A Saintly Woman is Not a Starving Woman: *Parrhesia* in "Birgitta's Heart is a Pot of Delicious Food"

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Abstract:

This article focuses on Chapter 54, "Birgitta's Heart is a Pot of Delicious Food", of Birgitta of Sweden's *Revelationes extravagantes*. This vision is striking in its use of *parrhesis*, the idea of speaking "truth to power", particularly because this vision is less edited by an *amanuensis* than any other section of Birgitta's works. Also striking in this vision is the use of food, which is often presented in medieval women's visionary texts as a temptation; in Chapter 54 food is framed in a positive way. It is only ash from a fire that the food is cooked over, framed as worldly temptation, that is problematic. As such, the emphasis in the vision is balance between an understanding of the secular world and how it can coexist with one's spiritual nature.

Keywords: Birgitta of Sweden, Parrhesis, Foodways, Visionary, Authorial Voice

In Chapter 54 of *Revelationes extravagantes* Birgitta of Sweden recounts a vision which is now known as "Birgitta's Heart is a Pot of Delicious Food". In this vision, Birgitta relates that:

> Once when Lady Birgitta was at prayer, she saw before her in a spiritual vision a small fire with a small pot of food above it, and delicious food in the pot. She also saw a man splendidly dressed in purple and gold. He went around the pot on bended knees, now blowing on the fire, now stirring the wood, and busying himself in this way around the pot. Finally he said this to her as she was watching: 'You who are watching this, did you ever see anyone as humble as I am? Can you see, I am dressed in golden clothes but still show so much concern for this pot. I go around it on bended knees. I lay my head on the ground to blow on the fire. Now and then I bring pieces of wood and pile them up or move them apart, sparing no efforts. This is the proof of my great humility.
>
> But I will show you what all this means. The pot signifies your heart. The food in it is the sweet words given to you by God from above. The small fire is the fever of the love you have from God. I am the devil, and I envy the consoling grace you have. That is the reason behind my humble concern. I blow on the fire not to make it burn more but to stir up the ashes of earthly affections so they get into the pot of your heart and make the appetizing food of the Holy Spirit's words inspired in you lose its taste. I move the wood and sticks around to turn the pot of your heart toward the earth, that is, toward earthly acquaintances or relations so that God will thus be less loved by you'" (Searby 2011, 274-5).

This vision is excluded from *Revelationes*, Birgitta's most widely read work, as it is problematic in its unorthodoxy. While it is not uncommon in medieval mystical texts to find food used as a rhetorical device, specifically as a "metaphor for interaction with the divine," food is most often represented as a corrupting force (Bynum 1998, 117).[1] "Birgitta's Heart as a Pot of Delicious Food," however, challenges this powerful religious and rhetorical expectation and uses food as a site of authorial power. In *Writing a woman's life,* Carlolyn Heilbrun (2015) notes that "power is the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter" (18). This statement from a modern American feminist echoes the importance of an Ancient Greek term *parrhesis,* or "speaking truth to power". It is the focus of this study to use the concept of *parrhesis* as a frame to analyze the *Revelationes extravagantes*, specifically "Birgitta's Heart is a Pot of Delicious Food," as a text that works against the medieval rhetorical expectation related the place of women in the medieval world and the place of women in in the medieval Church. When one views Birgitta's vision in this way, it is clear that she is a woman in a unique position to be a part of two words—the secular and spiritual—but that she must learn to keep the two in balance; this is Birgitta's "truth to power"

Context of the *Revelationes extravagantes*

Saint Birgitta of Sweden is a woman of contrasts. She was born in 1303 to a family with connections to the Swedish king. At 14 she was married to the wealthy upper class Ulf Gudnarsson, and subsequently gave birth to 8 children. For the first 41 years of her life, her family and social environment was one of privilege and expected gender roles for a woman of her class and time[2]. This very well could have continued after 1344, when Ulf died, but instead, Birgitta's life changed drastically and with intention. For instance, she organized a new order of religious, the Order of the Most Holy Savior, or the Brigittines. She embarked on a life of poverty and service. Most notably, though, she encountered various mystical visions, collected and known today as the *Revelationes*. Although a change from secular engagements that dominated her early life, the foundations for these later activities were laid early on. Birgitta, for instance, received her first vision when she was only seven years old and she engaged in care for unwed mothers and their children while she was a young mother, herself. While these activities were more sporadic before Ulf's death, they intensified in frequency after she was freed from married life and could devote herself fully to religious and charitable pursuits.

