“And they shall be two in one flesh”: The Battle over the Virgin’s Body in *The Life of Christina of Markyate*

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A _uti and beatrix_, a rich merchant couple in early twelfth-century England, had high hopes for their beautiful daughter, betrothing her to a young nobleman in order to advance their family. The girl, Christina, had other plans, however, swearing herself to a life of chastity at a precociously young age. Her parents refused to have their social ambitions dashed so easily and set about forcing Christina to bend to their will through a variety of means, including ambush, physical abuse, and attempted rape. When these threats failed to break her, Auti and Beatrix appealed to the local house of canons in Huntingdon, asking the prior to judge their case. After listening to the prior’s longwinded speech on the insolubility of matrimonial vows, Christina retorted, “And if my parents have ordered me to enter into a marriage which I never wanted and to break the vow to Christ which they know I made in my childhood, I leave you, who are supposed to excel other men in the knowledge of the scriptures, to judge how wicked a thing this is.” Following her declaration, Christina offered to carry red-hot irons in her hands as proof of her commitment to Christ in the face of the prior’s continuing doubt.

This episode neatly encapsulates many of the motifs found in the anonymous _Life of Christina of Markyate_: chastity, physical violence and injury (sometimes self-inflicted), and, perhaps most importantly, the question of marriage and what it entails. Most likely recorded from

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Christina’s own reminiscences (see below), the *Life* details her struggle to uphold the vow she made as a child to become a Bride of Christ.\(^2\)

Although the *Life* was not widely read outside of St. Albans, the anonymous author taps into a number of important cultural and religious shifts occurring during the twelfth century, especially those shifts concerning marriage and religious practices.\(^3\) As such, the text can be read as an example of the gradual transition to the more well-known somatic mysticism of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The *Life* depicts Christina’s religious experience as rooted firmly in bodily senses, sexuality, and materiality; indeed, much of the narrative is driven forward by battles—both physical and spiritual—over the state of Christina’s body.

This paper examines the place of the human body and what it entails within the religious practices of a twelfth-century female mystic. To do so, I will explore first the interrelated themes of gender, religious practice, and sexuality that run throughout the text. The next section focuses on the deliberate portrayal of Christina’s mystical relationship with Christ as a form of spiritual marriage that incorporated many of the same expectations found in contemporary understandings of the roles of husband and wife. I argue that by portraying Christina and Christ as participating in a spiritual marriage, the narrative makes the mystic’s body an integral space in and on which her devotional practices and experiences are written in order to promote spiritual growth.

In her book *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary*, Rachel Fulton has identified the High Middle Ages as a period of gradual but important theological and cultural shifts in religious practices, particularly from the terrifying God of the Last Judgment to more merciful and compassionate portrayals of Christ and the Virgin Mary. Fulton argues that this shift helped set the stage for late medieval religious devotional practices, such as *imitatio Christi* and

\(^2\) The only extant copy of the *Life* was badly damaged in the eighteenth century, destroying part of the manuscript and cutting the *Life* off abruptly. See Talbot, introduction to *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, vii.

Christina of Markyate is thus a particularly interesting religious figure, coming as she does towards the height of this crucial shift in the early- to mid-twelfth century. Indeed, the *Life of Christina of Markyate* has been a popular text among scholars in recent years. Most of these scholars have approached Christina in terms of her historical or literary context, asking questions such as to what extent she serves as an example of other women religious like her or how authority and gender interacted during her career. While these studies are, without question, useful, there have been few attempts to explore the question of bodily experience in the narrative of the *Life*, despite the number of fascinating parallels (and differences) the text displays to late medieval affective mysticism.


5. Interestingly, although Christina lived at the height of the period Fulton focuses on in her monograph, Fulton does not address Christina or her mystical/monastic experiences.


This paper seeks to apply one of the theoretical frameworks developed for late medieval mystical texts to the *Life of Christina of Markyate* as a potential early example of somatic mysticism. Patricia Dailey’s concept of the inner and outer body within medieval Christian theology is particularly useful for this task. According to Dailey, outer physical experience cultivates the growth of the inner being, which in turn aids in the search for unity with the divine.\(^8\) Dailey discusses the need for scholars to “read the body” as part of the process of spiritual growth: “Christian mystical theology and practice exemplify the ultimate attempt to solicit the indwelling of the divine; it performs . . . closeness or unity with the divine, and it does so by calibrating the outer according to the inner, the physical body to the spiritual or figural body.”\(^9\) Christina of Markyate, with her often extreme ascetic practices and physical travails, certainly provides an interesting case-study for this theory. Moreover, her experiences are, without exception, rooted in physical sensation—sight, touch, sound; pain and pleasure. Even her divinely-inspired visions take the form of material objects and human figures she can feel, see, and hear. One scholar comments briefly that, with limited institutional options open to her as a woman, Christina’s “starting place, of necessity, was her own body.”\(^10\) This paper suggests that the body takes an even more important role than just that of a starting point, however. With this emphasis on the senses, her physical body becomes both tool and stage for her devotional practices. Without her body—without its physical senses or its virginity—her search for the divine and her ultimate unification with Christ is impossible.

