Holy Imitation: *Imitatio Christi* and the Gendered Identities of Francis and Clare of Assisi

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Abstract:

As the study of gender has rapidly advanced in the past several decades, its application to the field of history has become somewhat outdated. This project seeks to apply modern theories of gender as a social construction to the social and religious context of thirteenth-century Northern Italy in order to gain a more nuanced perspective of two of its most prominent figures, Saints Francis and Clare of Assisi, as gendered individuals. I focus on the *imitatio Christi*, or imitation of Christ's humanity, which was a high medieval ideal. Using Francis and Clare as examples, I argue that *imitatio Christi* enabled behavior that contradicted hegemonic medieval models of both masculinity and femininity, as historians currently understand them. This is possible due to the unique figure of Christ, whose existence as both fully human and fully divine calls into question binary classifications of identity.

We can't return we can only look
Behind from where we came
And go round and round and round
In the circle game
-Joni Mitchell (*Ladies of the Canyon,* 1970)[1]

I. Introduction

Although it is impossible for us to travel back in time and discover how Francis and Clare *really* understood their gender, a study of how historians continue to confront this question can be illuminating in terms of how people living in the present day relate to history. It is impossible to study history in a vacuum; historians cannot completely remove themselves, with their modern ideas and perspectives, from their reading of the past. Moving forward, I would like to suggest some of the ways in which historical studies of Francis and Clare reflect a perspective that has become outdated from the standpoint of gender studies, and how more recent advances in gender theory might address some of the issues raised by this phenomenon.

In this essay I will use a modern perspective of gender to assess the medieval lives of Francis and Clare and evaluate the historiography[2] regarding the role of gender in the lives of medieval people. The intent of this is not to anachronistically apply current ideas of gender identity to medieval people for whom such ideas would not have existed, but to use modern advances in gender theory to inform the discourse surrounding their works and contemporary descriptions of their lives. This marks the first step in filling a void in the

[1]Joni Mitchell, "Circle Game," Siquomb Publishing Company, accessed 3 April 2016, http://jonimitchell.com/music/song.cfm?id=39.
[2] It should be noted that my scope is limited to works that are available in English, which consists mainly of American and British scholarship and some translated material, but does not include a broad base of Italian scholarship that has not been translated into English, such as the work of Maria Pia Alberzoni and Chiara Augusta Lainati.

scholarship surrounding Francis and Clare. Francis has inspired a multitude of biographical works, but to date these have neglected to examine his gender identity.[3] Although Clare has frequently been discussed from the perspective of gender studies, much of this work is based in outdated assumptions and methodology of early feminist histories.[4]

I will argue that an examination of Francis and Clare's writings, alongside medieval and modern descriptions of these figures as gendered individuals, can be used to complicate current understandings and categorizations of medieval gender roles. I will focus on *imitatio Christi:* the practice of living after the example of Christ's human life. This ideal, increasingly common throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, illuminates some of the ways in which Francis and Clare described their spirituality in gendered language, and how they have been depicted as gendered beings by their contemporaries and in subsequent scholarship. Representations of Francis do not align entirely with any of the models of medieval masculinity proposed by the current scholarship, but incorporate elements of these models with other characteristics considered more feminine. Clare complicates the narrative of second-wave feminist histories in that she, in many ways, embodies the roles considered acceptable for women within a patriarchal structure, but need not necessarily be considered a victim of the patriarchy.

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[3] For example, while the biography of Francis by Adrian House, *Francis of Assisi: A Revolutionary Life* (Mahwah, NJ: HiddenSpring, 2001) is quick to point out the significance of Clare's gender- its perceived impact on her relationship with Francis (129-138) and the limitations it placed on her physical freedom (153-156)- he fails to address how Francis was affected by standards of masculinity.

[4] One example is Catherine M. Mooney's *"Imitatio Christi* or *Imitatio Mariae?* Clare of Assisi and Her Interpreters," in *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine M. Mooney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 52-77, which, although well researched and written, assumes a fundamental divide between Clare's "true" self (which can presumably be recovered through close analysis of her writing), and the "self" depicted by male intermediaries.

Who Were Francis and Clare of Assisi?

Saints Francis and Clare of Assisi were both venerated figures within the Catholic Church of Northern Italy who during the thirteenth century. Both became popular figures in their communities while maintaining the approval of the Church hierarchy. Their lives are similar in many respects; both founded monastic orders, lived in accordance with a strict interpretation of Christ's poverty, and were canonized relatively quickly following their deaths. There are, however, a number of important distinctions in the ways their lives were subsequently recorded and remembered. As the field of gender studies has developed over the past twenty years, its application to historical studies has increasingly focused on the ways in which medieval people, especially religious people, understood gender. Francis and Clare make a fascinating case study for the historical construction and perception of gender precisely because their lives were, in so many ways, quite similar, but have been written about and remembered so differently.

Francis Bernadone was born the son of a wealthy merchant in Assisi in 1181 or 1182. After his early career as a soldier, he became very ill and underwent a dramatic conversion, in which he renounced wealth and worldly possessions, to a life devoted to the service of God.[5][6] He and his followers lived according to the ideal of poverty set forth by Christ during his lifetime, as described in the Gospels. Francis' later rule of life for these

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[5] *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, vol. 1: The Saint*, ed. Regis J. Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short (New York: New City Press, 1999), 184-190.