Perhaps because of Birgitta's early life, where she was tempered in the secular world of Swedish aristocracy and politics, once she becomes a full religious she maintains her elevated status. Part of her authority derives from being the head of the Brigittine Order, as being in this position makes her not only a religious leader, but an administrative leader as well. Even more so, Birgitta's main source of authority and credibility derives from her visions. The visions in the more widely read *Revelationes* are refined linguistically, as compared to those which are found in the *Revelationes extravagantes*, but they contain a similar wide range of topics[3]. Some of these include advice on how to pray (Chapter 14); on the nature of the love of God (Chapter 38); and spiritual pitfalls, such as greed (Chapter 17) and disrespect (Chapter 46). In addition to these, there are numerous visions related to direct revelations from Mary (Chapters 8, 10, 27, 35, 42, 50, 51 and, 53) or Jesus (Chapters 46 and 57)

regarding spiritual matters ranging from Mary's childhood to the wayward nature of man. While these are not completely unusual topics for medieval mystics' visions, they do move away from the more common emphasis on the connection of the mystic to Christ, particularly the idea of the mystical union or marriage with Him found in many medieval female mystics' texts. Hadewijch, for instance, has been described as having written "some of the most affective, sensual, even erotic descriptions of union with Christ ever penned" (Bynum 1998, 153-4) in her discussion of her mystical marriage with Christ.

Although more clearly physical than other accounts, Hadewijch is not alone in basic descriptions of mystical marriage in her visions; mystics ranging from Catherine of Siena to Margery Kempe focus on a mystical union with the divine, often with real, potent, and physical descriptions[4]. The presence of mystical union does appear in Birgitta's work—she refers to herself as "Bride" (Chapter 2 and 24)—but she does not describe her union with the Divine in erotic physical terms, but rather qualifies how "A Spiritual Marriage Is Compared to Human Marriages" (Chapter 26) in a more objective and removed way. I believe that in the discussion of marriage in the more widely read *Revelationes* that we get a small glimpse of the "balance" that Birgitta grapples with in the *Revelationes extravagantes*. In this instance, the balance is easier to manage because Birgitta has experience with being a wife and mother and therefore knows the joys and trials of these roles. As such, she can compare secular and divine relationships in a way that a virginal cloistered nun never could; she can be objective in comparisons of the two types of marriage and not describe marriage in the imagined, ecstatic, and erotic language of her virginal counterparts.

Birgitta's visions, which deal with spiritual, and to a lesser extent secular, topics were most often revealed to Matthias, canon of Linköping, and Peter Olafsson, her confessor, and were used as part of her application for canonization, granted in 1391. The rapidity of her canonization a mere 18 years after her death is remarkable, especially considering that the Western Schism occurred in 1378 and disrupted all normalcy in church business, including applications for canonization. As part of the application, among other items, Birgitta's *Revelationes* and *vita* were submitted. As noted in a *vita* for Birgitta, reportedly translated into Middle English by Thomas Gascoigne in the 16th Century,

> In these revelations [the *Revelationes*] are contained the high secret mysteries of the most glorious Trinity, of the Incarnation, the nativity, the life and passion of our savior Jesus Christ, as well as the plain and true doctrine to know virtue and the great intolerable pain and damnation that shall fall to sinners who die in deadly sin. (Gascoigne, 1991, p.1)

In contrast to this, the *Revelationes extravagantes* are not nearly as orthodox in scope and far more secular in nature. Dennis Searby (2015), translator of the Oxford edition, notes that it is during one of the "lulls in the canonization proceedings", likely due to the Western Schism, that Prior Petrus of Alvastra "took [home] with him a body of supplementary material".... a selection of 'extravagant, stray, isolated'" visions (119). Johannes Jordersson prepared these vision into one volume, known as Codex Falkenberg, and in it gives us the opportunity to read these visons that "for various reasons had been excluded from the central corpus of the *Revelationes*" (Searby 2015, 119). It is not surprising that many of the visions in the *Revelationes extravagantes* were excluded from the more widely-read

canonical work, as most are not as orthodox in nature as the corpus collected and presented in the *Revelationes*. For instance, the secular nature of many of the visions is revealed in topics that focus on spices, taxes, clothing, and even bed sheets; these are "mundane" secular themes that were not religious or orthodox enough to fit the narrative of the more widely read work which privileges matters that are more spiritual in nature. Through the use of Chapter 54—"Birgitta's Heart is a Pot of Delicious Food" as an example, one can see that the *Revelationes extravagantes* often challenge standard imagery used by female medieval mystics. The undermining of expectations of imagery and the framing of authorial voice are two important elements of the concept of *parrhesia* in Birgitta's work and show her to be intentionally dealing with the desire to balance the spiritual and secular in her life and work.

