fingers, bad nerves, and hospitalization are connected: I would guess and hope not, but that is the point: I don't know. Hidden away, Helen was seldom discussed. I grew up fearful of her, or rather, of the difference that she had come to represent. Whenever my brothers or I exhibited childish odd behavior such as climbing trees while shouting Monkees lyrics, the name of Helen became a threat. "You'll be just like Helen," warned my mother, going suddenly tight-lipped, "if you're all not careful!" Reading Christina's biography was at first a luxury, offering me an encounter with difference tempered by safe, critical distance.

Christina's primary biographer, Thomas of Cantimpre, notes that most of Christina's mystical deeds are unusual even for him, as they often "exceed all understanding of men" (*The Life*, p. 3). Like Margery Kempe later, Christina possessed prophetic gifts and underwent out-of-body experiences. But it is Christina's

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ever-changing body and grotesque physical accomplishments that fascinate, repel, or confound readers. Christina camps out in icy, wintry rivers, bakes herself alive in bread ovens, and provokes neighborhood dogs into chasing after her naked body through thorns. Even in meditation, Christina is outrageously physical. In a moment of quiet prayer, she becomes as shapeless as "hot wax" before unraveling like a "hedgehog" to her original human form (De Cantimpre, *The Life*, p. 18).

Yet within this portrait of a young woman as social oddity is also a powerful record of collective spirituality. As I returned to the text for a third and fourth time, I began to notice the subtler narrative of Christina's family and friends: Christina and her community cannot help but react to and inform one another in complex, reflexive ways. In the spirit of the salutary exemplum, *The Life of Christina Mirabilis* offers a happier alternative to my aunt's cautionary tale of physical difference, a hard-won unity that eventually forms between the communal and individual body. Christina's family and neighbors do more than provide sparse, peeved commentary upon an individual that seems foreign to them. Instead, Christina's home town of St. Trond comes to a new understanding of her radical physicality. This re-negotiation of what difference means enables the townsfolk to join Christina in a transformation from physicality to spirituality, from separation to wholeness. The text is more than a record of a historically fascinating body. It illustrates how reactions to difference, even those of fascination, are dependent upon our definitions of what the body finally means.

As a new mystic returned to the body by God after death, Christina at first is repulsed by both her own and others' human physicality. The biographer notes that Christina is "revolted by the smell of human bodies" and attempts to escape the human community by fleeing to the surrounding woods or to the tops of trees and churches (De Cantimpre, *The Life*, p. 13). The smell that she cannot stand is emitted by her own body as well, for it is primarily during this first period that Christina burns, freezes, and hangs herself. Wavering between misery and frenzy, Christina understands her

body as a site of both heavenly and earthly separation. While her physicality enables her to fulfill the mystic's requirements of serving God on earth, it also prevents her from joining fully with God. Yet her miraculous contortions, fire walking, and flying also keep Christina from blending quietly into the social framework. Defining her as a mystic, her behavior transforms her body into something other than typically "human."

The villagers of St. Trond initially react to Christina's self-violence with violence. Throughout the narrative, the biographer recounts how Christina is chased, captured, and chained by family members and neighbors:

[Christina's] sisters and ... friends were greatly embarrassed ... for men thought that she was possessed by demons. They made an agreement with a most wicked man who was very strong and they bribed him to follow and capture her and to bind her with iron chains ... this worthless man ... caught up with her and broke her leg with a cudgel. She was then brought home and her sisters hired a physician who took care of her broken shin bone (De Cantimpre, *The Life*, p. 19).

Rather than resorting to such Tanya Harding-esque measures, there are indeed less strenuous ways to cudgel social misfits. I am thinking here of the glares with which my grandfather pummeled his eldest, mysterious daughter Helen the one year she came home for Thanksgiving. As she pointed to the mashed potatoes with all her three fingers, grandpa brought her hand down into her plate with one single sharp look. The chatter around her also subsided, and even from the children's table I felt some unnamable, unbridgeable separation.