[6] The drama of this conversion experience, including the physical and spiritual impact of Francis' illness and the climactic moment when he renounced his wealth while stripping himself of his clothing before the Bishop of Assisi, is artistically represented in the film *Brother Sun, Sister Moon,* directed by Franco Zefirelli (1972; USA: Paramount Home Video, 2004), DVD.

followers, which received papal approval in 1223, serves as the basis for the Franciscan Order, which continues to exist to the present day.[7] He died in 1226 and was declared a saint by the Catholic Church less than two years later after a remarkably fast canonization process.[8]

The woman who would come to be known as Saint Clare of Assisi was born Chiara Offreduccio in 1194, the daughter of a noble family. Unlike Francis, she was described as pious from a very early age; according to the *Legend of Saint Clare*, her mother received a vision from God during her pregnancy, assuring her that her daughter would be bright and good.[9] In her adolescence, Clare abandoned the status and stability of her noble birth, and ran away from her family to espouse the poverty and piety of the newly founded Franciscan Order. She was placed in the restored church at San Damiano in 1212,[10] and was soon joined by likeminded women, marking the beginning of female counterpart to the Franciscan order, called the Poor Clares, or the Second Order of Saint Francis.[11] She died in 1253, immediately after receiving papal approval for her order, and was canonized just two years later.[12]

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[7] *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, 99.
[8] Michael Robson and Patrick Zutshi, "An Early Manuscript of the *Admonitions* of St Francis of Assisi," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* vol. 62 no. 2 (April 2011): 228.
[9] *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, ed. and trans. Regis J. Armstrong (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 1993), 254.
[10] Leslie Knox, *Creating Clare of Assisi: Female Franciscan Identities in Later Medieval Italy* (Boston: Brill, 2008), 21-23.
[11] E. Ann Matter, "The Canon of Religious Life: Maria Domitilla Galluzzi and the *Rule* of St. Clare of Assisi," in *Strong Voices, Weak History: Early Women Writers and Canons in England, France, and Italy*, ed. Pamela Joseph Benson and Victoria Kirkham (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 81.
[12] Knox, 48.

II. Historiography of Gender Studies

Over the past several decades, society has begun to acknowledge and address gender-related issues, from sexism in the workplace and media to the harmful effect of binary gender roles. As this process is taking place, an academic field has developed to address the study of gender as a social construction. This field, referred to broadly as gender studies, investigates "how gender is produced and reproduced across time and in different societies, how it shapes the subjectivity, experiences, and opportunities of individuals, and how it intersects… with other axes of difference and inequality."[13] Although the first manifestation of this academic movement was the "women's studies" which accompanied the rise of western second-wave feminism in the 1960s and '70s,[14] the scholarship discussing gender has since matured and grown to address masculinity and non-binary identities. I have divided this section into the study of femininities and masculinities not to reinforce depictions of these two categories as opposites, but to highlight the differences in how the study of each has developed over time.

Femininities

In the early days of mainstream feminism, women's history constituted a field of study "where feminists- both inside the academy and outside it- were reclaiming a lost past in their research, [and] empowering students in their teaching…"[15] As the struggle for

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[13] Mario do Mar Pereira, "Women's Studies/Gender Studies," in *Gender: The Key Concepts*, ed. Mary Evans and Carolyn H. Williams (New York: Routledge, 2013), 215.
[14] Ibid, 217.
[15] Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 1.

equality and liberation from gender roles that characterized this stage of the feminist movement was translated into academic study, women's history tended to focus on identification and empowerment of women in the past. It is not surprising, therefore, that there is a tendency among 1970s studies of medieval women, especially religious women, to idealize and overemphasize the relative freedom they attained as a result of their spirituality. One study from this era attempting to define the method by which all medieval female visionaries gained power claims that mystical experience gave rise to a "process of personal growth and transformation in women which allowed them to transcend cultural limitations."[16] While most modern scholars would consider these claims too broad to be accepted without qualification, these early examples of women's history echoed the popular feminism of their time.

As the second-wave feminist movement progressed, its advances were mirrored in women's studies, which developed into gender studies. Currently, women's and gender studies "reaps the benefits of the feminist offensive of the late twentieth century, having matured"[17] past the initial impulse to focus exclusively on empowering "women," defined in binary opposition to men. Following the pioneering work of Judith Butler in the 1990s, academic feminism has generally come to view gender as performative: the manifestation of a social construction based more in cultural context than biological or physical characteristics. Histories written from the perspective of gender studies are increasingly moving away from the narrative of "men" and "women," and towards an exploration of "masculinity" and "femininity," those "learned bodily performances that masquerade as

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[16] Elizabeth A. Petroff, "Medieval Women Visionaries: Seven Stages to Power," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* vol. 3 no. 1 (Spring, 1978): 34.
[17] Bennett, 7.

natural by invoking bodily markers as their signature and guarantee."[18] In this essay, "masculinities" and "femininities" will be used to describe models of behavior considered acceptable for males and females, respectively, in the context of northern Italy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

While women's roles in the secular world of medieval Italy were relatively limited,[19] the Catholic Church represented opportunities for women to express themselves and be heard in ways not common in other spaces in society at this time. Participation in the institutional Church allowed women to access "in abundance the resources and possibilities of the religious imagination as well as certain unique, if often unofficial opportunities to speak and be heard."[20] Though patriarchal in structure, the Catholic Church allowed women to exist in communities mostly independent from men, to preside over their daily affairs, and to gain respect from the lay and clerical communities- opportunities not readily available in a society that was itself patriarchal. Northern Italy in the thirteenth century was an environment especially conducive to new opportunities available to women through the Catholic Church. Compared to other locations in Europe,

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[18] Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville, "Judith Butler- in Theory," in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, ed. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 5.