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A word should be said here about the nature of the text itself. Written by a male author about a female religious figure, the Life immediately presents problems of interpretation for modern readers. While there seems to be a common scholarly consensus that the anonymous author at the very least knew Christina’s tale personally and most likely based his narrative on her reminiscences, the text itself does not provide any clues about the extent to which Christina’s tale was shaped and edited by the male author beyond the common hagiographical motifs already identified by scholars.\footnote{Even if the author based his text entirely on Christina’s own memories, the very act of recalling and relating those memories would have created a reimagined narrative structured and influenced by Christina’s present circumstances rather than a pure reflection of past events. See Georges Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” in Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical, trans. and ed. James Olney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 28-48.} This is a particularly troubling concern in light of recent studies on the emphasis placed by male ecclesiastical authors on the bodies and embodied experiences of their female subjects, an emphasis that the women mystics themselves frequently never intended.\footnote{See Catherine M. Mooney’s essay, “Voice, Gender, and the Portrayal of Sanctity,” in Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters, ed. Catherine M. Mooney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 1-15.} The question of male ecclesiastic obsession with the portrayal of the female body is therefore a crucial one which any reader of the Life of Christina of Markyate should be aware of. However, a definitive answer to this question lies beyond the scope of this essay, which focuses instead on how Christina appears within the limits of the narrative itself. The male author presents his textual Christina as a praiseworthy agent and enactor of deep religious devotion—she is, unquestionably, the main (human) protagonist in the narrative. The author continually shows a clear awareness of and concern with the often negative influence of Christina’s gender on her experiences (about which more will be said below), while still portraying her as a source of spiritual inspiration for male ecclesiastic characters within the text. It is Christina’s personal religious inclination and the ways in which she acts upon this inclination that provide the driving force of the narrative. And for this tex-
tual Christina, the mystical/religious experience takes the form of an intensely personal journey that focuses on the connection and interaction between her physical being and her spiritual growth. Therefore, I would argue that the Life can be used to demonstrate a privileged moment in the gradual transition to late medieval somatic mysticism.

Indeed, Christina’s obsession within the narrative with her own physical state as a virgin serves as a specific example of the dual inner/outer being Dailey proposes for late medieval mystical texts. Christina’s cultivation of her outer body as a chaste vessel both reflects her inner soul’s religious devotion and serves as part of a process of physical and spiritual means to foster her relationship with the divine. In her work on medieval virginity, Sarah Salih discusses this twofold medieval conception of the nature of virginity, arguing that in medieval texts virginity always co-exists as both a bodily and spiritual state. Salih uses Christina of Markyate as an example of virginity as a “mental state,” an issue that will be discussed in greater detail below. Ruth Mazo Karras places Christina within a pattern that emerged during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries of decreasing emphasis on physical integrity in favor of increasing attention to moral qualities. This paper agrees with Karras’s and Salih’s claims to a certain extent, as the Life certainly does emphasize Christina’s “mental” chastity. However, Christina’s bodily state of virginity—and her attention to preserving it—is just as, and arguably more, important than her mental purity. As Salih suggests of medieval virginity overall, Christina must become a virgin—in other words, must

13. Dailey does not address Christina of Markyate’s experience, focusing instead on texts from the thirteenth century onwards. She insists correctly, however, that this conception of “the body” as both a material and spiritual body has long standing in Christian tradition, developed by early figures such as Paul, Origen, and Augustine; see Promised Bodies, 1-26.


15. Ibid., 129.


17. Karras claims that the monk who recorded Christina’s life downplayed the spiritual significance of her chastity; see Sexuality in Medieval Europe, 46. However, as this paper will demonstrate, the state of Christina’s body had an overwhelming influence on the depiction of her spiritual experiences.
prove her corporeal virginity as a sign of her religious devotion in order to establish her relationship with the divine.\textsuperscript{18}