Birgitta and *Parrhesia*

Renae Frey's (2015) dissertation "Speaking Truth to Power: Recovering a Rhetorical Theory of *Parrhesia*" is an invaluable resource in understanding the impact and importance of Birgitta's *Revelationes extravagantes*. In it Frey (2015) notes that *parrhesia* is "not commonly used in current vernacular speech", even though we often "valorize those who risk their safety to resist oppression" (2). Indeed, Frey's (2015) definition of *parrhesia* focuses on how dangerous the concept can be; these are "disruptive rhetorical acts that challenge hierarchy and power inequalities, often at great risk to the rhetor" (2)[5]. Why one would engage in these acts even though death could be a result is important to understand. One doesn't engage in *parrhesia* simply because of recklessness or disregard for one's life; *parrhesia* encompasses acts that may be qualified as "a deeply held truth value" for the speaker (2 and 3), truths important enough to die for. Although Birgitta was not martyred because of her visions, some of them could have led to appearance at ecclesiastical court, excommunication and/or death. One of these visions is "Birgitta's Heart is a Pot of Delicious Food", in which it is not Mary or Christ of the canonical visions who imparts a vision to Birgitta, but the Devil. The idea of a demonic figure communicating an instructive vision is a dangerous concept in the medieval world.[6] It is possible that the words from the Devil might lead one astray, causing the visionary to falter individually, or worse, lead others to damnation. It is for this reason that visions needed to be validated as deriving from a divine source.[7] The fact that Birgitta still told the vision to her confessor, even though it could have been dangerous for her to do so, indicates just how important the vision was to her. Even though the vision might have had significance for Birgitta, this vision was not included in the main application for canonization, likely because of the controversial speaker in the vision, and, thus, was only submitted in "supplemental materials"[8].

It is fortunate for us, as modern readers, that "Birgitta's Heart is a Pot of Delicious Food" was not included, for its exclusion means that Birgitta's amanuensis "edited" this and other *Revelationes extravagates* far less than her other works. The idea of the amanuensis editing texts by female authors is not uncommon. Perhaps the most thorough discussion of how texts from a female voice are altered may be found in the work of another female medieval mystic, Margery Kempe.[9] In

her fine work "Reexamining *The Book of Margery Kempe*: A rhetoric of autobiography", Cheryl Glenn (1995) notes that Margery

> reveals herself to be a woman who could neither read nor write, dependent upon amanuenses to record her story. In fact, the manuscript begins with the priest's incipit, recounting his tribulations in attempting to revise the previous priest's transcriptions of Margery's text" (55-6).

Glenn aptly highlights the words of Margery's own amanuensis and the work that he does to "revise" Margery's text; through such a comment, the control that he has over the shape and direction of Margery's text is clear. Although Birgitta is a very different woman than Margery, being able to not only read and write but organize and run an abby as well, there is a parallel between the two women through the "fingerprints" their amanuensis leave in their texts. Clarie L. Sahlin (2000) emphasizes the "complex collaboration between Birgitta and her confessors" (33). Searby (2015) is somewhat more cautious in his characterization of the relationship, suggesting that "some of the *Extravagantes* may be early drafts of the same originals, or the first stage of an ongoing revision and reworking by Birgitta and her confessors" of works that will later appear in the *Revelationes* (221). Nevertheless, the idea that the visions that appear are later "reworked" is significant in Searby's framing of the *Revelationes extravagantes,* and goes to the control, or rather lack of it, that a female medieval mystic had over the transcription of her visions.

This idea of revision is important when one considers that in the *Institutio Oratoria* Qunitillian "delineates between *exclamatio*, which is a figure that is 'simulated and artfully designed' as opposed to 'exclamations [that] are genuine'" (Frey 2015, 3). The carefully framed visions that appear in Birgitta's application for canonization are *exclamatio--*"artfully designed", orthodox in nature, and collected in the *Revelationes*; these are the texts that most people read and think of as Birgitta's visions. Contrary to the visions that appear in most standard volumes of Birgitta's work, what appears in the *Revelationes extravagantes* are "early drafts" that don't benefit from "ongoing revision and reworking". As such, one may posit that a more realistic version of Birgitta's authorial voice may be found in these visions. These visions are formative, less edited/revised, and often contain ideas that run counter to the expected themes and rhetoric used by most medieval female visionaries. The content of these visions, such as "Birgitta's Heart is a Pot of Food" may be considered to be Birgitta's "truth to power" before it is softened and modified by her amanuensis.