[19] In her article "Women, Gender, and Rulership in Medieval Italy," published in *History Compass* vol. 4 no. 3 (2006): 528-535, Holly S. Hurlburt argues that the heavy emphasis on marital ties in the volatile political environment of medieval Italy allowed women to access some degree of political power through their alliances with men.

[20] John Coakley, introduction to *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy: A Religious and Artistic Renaissance*, ed. Ann Matter and John Coakley (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 2.

northern Italy, from the early thirteenth century onward, saw a particularly vigorous proliferation of female religious orders, established and managed by women.[21]

Masculinities

The study of men and masculinities grew out of and alongside women's studies, as awareness of masculinity "developed from the late 1970s, at the same time as feminist auto-critiques of the concept of patriarchy."[22] The application of theories of masculinity to historical scholarship is a relatively recent trend of the past 25 years. In one of the first collections examining medieval notions of masculinity, *Medieval Masculinities*, published in 1994, editor Claire Lees describes "the gendered study of men (as) still in its infancy." [23] She consciously uses "masculinities" in the plural, to emphasize the impossibility of defining a single, monolithic concept of masculinity.[24] Rather, many of the works in this collection trace standards used to define manhood at different periods and in different contexts, outlining several models of masculinity. Such models describe patterns of behavior considered acceptable for a medieval person designated male at birth.

The most prevalent models discussed in studies of medieval masculinity include physical, chivalric, and clerical. Some scholars characterize these models as mutually exclusive, while others have argued that multiple models of masculinity can exist simultaneously and help define one another. What I term the "physical" model defines

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[21] Luigi Pelligrini, "Female Religious Experience and Society in Thirteenth-Century Italy," in *Monks and Nuns, Saints and Outcasts: Religion in Medieval Society*, ed. Sharon Farmer and Barbara H. Rosenwein (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 98-99.
[22] Jeff Hearn, "Men, Masculinity, and Masculinities," in *Gender: The Key Concepts*, 150.
[23] Clare A. Lees, introduction to *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clare A. Lees (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), xvi.
[24] Ibid, xx-xxi.

masculinity by the characteristics of physical strength, aggression, and virile heterosexuality. The physical model is the predominant model of medieval masculinity, to the extent that it is seen by some scholars as the only valid model. Olga Trokhimenko claims that there is, "after all is said and done, only one acceptable model of medieval masculinity- that of sexual prowess, virility, and aggression."[25]

Another model of masculinity, chivalry, is thought to have arisen in the early twelfth century as the result of an application of Christian ideals to soldiers (who might otherwise have been paradigms of the physical model) during the early crusades.[26] According to the chivalric model of masculinity, a man was expected to remain chaste until, and at times during, marriage, prioritizing service to Christ over temporal marriage vows.[27] Like the physical model, however, chivalric masculinity was contingent upon strength and the use of violence, which has been called "the fundamental measure of a man because it was a way of exerting dominance over men of one's own social stratum as well as over women and other social inferiors."[28] This use of violence for the sake of social status underscores the notion of personal honor that was central to chivalric masculinity. As with physical masculinity, chivalry demanded physical strength for a man to demonstrate his power over and superiority to women as well as other men who would subsequently be, due to their failure to prove their physical dominance, considered less masculine.

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[25] Olga Trokhimenko, "'Believing That Which Cannot Be': (De)Constructing Medieval Clerical Masculinity in 'Des Munches not,'" *The German Quarterly* vol. 85 no. 2 (Spring 2012): 122.
[26] Andrew Holt, "Between Warrior and Priest: The Creation of a New Masculine Identity During the Crusades," in *Negotiating Clerical Identities: Priests, Monks, and Masculinity in the Middle Ages,* ed. Jennifer D. Thibodeaux (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 197.
[27] Holt, 193.
[28] Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 21.

Several scholars have argued for the existence of a clerical model of masculinity. One of the main difficulties in the conceptualization of this model is accounting for clerics' divergence, in the form of their celibacy, humility, and pacifism, from the dominant physical model. Primarily, scholars thus far have focused on clerical celibacy, the "tension between priests' and monks' anatomical maleness and their official exclusion from the system of sex and procreation."[29] Trokhimenko voices one opinion held among some scholars: that only one model of masculinity was held to be valid; thus, it would seem that (in the minds of medieval people, at least) clergy could not exist as "men" while maintaining their vows of chastity. It has also been argued, however, that physical separation from women allowed clerical men to redefine their masculinity. "Celibacy freed men from women. It enabled the clergy to use elements from both genders to construct a new model of humanity in which men could play all the roles."[30] With the solidification of the separation between men and women of the church in the twelfth century, clerical men were able to take on "feminine" traits even while shunning the company of women. As women were ever more strictly excluded from monastic men's daily lives, they were perceived both as more threatening and less valuable.[31] This concern over the place of women in religious life would be critical as Clare attempted to form her own, exclusively female, religious community.