**Destroying the Virgin Body**

Kathryn Kelsey Staples and Ruth Mazo Karras have identified the *Life of Christina of Markyate* as a fairly early example of “a shift in attitudes within the medieval church towards sexual temptation for women. . . until the twelfth century they primarily emphasized the threat of it for men,” while women were seen as the object of temptation.\textsuperscript{19} Her body’s sexual urgings (prompted, naturally, by the devil) form one of Christina’s main concerns throughout the text; at one point she even worries that experiencing such desires has compromised her virginity.\textsuperscript{20} These portions of the narrative closely echo the trials of temptation suffered by earlier male saints such as Saint Anthony of Egypt.\textsuperscript{21} Indeed, because of the similarities between Christina’s sexual tempting and stories from her male predecessors, one scholar has suggested that Christina’s gender played a minimal role in her experience, leaving her neither more nor less susceptible to such physical desires.\textsuperscript{22} A close reading of the *Life* implies otherwise, however, with the frailty inherent in her gender lying implicit throughout the text. If anything, Christina’s final triumph over

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{salih} Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 50.
\bibitem{kelsey} This portrayal of Christina as the subject rather than the object of temptation is particularly interesting as she is being portrayed as such by a male ecclesiastical author. See Kathryn Kelsey Staples and Ruth Mazo Karras, “Christina’s Tempting,” 185. See also Jane Geddes, “The St. Albans Psalter: Sex, Desire and the Middle-Aged Woman,” in *Middle-Aged Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Sue Niebrzydowski (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), 70; and Jane Tibbets Schullenberg, “Saints and Sex, ca. 500-1100: Striding Down the Nettled Path of Life,” in *Sex in the Middle Ages*, ed. Joyce E. Salisbury (New York, NY: Garland Publishing, 1991), 214.
\bibitem{talbot} Talbot, *Life of Christina of Markyate*, 126–27.
\bibitem{fanous} Fanous, “Christina of Markyate and the Double Crown,” 54.
\bibitem{deiner} Deiner, “Entering the Bedchamber of Your Soul,” 355. Interestingly, Patricia Dailey focuses on medieval embodiment in a specifically non-gendered way. See *Promised Bodies*, 2–3, but in the case of the *Life of Christina of Markyate*, the author’s (and possibly Christina’s) awareness of gendered differences in experience between men and women is impossible to overlook.
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carnal passion—both her own and others’—comes across as all the more remarkable because of her womanhood.\textsuperscript{23}

Christina’s femininity is continuously located in and on her body throughout the \textit{Life}, resulting in a core conflict between spiritual and carnal passion.\textsuperscript{24} Her extraordinary physical beauty inflames the men around her with desire to the point of violence. Bishop Ranulf of Durham, a lecherous priest who had already taken Christina’s aunt as his concubine, tries to convince the saintly young woman to sleep with him. Christina, realizing that “she would certainly be overcome by force,” outwits the bishop and escapes behind a bolted door, guarding her physical body from his touch. In a similar scene, Burthred, Christina’s aristocratic fiancé, tries to sexually assault her; Christina escapes in the following manner: “she hastily sprang out of bed and clinging with both hands to a nail which was fixed in the wall, she hung trembling between the wall and the hangings.”\textsuperscript{25} Eventually Christina flees to a nearby hermitage and hides herself in a coffin-like cave for years—she must literally place her body out of sight and touch to protect herself and her religious devotion.

Notably, Christina’s antagonists all equate the violation of the virgin’s body with her potential defeat. Ranulf, humiliated and infuriated at being made a fool by a young girl (\textit{adolescentula}), believes that “the only way in which he could conceivably gain his revenge was by depriving Christina of her virginity, either by himself or by someone else, for the preservation of which she did not hesitate to repulse even a bishop.” Christina’s parents and betrothed clearly believe the same. At one point Auti and Beatrix try to inebriate Christina for they hoped that “the accumulation of little sips of wine would break her resolution and prepare her body for the

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\item \textsuperscript{23} Karras discusses the medieval conception of women as more vulnerable to sexual temptation; as a result, they were also more worthy of praise if they remained chaste, \textit{Sexuality in Medieval Europe}, 39. For the importance of gender to male authors of female saints’ lives, see Barbara Newman, \textit{From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 28.
\item \textsuperscript{24} C. Stephen Jaeger, “The Loves of Christina of Markyate,” in \textit{Fanous and Leyser, Christina of Markyate}, 101.
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It is her parents, too, who encouraged Burthred in his attempted rape of Christina—to the point of thrusting him into their daughter’s bedchamber with strict instructions to get the deed done—with the belief that with the loss of her virginity, her resistance to a worldly marriage and worldly status would crumble as well.