This is particularly important when one considers the changing nature of *parrhesis*, originally relating to public discourse, but by the time of Plato governing private discourse as well (Frey 2015, 5). Glenn (1995) asserts that the dynamic of public and private discourse is a concern in all women's writing of the medieval period; "because of the continual crossing of self and other, the continual conversation among the voices, women's writings often blur the line between public and private" (67). Although I do not dispute Glenn's assertion, I believe that there are some variations of women's writing that are marked more by the "blurring of lines" than others. In the *Revelationes*, this dynamic of public and private is particularly significant. The visions are received by Birgitta as a private,

mystical experience, but through her voicing of them during her life and their use as part of her application for sainthood after her death, Birgitta's visions enter the public realm.

Frey (2015) continues her discussion of the changing role of *parrhesis* in society by "examining the role of women and other marginalized populations....crossing over from the realm of the private to the public...[which] marks women's parrhesiastic action in the nineteenth century" (18). If the public and private roles/voice of a woman in the nineteenth century is constrained, one might consider how even more potent this idea of public/private *parrhesia* would be for a woman in the 1350s, where gender roles and expectations were even more narrowly defined. Elizabeth Petroff (1978) highlights this dynamic in her seminal work "Medieval women visionaries: Seven stages to power" in which she makes the observation that "women saints of the thirteenth and fourteenth century did become visible. This in itself would seem to be paradoxical, for according to medieval ecclesiastics, the best women were absolutely invisible" (35). A woman in the 19th century might better be seen than heard, but a woman in the Middle Ages was expected to be both not seen and not heard.

There are medieval women who challenge this social expectation. Another medieval female writer, Christine de Pizan, is useful at this point in considering the idea of public/private voice and authority in text. De Pizan's life parallels that of Birgitta in that both women were born to upper class educated families, both spent their early lives as wives and both began only to create texts after their husbands' deaths. Although de Pizan's writing is secular in nature and Birgitta's spiritual, the moving of woman's voice from the private to the public sphere is problematic in both writers' texts. For instance, in de Pizan's *Treasure of the city of ladies*, Fortune transforms the speaker's body to become male. Jenny Redfern (1995) underscores the importance of this in relation to authorial credibility: "this imprinted gender transformation was a major step toward developing her [de Pizan's] authority as a teacher and rhetorician" (79). This same sort of problem may be recognized in Birgitta's text, but she did have an advantage that de Pizan did not; she had the shelter of the Church and an amanuensis, whose "complex collaboration" or "ongoing revision and reworking" gave the *Revalationes* authority (Searby 2015, 221). Even so, there is a tension in Birgitta's work concerning the public/private nature of her visions which are revealed through her as a female vessel. Gasgoigne (1991) underscores this tension in the *vita* by stressing that:

> She would gladly have hidden and kept secret the special gift that she had of our Lord in the *Revelations* except that our Lord frequently commanded her to write and to speak them boldly to the Pope, to the Emperor, to kings, princes and other people, so that through them they might the more quickly be converted from their sins.

Birgitta may have wanted to keep her voice/visions private, but she makes her visions public at the behest of the Lord. Although God desires that these visions be made part of the public sphere, there is still a problem with the vessel through which they are delivered. Like de Pizan, Birgitta is a woman. Also like de Pizan, Birgitta's flawed body attains a "modified shape" when in a mystical trance: "And when she was in prayer and contemplation, she was often seen by many devout persons

to be elevated and lifted up from the ground about the height of a man" (Gasgoine 1991). Although one may interpret this as Birgitta levitating, I think that a more accurate reading of the passage is that Birgitta takes on a presence which equates her stature to that of a man. The height and the reference to sex imbues Birgitta with an authority that she might not otherwise have. This is a very important detail in the *vita* because Birgitta's life recounted in it frames all of her work, including the *Revelationes extravagantes*. Indeed Gasgoine (1991) references "four goodly chapters to be read as prayers along with certain *Revelationes* called the *Extravagantes"* just before noting the change in Birgitta's manner/height as evidence for her authority. It is a striking juxtaposition of Birgitta's stature and the *Revelationes extravagantes*, making them seem to be even more of a quiet testament to *parrhesia* in Birgitta's work, especially evident in "Birgitta's Heart is a Pot of Delicious Food".