III. Religious Background

These discussions of celibacy took place against the backdrop of a serious reformation of the Catholic Church. Beginning in the late eleventh century, the movement

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[29] Trokhimenko, 124.
[30] Jo Ann McNamara, "The *Herrenfrage*: The Restructuring of the Gender System, 1050-1150," in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages,* 22.
[31] Karras, 9.

that has since come to be known as the Gregorian Reform began to define and enforce stricter standards of behavior for members of the clergy. This movement, which was largely the result of "demands of the lay people that their clergy be held to higher behavioral standards," emphasized that members of the clergy must avoid greed and temptation to break their vows of celibacy, "and, in sum, not live like lay people."[32] Enforcement of behavior that was meant to differentiate the clerics from a secular lifestyle placed male clergy outside of the dominant models of masculinity. Men living separately from women, "deprived of sexuality, came dangerously close to traditional visions of femininity."[33] The focus during the Gregorian reform on ensuring celibacy confirmed not only the control exerted over the clergy by the Church hierarchy, but also their separation from the lay population.

By the thirteenth century, the lay population of northern Italy also demonstrated a renewed commitment to living according to Christian ideals. The late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries saw a proliferation of unofficial female religious orders "called beguines in the north, tertiaries in the south- (women who) undertook to lead holy lives of chastity, service and labor without withdrawing from the world physically."[34] Though they lived according to Christian ideals, Italian tertiaries existed outside the regulation of the Catholic Church. These unsanctioned groups developed an especially strong presence early in the thirteenth century in northern Italy, drawing condemnation from the Pope.[35] As spirituality was increasingly expressed through organizations not directly approved by the

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[32] Maureen C. Miller, "Religion Makes a Difference: Clerical and Lay Cultures in the Courts of Northern Italy," *American Historical Review* vol. 105 no. 4 (October 2000): 1098-1099.
[33] McNamara, 8.
[34] Caroline Bynum Walker, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 59.
[35] Pelligrini, 119-121.

Catholic Church, the church hierarchy became stricter in its standards for the creation of new Christian orders.

The Catholic Church defined the requirements for new orders in 1215, with the Fourth Lateran Council. Canon 13 of Lateran IV states: "Lest too great a diversity of religious orders lead to grave confusion in the Church of God, we strictly forbid anyone in the future to found a new order," adding that anyone "who would wish to found a new monastery, must accept a rule already proved."[36] In effect, this restricted the founding of new religious orders permitted by the Catholic Church to those directly approved by the Pope. Prospective leaders of new orders were required to demonstrate continuity with a unified and cohesive Catholic theology, and meet with the approval of the highest authority of the institutional hierarchy. While this period marked a tightening of the Catholic Church's control over its adherents, it was also a period during which certain popular devotional practices, such as *imitatio Christi*, flourished.

IV. Imitatio Christi

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, *imitatio Christi,* or the imitation of Christ's humanity, became an important ideal among both Christian clerics and laypeople. The impulse among devout Christians to imitate the ideal of Christ dates back to the disciples. Paul described his devotion to Christ using the verb *imitare,* which has been translated both as "to follow" and "to imitate."[37] There may have been a distinction in the early Christian tradition between imitating and following Christ, with the former associated

[36] "Medieval Sourcebook: Twelfth Ecumenical Council: Lateran IV 1215," Fordham University, accessed 31 July 2015, http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/lateran4.asp.
[37] Giles Constable, *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 145.

more with his divinity and the latter with his humanity. By the twelfth century, however, the term *Imitatio Christi* was used to refer to both practices, as Christians increasingly "modeled their own lives on His with a degree of literalism which would have surprised and perhaps shocked people in the early Middle Ages."[38] The desire to replicate Christ's behavior on earth to become closer to God indicates a unification in the minds of medieval Christians of Christ as human and Christ as divine. His identity as both fully human and fully divine serves as the ideal focus for spirituality; as a human he provided an example by which ordinary people could, through their daily actions, access divinity.

There is a tension between Christ's apparent maleness and ambiguously gendered behaviors, which has led scholars to question and debate how medieval Christians perceived and imitated him. Modern Catholic feminists have also taken issue with the exclusively male interpretation of Christ. According to early Christian thought, "only the male represents the fullness of human nature," thus, "as Christ has to be incarnated in a male, so only can the male represent Christ."[39] The depiction of Christ's human form, critical to the salvation of humanity, as solely male has raised concerns about the physical prerequisites for divine grace. As Karen Allaume notes in her discussion of women's ordination, "If Christ had to be physically like us in order to save us, logic suggests, then in order to be saved we must in turn have to be like *him*."[40] It seems illogical that Christ, the intermediary between the divine and the human, can physically identify with only a part of the human population.

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[38] Ibid, 170.
[39] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 126.
[40] Karen Trimble Allaume, "Disturbingly Catholic: Thinking the Inordinate Body," in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, 97.