My grandfather was embarrassed as Christina's sisters are embarrassed. Despite variations in their silencing methods, the two parties share a similar sentiment: that one aberrant member threatens a familial sense of homogeneous connection. Unity in both my own and Christina's family, at base level, is contingent upon an unspoken ideal of the body. For Christina, the female ideal is one of silence and restraint. Aunt Helen had to deal with more contemporary concepts of wholeness and control; that is, having five fingers and not being too nervous. Social norms of physicality in both contexts ensure a degree of coherence. Difference puts into question what we think the body is and what it can and should do: it is not difference, but what we think we have in common that keeps us all together. Difference poses a threat, interrupting surface unity with the unfamiliar.

The brutal attempt at silencing Christina occurs precisely because of separation. This separation arises not only from the introduction of Christina's difference, but from the town's own division between themselves and their ideal. Like Christina, the people of St. Trond exist in a state of perpetual detachment. While they physically exist away from God as mortals, they also mis-read Christina's actions as those of the devil. This misjudgment demonstrates that they are not with God spiritually as well as physically, for they cannot comprehend His mysterious works. The violence surrounding Christina's difference also exposes the fragile netting that holds their society together. In order to enforce societal norms, Christina's sisters find they must "bribe" a "worthless man," as well as pay for the services of a doctor. The cohesion of the family is suddenly contingent upon money, and the norm of quiet physicality is exposed as little more than commodity. The biographer underscores this less-than-ideal relationship by referring to town members not by name, but solely by duty. Individuals are valued only for what they can do and what they will be paid for. Except for Christina, family, friends, and enemies flash in and out of the narrative like shadowy threats.

It is a new understanding of Christina's physical difference that ultimately joins the townspeople of St. Trond with God and with one another. The ruptures between the spiritual and secular, the individual and the community, are mended at once with the appearance of a mysterious oil that begins to flow from Christina's "virginal breasts." Held mercilessly in town by a wooden yoke, she is able to use the oil both as food and as ointment for her numerous wounds. Instead of reacting violently, the gathered crowd begins to "weep and ... struggle no more against the miracles of the Divine Will in Christina" (De Cantimpre, *The Life*, p. 21). This shift in the community's interpretation does not arise from struggle but, instead, from a re-negotiation of what difference means. The oil puts Christina's difference into a new code. Is it as miraculous and grotesque as anything else she presents, but the oil speaks more directly to the townsfolk's physical needs of medicine and food. The oil is proof that Christina can cross the boundaries between heaven and earth, and her difference is a result of this crossing. It promises unity, repair of inherent separations, and thus Christina is set free to translate her love of God into more earthy social interaction.

Christina next responds to her physicality as the town does, not with violence, but with grateful recognition. She

kisses each of her limbs, thanking them for allowing her to carry on her good work (De Cantimpre, *The Life*, p. 36). Christina now has the freedom to come and go into town as she pleases, and shares with others her prophesies and visions. She begs alms from people, relying on them for food and shelter. The communal body operates not as a completed and closed system with no room for difference, but as something revitalized, open, and fluid. This newfound plurality is demonstrated as the names of individual supporters like Beatrice, Thomas, and Count Louis emerge in the narrative. It is as if their new understanding of difference allows all greater autonomy.

As I went through some of the criticism surrounding this text, I found that *The Life of Christina Mirabilis* has been discussed primarily as a sideshow to the lives of more orthodox mystics. Christina is a strong example of difference, but she also exemplifies how the definition of difference is always socially constructed. In the end, all I can say is thank God for that oil. My aunt Helen was not nearly so lucky. Nothing newly miraculous emerged from her body to make our family reconsider her position, and she died alone in a group home eight months ago. I found this out three months after the fact. When I asked my grandfather why no one immediately called me, he said that I didn't need to bother myself with such things. Helen's death, like her life, was almost erased. I responded only with my usual, expected silence. I wondered if my hush meant that he'd won.

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1. Thomas De Cantimpre, *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, trans. Margot H. King (Toronto, 1989), p. 9. All further references to *The Life* are to this translation and are given by page number in the text.