Birgitta's Heart is a Pot of Delicious Food **and Imagery of Food**

Most often in medieval texts by female mystics there is a focus on the self-denial of food as a form of sacrificial piety. Birgitta's *vita* even notes as evidence of her piety the extreme fasting that she engages in: "She not only kept the fasts and vigils that holy Church required, but she also added so many others to them that she went beyond the church's commandment and fasted four times each week" (Gascoigne 1991, 1). It should be noted that this description of Birgitta's fasting is written after her death, and part of an application for canonization; the emphasis on her fasting would be seen in this context as a sign of her spirituality and would have been framed as a positive attribute. Such contexts have been extensively discussed, perhaps most persuasively by Caroline Walker Bynum (1987) in *Holy Feast Holy Fast*. In her book, Bynum explores the idea of fasting as both a form of self-control (189) and also a site of resistance against church authority (243); in this way the female mystic gains authority over her own body and also within the church structure as a "holy woman" who has credibility and authority.

Granted, this dynamic is not always accepted. There are a number of daughters of the upper class whose families find the fasting of their daughters to be disturbing, and there is even an active resistance against this activity. As noted by Bridget Ann Henisch (1976) in *Fast and Feast: Food in Medieval Society* , "in every case, a fast was to be endured for its spiritual benefit: dazzling displays of willpower and austerity were frowned upon" (28). Bynum (1987) reiterates this caution when she notes that "thirteenth- and fourteenth-century writers, busy defining exactly who should fast when, urged spiritual more than physical abstinence" (42). Contrary to the wording emphasizing Birgitta's extreme fasting in her *vita*, her visions seem to emphasize an alternative view of fasting. For instance, in the *Revelationes extravagantes* Chapter 13 "On Rules for Fasting" it states, "It is good for the healthy to fast on bread and water, but it is not the highest good. The highest good is charity, without which there is no salvation. Anyone can be saved without fasting on bread and water, provided they have perfect faith and prudence and a good reason" (238-9). Another example is in Chapter 58 "Three Aspects of Birgitta's Fasting", in which Mary tells Birgitta that "My Son is more pleased when you eat

than when you fast contrary to obedience….fast in an intelligent way" (278-9). These are just two visions in the volumes of Birgitta's work where there is a reference to, and admonition against, extreme fasting.

In addition to the reframing of fasting in Birgitta's work we also get visions in which food is seen as "quite homely in tone" (Searby 2015, 222). For instance, Chapter 35 is "Four Women and Two Men May Help in the Kitchen" (256-7) and Chapter 36 is "On the Use of Spices" (257). One might consider that the focus of these and other chapters on the mundane nature food draws on the female experience, more specifically the running of a household, a position that Birgitta held for the first 41 years of her life and which would have been quite familiar to her. The focus in the visions on elements that would be part of Birgitta's personal experience is not unexpected. Bynum (1989) frames a discussion of this more generally, but her commentary may be aptly applied to Birgitta. She asserts that while male mystics "stressed male/female contrasts and used imagery of reversal to express their dependence on God, women expressed their dependence on God in imagery at least partly drawn from their own gender and avoided symbolic reversals" (1293-4). I would agree with Bynum's assertion that women will use imagery from their own experience; indeed, in the instance of "Birgitta's Heart is a Pot of Delicious Food" the cooking of a pot of food is used to symbolize the spiritual dynamic of the vision. The main elements of the first section of the vision are:

> The pot is Birgitta's heart.
> The food is the Word of God.
> The fire is the love that Birgitta has for God.

Even though the elements of this triad are composed of "homely images" there is an underlying profound spiritual significance to the elements. When one considers the use of food in a positive way in the Church, one of the first images that comes to mind is the spiritual nourishment of the bread used during the Mass—the Eucharist. The Eucharist, at once the body of Christ and the bread of life, is something that Birgitta focuses on in another vision. In Chapter 63 in *Revelationes*, Birgitta recounts a vison of Christ and the Devil debating the "Presence of Jesus in the Holy Sacrament of the Altar". In it, Christ argues about the use of bread as a his body in the Eucharist noting that

> Does it, perhaps, entail an effort for My Divinity to unite that which is least with that which is heavenly, the earthly with the most sublime?….I can reveal something through a visible sign and shape that, however, truly is one thing in what is signified, yet is seen as something else" (Searby, Volume II, 2015, 118).

In this vision the base and the divine are connected in the form of the bread via transubstantiation, making the bread and the body of Christ one. Likewise, in "Birgitta's Heart is a Pot of Delicious Food" there is a joining of the base and the elevated—delicious food, most likely a soup as it is in a pot, and the word of God.