Historical perceptions of Christ's gender identity have generated a great deal of academic interest. At the intersection of gender studies and medieval history, the most extensive and sustained research on this matter has been carried out by Caroline Walker Bynum, whose work concerning Christ's gender spans over thirty years. In one of her earlier articles, "Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother," Bynum notes the proliferation in twelfth century religious texts of descriptions of Christ as maternal, but refutes the idea that such maternal imagery is explicitly feminine.[41] She argues that, although both Jesus and his twelfth-century imitators acted and were described as motherly figures to their followers, they were not necessarily perceived literally as mothers, or even as feminine. In subsequent works, however, Bynum returns to this maternal imagery to argue that descriptions of Christ in medieval writing emphasized his humanity, both masculine and feminine. Christ, as divinity incarnate, represents not just men, but all of humanity.[42] As he transcends the distinction between human and divine, it has been said that "Jesus confounds and multiplies all dualities: male/female, rich/poor, life/death."[43] Christ's humanity is the embodiment of divinity- a temporal representation of God, who is by nature ineffable. Thus Christ cannot be described using one half of a binary identity.

V. Francis

Though Saint Francis of Assisi has been frequently honored and commemorated in the eight centuries since his death, almost none of the myriad works written about him

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[41] Caroline Walker Bynum, "Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother: Some Themes in Twelfth-Century Cistercian Writing," *The Harvard Theological Review* vol. 70 no. 3/4 (July-October 1977), 257-258.
[42] Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption,* 96-97.
[43] Allaume, 111.

have explicitly discussed his gender.[44] In the field of gender studies, Francis has sometimes been discussed by feminist scholars in relation or in contrast to Saint Clare.[45] In spite of the recent rise in popularity of gender studies, and the study of masculinity in particular, Francis is seldom if ever mentioned as either an example of or an exception to any of the major models of medieval masculinity. This is a lacuna I hope to fill, by arguing that Francis' imitation of Christ is a performance of gender that seems to subvert any existent model of gender, either masculine or feminine.

Francis' dedication to Christ was evident in his writing, and his determination to pattern his own life behavior and that of his followers after the life of Christ was especially clear in both the earlier and later rules he set forth for his monastic order. The earlier rule opens with an exhortation to the Franciscan brothers to "live in obedience, in chastity, and without anything of their own, and to follow the teaching and footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ," a directive that is repeated almost verbatim in the later rule.[46] His reference to Christ was particularly vivid in the insistence upon strict poverty that marked his rule as unique. He encouraged the brothers to shun material possessions and "strive to follow the humility and poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ," begging alms as a "legacy and a just due right to the poor, which our Lord Jesus Christ acquired for us."[47]

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[44] In addition to the House biography, the more recent and comprehensive *Cambridge Companion to Francis of Assisi*, ed. Michael J. P. Robson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012) does not mention Francis' relation to masculinity except to make the brief and unsupported claim that, "Francis and Clare are the masculine and feminine faces of an identical passion: to live radically according to the Gospel" (125).
[45] Some examples include Catherine M. Mooney, "*Imitatio Christi* or *Imitatio Mariae*?" and Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 94-112.
[46] *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, trans. and ed. Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 109, 137.
[47] Ibid, 117.

Francis' successful imitation of Christ is apparent in contemporary descriptions of his character, which frequently associate him with or compare him to the figure of Christ. According to his companions, Francis was able to convince many of his followers to live in austere poverty as Christ did through his own example. He welcomed the hardship of poverty and, "as a faithful enthusiast and imitator of Christ undertook in his own body, while he was well, what he taught his friars."[48] The first biographical account of his life, the *Life of Saint Francis* attributed to Thomas of Celano and written just a few years after his death, emphasizes the extent of his love for Christ. Francis' joy when contemplating Christ was such that "He was always with Jesus: Jesus in his heart, Jesus in his mouth, Jesus in his ears, Jesus in his eyes, Jesus in his hands, he bore Jesus in his whole body."[49] Here, Francis' intense emotion when meditating on the image of Christ appears to invoke direct presence of and bodily union with Christ.

Physical union with Christ was embodied in Francis' display of the stigmata, wounds mirroring those inflicted upon Christ during the crucifixion. He is said to have received the stigmata, mirroring all five of Christ's wounds, on Mount La Verna in 1224, two years before the end of his life.[50] He is often regarded as the first person to receive the stigmata; however, recent scholarship has emphasized references to stigmatization before the lifetime of Saint Francis. The precedent for visibly manifesting the suffering of Christ on the cross can be found in the New Testament, the words of Paul in Galatians 6:17- "From now

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[48] *The Writings of Leo, Rufino and Angelo Companions of St. Francis*, ed. and trans. Rosalind B. Brook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 213.
[49] *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents,* 283.
[50] Carolyn Muessig, "Signs of Salvation: The Evolution of Stigmatic Spirituality Before Francis of Assisi," in *Church History* vol. 82 no. 1 (March 2013): 40.

on, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus."[51] In his study of *imitatio Christi*, Giles Constable argues that medieval interpretations of the stigmata became more physical as Christians focused increasingly on imitation of Christ's humanity in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.[52] The century before Francis' birth saw a rise in spirituality demarcated by physical suffering in imitation of Christ.

While he was not the first person to embody the suffering of Christ on the cross, Francis is so often identified as the first stigmatic because "he is probably the first person to have had visible marks which are known from precise early descriptions to have resembled those of Christ and which are not known to have been imposed on his body by himself or others."[53] Francis' stigmata were particularly striking not only because they were a perfect replication of all five of Christ's wounds, but also because they were thought to be marks made by Christ himself, rather than the self-imposed suffering common among eleventh and twelfth-century examples. The presence of Christ at Francis' reception of the stigmata was depicted in the late thirteenth century by Giotto in the Basilica of San Francesco in Pisa (Appendix I). This fresco, one of the most iconic representations of Francis, shows the stigmata as an indication both of Christ's imminence and of Francis' similarity to Christ. For Francis, as well as for his medieval (and modern) followers who were drawn to this image, the stigmata represented the pinnacle of his holiness and his ultimate success in his *imitatio Christi.*

The physical expression of spiritual experience, which uses the body as a vessel to connect to the sacred, has most often been associated with female practice in a medieval

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[51] "Galatians 6- New International Version," Bible Gateway, https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Galatians+6&version=NIV.
[52] Constable, 199-201.
[53] Constable, 215.

context. Modern scholars like Caroline Walker Bynum have attempted delineate a gendered divide between two kinds of mystical experience: "the feminine- affective, emotional, visionary, and often erotic; and the masculine- speculative, intellectual, and often explicitly antivisionary."[54] According to this typology, Francis' experiences of proximity to God should have been cerebral and internal rather than affective and physical. Furthermore, Bynum has described devotion to Christ's humanity, particularly to his body and wounds, as characteristic of thirteenth-century female spirituality.[55] Thus, Francis' imitation of Christ's humanity and reception of the stigmata are more typical of what has been considered female mystical experience.

The classification of medieval people into categories of masculine and feminine based on assigned sex has not been accepted uncritically. Historian Kathleen Biddick has criticized Bynum's book *Holy Feast Holy Fast* (though the critique is equally valid for many of her other works), which "assumes that gender is an essence that appears prior to other categories and informs them, that the feminine mirrors, indeed reduces to, the female reproductive function, that the female body is the originary, foundational site of gender."[56] While Bynum's work is prolific, well researched, and often quite insightful, her tendency to equate femininity with maternity, and to define these in terms of a specific type of body, are limitations that should be kept in mind. Treating gender as essential to the body risks ignoring the ways in which it constructed and reinforced by social standards.

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[54] Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 8.
[55] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 172.
[56] Kathleen Biddick, "Genders, Bodies, Borders: Technologies of the Visible," in *Studying Medieval Women: Sex, Gender, Feminism*, ed. Nancy F. Partner (Cambridge: Medieval Academy of America, 1993), 95.

The language used to speak about Francis in early biographies is also ambiguous in terms of gender. The first *Life of Saint Francis* described the saint in his youth according to the chivalric model of masculinity, concerned with wealth and reputation. Before his conversion to the monastic life of radical poverty, Francis fought as a soldier in local disputes: "Ignoring God's plan, he vowed, out of vainglory and vanity, to do great things."[57] Even after his renunciation of material wealth and personal glory, however, Francis was still portrayed using image of a chivalric knight. Use of physical imagery to illustrate spiritual struggle is not uncommon in Christian hagiography; saints were often called "athletes" or "soldiers" of Christ, God, or their faith.[58] The *Life of Saint Francis* described him in the days before his death as being:

> Like a soldier, well-trained in the battle camps of God,
> challenging the enemy,
> he wanted to stir up fresh battles.
> With the Christ as leader,
> he resolved "to do great deeds,"
> and with weakening limbs and dying body,
> he hoped for victory over the enemy in a new struggle.[59]

The "great deeds" Francis hoped to accomplish at the end of his life were performed in service of Christ, rather than for personal gain. Though he was ultimately a servant of Christ, submissive and humble before God, the language used to speak about this relationship places Francis within existent models of masculinity.

Descriptions of Francis are not entirely masculine; he is also spoken of as a doting mother and as a devoted lover of Christ. The canonization process of Saint Clare, who herself frequently referred to Francis frequently as a "blessed Father," relayed a vision of

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[57] *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, 185.
[58] Ibid, 190, footnote c.
[59] Ibid, 272.

hers, in which Francis was depicted as a nurturing mother. In the vision, "the saint bared his breast and said to the Lady Clare: 'Come, take and drink…' After she did so what she had tasted was so sweet and delightful she could in no way describe it."[60] After she had drunk from the breast of Saint Francis, Clare experienced a moment of spiritual clarity that exceeds the ability to be put into words, an experience characteristic of mystical encounters with God or Christ.

This vision of breastfeeding from a male figure was not without precedent in the Christian interpretive tradition; descriptions of Christ as a mother were fairly common among twelfth-century theological texts. In his commentary on the Song of Songs, Bernard of Clairvaux explained the relationship between the soul and Christ the bridegroom using similar imagery. Speaking to Christ, the soul "said, then, 'Your breasts are better than wine,' she meant: 'The richness of your breasts contributes far more to my spiritual progress than the biting reprimands of superiors.'"[61] Clare's vision of Francis was in accordance with this depiction of divine power as maternal and nurturing. Like Christ, Francis provided for Clare not only the physical protection and strong authority of a father, but also the tenderness of a mother's love that was equally necessary to her spiritual nourishment.