This positive depiction of food is very important in light of Gillian Feeley-Harnick's (1994) commentary in *Lord's table.* In it she reminds us that early Christians incorporated into their traditions the Jewish notion of food as embodiment of God's wisdom/law (107). Birgitta's vision, which emphasizes the word of God as food, seems almost like a return to this early equation of food and God's wisdom. In addition, the Eucharist is perceived as a community practice or event; a Christian taking part in the Eucharist is at once communing with the Divine and with all others who take part in the rite (116). Thus, the idea of many grains of wheat combined to form one loaf of bread, from which all members of the community may be enriched spiritually, can be seen as analogous to the many ingredients that are combined into Birgitta's homely pot of food, which, though unidentified, are presumably an amalgamation of many parts. Indeed, Bynam (1987) rightly notes that early Protestant and Catholic theologians lament that there is the loss of the idea of the communal meal in the Eucharist in favor of individual piety in late medieval works (61). "The many" sadly reduces to "the one", and a suffering/sacrificial one at that. Like the reversal of food as useful only as a sacrifice, so Birgitta also reverses the idea of a disconnected and singular piety through the depiction of God's wisdom as a quintessential communal dish—a pot of food. This reversal, which Bynum (1987) would ascribe only to male mystics, is another way in which Birgitta in the *Revelationes extravagantes* goes against the expected norms of her gender and asserts her own truth, her own power, in her visions.

Although the first part of the vision creates a connection between the heart and food and, through this connection, Christ and the community, one must not forget the final part of the vision—the finely dressed man is revealed to be a Devil whose goal is to corrupt Birgitta so that she turns away from God and back toward the world. It is important to underscore the significance of the Devil, not the expected characters of Christ or Mary, who teaches Birgitta in this vision. Although Christ often appears in the mystical marriage with Birgitta and debates the Devil, as in the vison about the Eucharist recounted earlier in the text, it is Mary who makes perhaps a more impactful presence in Birgitta's visions. Nancy Bradley Warren (2007) notes that "Brigittine texts contain frequent discussions of the Virgin Mary as one who translates the divine Logos into the human realm" (397). The orthodox characters of Christ or Mary lend authority and credibility to the visionary text. It was vitally important that the visions descended from God or his intermediaries for, as Elizabeth Petroff (1978) notes "visions....told the women who they were, what they must do, what others were thinking, what would happen in the future, and what Christ and the Virgin Mary felt for them and for all humanity" (34) If the vision was deemed to be orthodox, then it would lead people to Christ and salvation, but if it was demonic in origin, then this could lead to the ruination of souls and eternal damnation. It is for this reason that the commentary in the Prologue to the *Revelations extravagantes* is particularly important. Here, it is noted that

> Prior Petrus and Blessed Katherina, daughter of St. Birgitta, testified to the truth of these revelations (i.e., that they were divinely revealed) before her [Birgitta's] canonization, and anyone who takes a careful look at their testimony will, for the most part, find this to be obvious" (Searby 2015, 229).

Such a comment was vitally important, for the idea of a vision being explained/taught by the Devil, rather than Jesus or Mary, would have been seen to be problematic. Without clarifying that there is orthodoxy to such controversial visions, it could have cast doubt on the believability and validity of all of the visions, as they may all have the taint of the demonic.

It should be clarified that there are instances of the Devil appearing in medieval female mystics' writings and even instances where the temptation that the Devil offers a woman is food. In Frederic Tubach's (1969) *Index*, there are two recorded instances where the Devil tricks women out of fasting and toward the world (78). These visions, though, are about food as a form of temptation, a corrupting force in itself.[10] Like temptation from the Devil, food also may be seen as something that taints or contaminates the body and soul in medieval mystical texts. For example, it is quite common in medieval mystical texts for imagery of breastfeeding to be used; sometimes it is Christ who feeds the mystic, but often he is shown as being nursed as well[11]. Although these are the images that are the most often used in mystical texts, there are some instances where even this earliest form of food is shown as being capable of being corrupted. For instance, in her later life, Birgitta's daughter, Catherine, recounts a food contamination vision of her own. Catherine recounts a vision she had of herself as an infant who refused to breastfeed because her mother's (Birgitta's) breast milk had been contaminated by the conjugal engagement of her parents the night before (Bynum 1998, 119 and 215). Although most often breast feeding is used to show nourishment in mystical texts, in this vision the life giving milk is turned sour because of the "sin" of sex.[12] In this instance, real food is refused and physical nourishment is impeded because the food is qualified as "corrupted". What is perhaps more disturbing than physical food being refused is when spiritual food is framed as corrupted. As Bynum (2015) notes, an unnamed fourteenth-century visionary saw the Eucharist, itself, as contaminated. In her vision, she laments that as the "body of the Lord [was] raised on the Alter, I kept thinking, because of the afterbirth [of his human delivery] that the host was something polluted. That's why I could no longer believe it was the body of Christ" in/as the Eucharist (qtd. in Bynum 1987, 266). The idea of contamination/food had been taken so such an extreme in this case that the host is rejected, isolating the speaker from the essence of spiritual nourishment, grace, and communion.