In his own writing, Francis described a complex relationship with Christ, in which pious Christians could aspire to act not only as lovers and followers of Christ, but also as his brothers and mothers. In his Letter to the Faithful, Francis exhorted his followers to love the Lord with their entire being, saying:

> We are spouses when the faithful soul is joined to our Lord Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. We are brothers to Him when we do the will of the Father Who is in heaven. [We are] mothers, when we carry Him in our heart and body, through divine love

[60] *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, 152.
[61] Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 117.

> and a pure and sincere conscience and [when] we give birth to Him through [His] holy manner of working, which should shine before others as an example.[62]

The relationship with Christ to which Francis aspired is threefold. By remaining pure and chaste, the soul could achieve a divine union with or marriage to Christ, a common goal among members of both male and female monastic orders. By living a life according to Christian moral standards and proving oneself a dutiful child to the Heavenly Father, a person could attain a fraternal bond with the Son of God. And finally, through a perfect imitation of Christ, a person could become the mother of Christ, bringing him into the world through their actions. Francis seemed to indicate that through *imitatio Christi*, a person became the vessel for Christ, achieving a physical as well as a spiritual union, and serving as an example for others as Christ did. This approach was clearly appealing to his numerous followers, including Clare, and has contributed to his reputation as one of the most enduring popular figures of Christianity.[63]

VI. Clare

Saint Clare of Assisi is known as the most famous follower of Saint Francis, but her individual accomplishments are no less impressive. Having shunned her noble birth to lead a life devoted to Christ, she founded her own order, the Poor Clares. Her Rule of Life for the Poor Clares received papal approval just before her death in 1253 in spite of the restriction on the founding of new orders brought about by Lateran IV, making it the first female-

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[62] *Francis and Clare*, 63.
[63] Patricia Applebaum, *St. Francis of America: How a Thirteenth-Century Friar Became America's Most Popular Saint* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 1-2.

authored Rule for a women's religious community.[64] Questions have been raised about the extent of her authority, however, and it has been argued that some "Recent interpretations have focused upon Clare as the victim of a patriarchal Church and age."[65] Extant scholarship on Clare of Assisi reflects a frustrating dichotomy common to many (especially earlier) feminist histories: she is either viewed as a paragon of female independence- the remarkable exception in a misogynistic age- or as a powerless victim of male authority. For example, while one study views papal approval of Clare's *Rule* as a major triumph for a medieval woman operating within a patriarchal system,[66] another work published just a year later depicts the process of gaining approval from the Pope as a tragic blow to Clare's autonomy and ability to act according to her wishes.[67]

Medieval descriptions of Clare used language that was gendered in a manner more consistent with her assigned sex. She referred to herself as "the unworthy handmaid of Christ and the little plant of the most blessed Father Francis."[68] She embraced poverty and humility, and took on the role of spouse or daughter in relation to both Christ and Francis, submissive to their authority. She described the duty of the Abbess, her own role in the convent, as a responsibility "to preside over the others more by her virtues and behavior than by her office, so that, moved by her example, the other sisters might obey her more out of love than out of fear."[69] The Abbess served as the mother of the convent in a manner

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[64] Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 66-67.
[65] Miles Pattenden, "The Canonisation of Clare of Assisi and Early Franciscan History," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* vol. 59 no. 2 (April 2008): 209.
[66] Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 66-79.
[67] Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 199-203.
[68] *Francis and Clare*, 211.
[69] Ibid, 215.

similar to the description of Christ as a spiritual mother in Bernard of Clairvaux's commentary on the Song of Songs. Rather than a reprimanding father, Clare acted as a loving mother to provide guidance through her own example of living morally.

The papal bull canonizing Clare, issued just two years after her death following an unusually rapid process of canonization, praised her piety and purity. Unlike Francis, Clare was determined from an early age to live in accordance with the teachings of the Catholic Church and in service of Christ. This document praised how, "Keeping the precious treasure of her virginity with an undiminished modesty, she carefully dedicated herself to works of kindness and brilliance."[70] As she converted to the monastic life in following Saint Francis and gained followers herself, her humility, chastity, and kindness made her a moral exemplar. Her dual role as obedient child and loving mother was confirmed in the bull's exhortation of her virtue:

> Therefore let Mother Church rejoice
> that she had begotten and reared such a daughter
> who as a parent fruitful with virtues
> has produced many daughters of religion by her example,
> and has trained them for the perfect service of Christ by her
> thorough teaching.[71]

The Church lauded Clare's ability to fulfill the various and occasionally contradictory responsibilities of a woman. She was simultaneously a dutiful child to the Church, a perfect servant and virginal spouse of Christ, and an entirely chaste mother.

It is partially due to this reputation as a virgin mother that Clare has been compared by her contemporaries and by many more recent biographical works to Mary, the mother of Christ. Clare's maternal side has been viewed as its own kind of bodily association with

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[70] *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents,* 241.
[71] Ibid, 244.

Christ; "maternity is understood, after the example of the Virgin Mary, as another type of deeply physical union."[72] Portrayal of Clare in accordance with this maternal archetype emphasizes both her bodily purity and her physical and spiritual proximity to Christ. A study of Clare's life from the 1950s takes a slightly different view of her in relation to the Virgin Mary, making the argument that, as men and women harmoniously complete each other, Clare took it upon herself to act as Francis' female counterpart. "If she saw in Francis 'another Christ,' she understood that it was for her to become another Mary, for only in this way could she complement his work."[73] While it is true that Clare frequently associated Francis with Christ, scholars have debated whether or not she actually perceived herself as another Mary.

Feminist scholars have since objected to the Marian interpretation of Clare's spirituality. Catherine Mooney claims that, since her death, Clare has been increasingly associated with Mary, in spite of the fact that her writings reflect a self-identification with the figure of Christ much more so than with his mother. She argues that portrayal of Clare and her followers as imitators of Mary "served to distance them from the centrally important Christian motif of *imitatio Christi* and consequently reinforced their secondary position vis-à-vis Francis and his male followers."[74] By associating Clare with Mary rather than with Christ, her early hagiographers put forth an image of her that simplified the spirituality described in her writing to align more closely with gendered expectations of the Catholic Church.

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[72] Mariateresa Fumagalli Beonio-Brocchieri, "The Feminine Mind in Medieval Mysticism," in *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy*, 22.
[73] *The Legend and Writings of Saint Clare of Assisi: Introduction, Translation, Studies*, ed. Ignatius Brady (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1953), 151.
[74] Mooney, 76.

While Mooney argues that Clare's *imitatio Christi* was increasingly feminized over time until she was associated primarily with Mary, Clare's own writings made frequent reference to following not a divine example, but a human one. The relationship between Clare and Francis has often been depicted as one in which Clare converted to a religious life due to her love for an unattainable man.[75] While her devotion to Francis was clear in her writing, the relationship between them seemed less romantic and closer to that of a parent and child. Clare's description of herself as the "little plant" of Father Francis, as well as her vision of him providing her with spiritual and physical sustenance indicate that she perceived Francis as a spiritual parent. According to the Franciscan brothers, this relationship was mutual, as Francis "loved her and her sisters with fatherly affection on account of their holy life."[76] The "holy life" to which they referred was one based very closely on the Rule of Life set forth by Francis for his own order.

Clare's *Rule of Life* for the Poor Clares emphasized many of the same aspects of living morally as the *Rule of Saint Francis*, particularly focusing on poverty in imitation of Christ. In addition to similarity in theme and frequent quotation from Francis' *Rule*, Clare's *Rule* also included the form of life set forth by Francis for her order, in which he stated his desire "to follow the life and poverty of our most high Lord Jesus Christ and of His most holy mother and to persevere in this until the end; and in this I ask and counsel you, my ladies, to live always in this most holy life and in poverty."[77] Clare's inclusion of Francis' form of life underscored the relationship in her spiritual practice between Francis and Christ. In adhering to the word of Francis and imitating his example of poverty, she was

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[75] Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 67.
[76] *The Writings of Leo, Rufino, and Angelo*, 281.
[77] *Francis and Clare*, 218.

also conducting her life according to the examples of Christ and the Virgin Mary. The relationship between Christ, Francis, and Clare was also noted by the companions of Francis. They describe Clare as "the first little plant in the Order of the sisters, abbess of the Poor Sisters of the convent of San Damiano at Assisi and emulator of St. Francis in preserving always the poverty of the Son of God."[78] While Clare was associated with Christ and commended for upholding his lifestyle of poverty, she did so through an intermediary, following Francis rather than imitating Christ directly.

Clare's *Testament* depicts Francis as a divinely given intermediary between Christ and herself. She states, "the Lord gave us our most blessed Father Francis as Founder, Planter, and Helper in the service of Christ and in the things we have promised to God and to himself as our father."[79] Francis played a critical role to Clare's monastic lifestyle in several senses. He founded First Franciscan Order, with the example of strict poverty that was so important to Clare in her foundation of the Second Order of Saint Francis (the Poor Clares). He and his followers maintained a connection with the Poor Clares by acting as chaplains and visitators, performing religious roles reserved for men.[80] Finally, Clare wrote of him as an earthly father who was capable of bringing herself and her followers closer to the divine Father through emulation of his example.

VII. Conclusion

In the centuries that have passed since Francis and Clare were alive, works written about them have necessarily integrated the perspective of the writer into the historical

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[78] *The Writings of Leo, Rufino, and Angelo*, 279.
[79] Ibid, 230.
[80] Ibid, 224.

narrative. In the present day, this is evident in the now-outdated gendered assumptions that appear in more recent accounts of these saints: Francis' gender is ignored, while Clare is represented according to the standards of second-wave feminism. While application of more modern gender theory cannot in itself answer the question of how Francis and Clare fit into the gendered expectations of their time, it can at least complicate how we conceptualize the matter. In moving past some of our preconceived assumptions, we become open to new interpretations of old texts and can hope to gain more nuanced, more complex, and more human understandings of historical actors.

The complicated identity of Christ as recorded in the Gospels and interpreted by medieval Christians provided a precedent for the subversion of gendered expectations in the lives of Francis and Clare of Assisi. Medieval accounts of Francis' spiritual strength conform to hegemonic models of masculinity, even as his own (and subsequent) descriptions of his adherence to following Christ's lifestyle of extreme poverty and compassion place him outside of these models. Clare's determination to live according to these standards, while more appropriate for the marital, maternal, and filial roles of medieval women, allowed her to serve Christ by following the example of a male contemporary. In doing so, she was able to gain respect and influence largely unavailable to women of her time.

Appendix I

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