In "Birgitta's Heart is a Pot of Delicious Food", though, the food is a not a site of temptation or contamination; the world is temptation. The Devil notes that "earthly affections" and "earthly acquaintances or relations" might draw Birgitta away from the Church and toward the secular world. This likely was a concern for Birgitta as she lived in the world for half of her life, only leaving it in her 40s. In Birgitta's *Revelationes extravagantes*, as well as her more well-known visions, there are many examples of visions that are completely secular in nature. For instance, in Chapter 2 the focus is on "The Sick Should not be Allowed Extra Bedclothes", Chapter 15 "Baths Should be Taken Regularly," Chapter 24 "The Virgin and the Devil Argue about Land Rights", to as already noted Chapters 35 and 36 on the running of a kitchen and the use of spices in foods. These are decidedly worldly concerns.

If the ash that floats up from the fire are "earthly affections", then unlike other female mystics who frame food as a form of temptation, it is the world which is Birgitta's temptation. As noted earlier, Birgitta's life circumstances make her much more part of the secular world than other female mystics were. As such, Birgitta falls squarely into the "rise of lay spirituality" as described by Bynum (1987) vis a vie Vauchez's *The spirituality of the occidental Middle Ages*. She discusses that "From the later twelfth century on, the church....felt a greater and greater responsibility for ordinary layfolk, devoted more attention to defining for them their characteristic forms of devotion, and canonized more and more lay (even married) saints", which connects well Birgitta's experience (qtd. in Bynum 1987, 239). Granted, by the time that people were lobbying for Brigitta's sainthood she was a widow and a nun, nevertheless she had spent a good portion of her life as a wife and mother, a woman of the world. It must have been somewhat disconcerting, especially initially, to not focus on matters of the household and the intricacies that would be of importance in a typical, secular life. These issues, therefore, have the tendency to creep into Birgitta's works and can be seen as the "earthly affections" or "earthly acquaintances or relations" that might draw her away from her new, spiritual existence. Should she turn her face toward the world, or away from it? This seems to be the underlying tension that Birgitta deals with in "Birgitta's Heart is a Pot of Delicious Food".

Because of this dynamic that exists in Birgitta's work, the binary that Bynam (1987) proposes doesn't neatly fit. To recap, Bynam (1987) notes that "symbolic reversals are less important in women's spirituality than in men's" and that because of this, there is less duality in female visionary writing than in men's (280). Concerning the first point, in "Birgitta's Heart is a Pot of Delicious Food" there is a startling reversal as the finely dressed man who seems to tend the fire and have good intentions is actually the devil who is there for ill will. Also, the pot of food, which would normally be framed as a temptation, is quite positive. It is only the ash, the worldly concerns, which might contaminate Birgitta's spiritual life if she is not careful. The element of reversal which Bynum (1998) notes is a hallmark of male visionary texts also appears as a significant element in Birgitta's vision.

Bynum's second point about men having a straight "either/or" duality in the text, with the female text being more nuanced, does track with how Birgitta sees herself in "Birgitta's Heart is a Pot of Delicious Food" and I believe, by extension, in many of the visions in her work. She does not, in the end, see herself as only a woman of the world or a woman of the church. She is able to "have one foot in each world" and be a woman of both. This is why in her works, especially in her *Revelationes extravagantes*, we perhaps get her "true voice" which shows that Birgitta can be part of two worlds, but only if she can keep them in balance.

Most often in medieval texts by female mystics there is a focus on the self-denial of food as a form of sacrifice or mystical nourishment, such as the Eucharist. In Birgitta's vision, seeing herself as food, and potentially contaminated food at that, is significant. Food becomes not that which tempts one to the world, but rather food is framed as positive, even going so far as being the heart of Birgitta which is touched by the love of God. Thus, the vision creates a connection between the heart and food and through this Christ and the world, showing that a balance between the spiritual and the

material can exist. It is only with the addition of the ash/sin that two may come to be out of balance, be contaminated, and cause Birgitta to turn back to the world. In this way Birgitta's vision affords her the luxury that many other female mystics of the Middle Ages don't have—the luxury of being a woman of dichotomies, a woman of both the spirit and of the world. The only caveat is that she keeps these two in balance. This, in the end, is her truth to power.

Endnotes:

1. Some examples of women who exemplify the idea of food as a corrupting force are Mary of Oignies, who "mutilated her flesh out of guilt over eating;" Catherine of Siena, who was known for extreme fasting, and even Birgitta of Sweden's daughter who, as a baby, "refused not only the breast of her sinful wet nurse but even the breast of her saintly mother, Bridget, whenever Bridget had had conjugal relations the night before" (Bynum 1998, 119 and 215). For a more thorough discussion of the connection of food, contamination and fasting, please see Carolyn Walker Bynum's seminal *Holy feast and holy fast: The religious significance of food to medieval women*.
2. As is often the case in married female mystics lives, the lady convinces her husband to live a life of chastity after being directed to this life via a vision. In the case of Birgitta, this vision occurred while on pilgrimage and she returns after vowing to live a chaste life. Parallels can be made between this dynamic in Birgtitta's household and Margery Kempe's, which also became a chaste marriage after a vision from God.
3. The refined nature of the linguistic elements and content of the *Revelationes* will be discussed in the next section of this work, Birgitta and *Parrhesia*.
4. For more on the mystical marriage, please Bynum's (1998) *Holy feast holy Fast* for an overview of the subject. Many more specific discussions have been penned, including Kugeler-Race's (2018) "Carnal manifestations of divine love in the mystical writings of Elsbeth of Oye, Mechthild of Magdebrug and Margery Kempe," Smith's (2001) "Remembering the rhetorics of women: the case of Jane Leed" about an Early Modern mystic, to Graziano's (2004) *Wounds of love: The mystical marriage of Saint Rose of Lima*, about the first New World saint.
5. Frey's dissertation dovetails nicely with Victor Vitanza's (1997) *Negation, subjectivity, and the history of rhetoric* in which he notes that connections can be made between positions of rhetorical power and oppression. This concept of rhetoric and oppression is reflected upon in Gray-Rosendale and Gruber's (2001) edited volume *Alternative rhetorics: Challenges to the rhetorical tradition*. In the introduction to Part I of the volume, Changing Histories, Changing Lives", the editors ask pointed questions regarding rhetoric and power, most importantly for this study "What examples of historical accounts of rhetoric should be unearthed, and how does doing so shift how we view received histories of the discipline? (16). One might equate this to how power and authorial voice in Birgitta is "unearthed" in the *Revelationes extravaganes* as opposed to the more refined and polished texts presented in the more widely read *Revelationes*.
6. There are various articles that deal with the demonic in visionary texts. Two of the many valuable resources on the dangers of visions which include the demonic include Gwenfair Walters Adams (2007) chapter on "Spiritual Warfare in Medieval Encounters" and Nancy Caciola's (2007) *Discerning spirits: Divine and demonic possession in the Middle Ages.*
7. To validate the visions, it is noted that "Prior Petrus and Blessed Katerina, daughter of St. Birgitta, testified to the truth of these revelations (i.e, that they were divinely revealed) before her [Birgitta's] canonization" (Searby 2015, 229).
8. As noted earlier in Searby (2015), these visions were included in a "body of supplementary material".... a selection of 'extravagant, stray, isolated'" visions (119).

9. There are many fine works regarding the authorship of The Book of Margery Kempe. Some of the most salient include Francois Le Saux's (1992) "'Hir not lettyrd': Margery Kempe and writing", John Hirsch's (1975) "Author and scribe in the Book of Margery Kempe", and Elizabeth Passmore's (2003) "Painting lions, drawing lines, writing lives: Male authorship in the lives of Christina of Markyate, Margery Kempe and Margaret Paston".
10. One might liken this to the temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden by the Devil. Mary of Oignies, for instance, engages in flagellation because she gives in to the temptation of tasting earthly food, thus subverting the importance of relying on heavenly food for sustenance. As Bynum (1998) rightly point out, there is a desire among many mystics for to substitute "holy food (Eucharist) for ordinary eating" (117) as the former was considered "pure" and the latter "corrupted" and not as nourishing for the body/soul.
11. It should be noted that most often male mystics are fed by Christ, whereas female mystics are shown to feed him.
12. I have "sex" in quotation marks here, because there is no indication that there was a restriction, as was common in the Middle Ages, on the day/time of year in which the conjugal visit occurred. Because of this, there is no indication that a restriction was transgressed and that the married couple sinned in their relations.

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