Within the text, communal attention is so fixated on the body of the virgin that sexual desire and sexual relationships are constantly misconstrued and forced onto Christina’s interactions with those around her, emphasizing the fragility of her physical state as well as the vulnerability of her gender. This is further complicated by the fact that Christina’s dearest friends and allies are all men—the majority of whom are members of religious institutions who, like Ranulf of Durham, should most likely be avoiding contact with potential temptation, and who, indeed, struggle openly with sexual desires. For example, Sueno, a canon at Huntingdon and Christina’s first friend, was notorious for his lust before he met Christina: “unless he were prevented by the greater power of God he would without any shame lie with any ugly and misshapen leper.” The holy hermit Roger hides both his friendship with Christina and Christina herself for four years because he fears the scandalmongering that would inevitably follow any open acknowledgment of their relationship. Christina’s last and greatest friendship with Abbot Geoffrey de Gorham of St. Albans certainly comes under fire as being anything but innocent in nature. Indeed, their relationship nearly destroys their reputations: “Before they had become spiritual friends, the abbot’s well-known goodness and the maiden’s holy chastity had been praised in many parts of England. But when their mutual affection in Christ had inspired them to greater good, the abbot was slandered as a seducer and the maiden as a loose woman.” Although Christina and her male friends recognize the

26. Ibid., 42–43: nullo alio modo se ultum iri credidit quam ut vel per se vel [per] alium auferret Christine florem pudicicie, propter quam tutandum episcopum quoque spernere non dubitavit; and 48–49: illinc nimietate paulatim sumpta potus, subigen-dum animum illius ad consensum, corpus ad opus corrupcionis.


28. Ibid., 38–39: quod nisi maiore virtute Dei cohiberetur impudenter cuilibet deformi fracteque leprose se supponeret; 102–3; and 174–75: Priusquam se invicem in Christo diligerent, abbatis nota probitas et sancta virginis castitas per plures Anglie
chaste and spiritual nature of their friendships, the assumption of weakness/temptation associated with her gender—of her attractive female body as a source of seduction—is apparently so ingrained in her immediate society that it constantly threatens to undermine her devotional practices.

While she rejects and denies feelings of carnal passion, Christina does not necessarily reject the body itself in her efforts to achieve a sanctified life. Rather, the suffering of her physical body becomes both a symbol of her religious devotion and the route through which she ascends to the divine visionary experience. The *Life* relates how, while still a very small child, Christina “beat her own tender body with rods whenever she thought she had done something that was not allowed.” This self-inflicted suffering continues throughout the rest of the narrative. When her parents try to intoxicate her as discussed above, for example, Christina focuses on her “burning thirst,” using it as a shield against the urge to drink. The most extreme instance of physical suffering and deprivation occurs when Christina hides for four years by Roger’s chapel. The author describes the tomb-like enclosure with great detail, emphasizing the effects on Christina’s physical body:

In this prison, therefore, Roger placed his happy companion. . . . O what trials she had to bear of cold and heat, hunger and thirst, daily fasting! The confined space would not allow her to wear even the necessary clothing when she was cold. The airless little enclosure became stifling when she was hot. Through long fasting, her bowels became contracted and dried up. There was a time when her burning thirst caused little clots of blood to bubble up from her nostrils. But what was more unbearable than all this was that she could not go out until the evening to satisfy the demands of nature.29

29. Ibid., 36-37: suam tenellam carnem virgis vedebat quociens aliquod illicitum se fecisse putabat; 48-49: ardorem sitis; and 102-5: In hoc ergo carcere Rogerus ovantem sociam posuit. . . O quantas sustinuit illic incommunicates frigoris et estus, famis et sitis, cotidinai ieiunii. Locis angustias nullam indulgebant refrigerium estuanti. Longa inedia, contracta sunt et aruerunt sibi intestina. Erat quando pre ardore sitis naribus ebullient frusta

partes excolebantur. Cum vero utroque mutua sed in Christo dileccio ad bonum magis accenderet, subversor abbas peccatrix virgo diffamabatur.
Interestingly, Salih suggests that the physical suffering portrayed in this episode had no spiritual meaning for Christina, serving merely as a dramatization of Christina’s literal marginalization within a masculine monastic framework. However, the language of this passage seems to foreshadow later developments in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century somatic/erotic mysticism.

The male hagiographers of the thirteenth-century mystics Mary of Oignies and Beatrice of Nazareth, for example, focus on extreme ascetic and penitential practices as a major part of their subjects’ embodied mystical experiences. This focus on bodily suffering as a form and enactment of religious devotion is remarkably similar in tone to Christina’s isolated suffering as portrayed in the Life. The Life’s emphasis on the virgin’s physical suffering here serves to highlight her determination and the strength of her religious devotion—Christina must be saintly indeed to be happy in such a “prison.” Moreover, it is during the throes of her physical pain and suffering that Christina gives herself entirely to the divine, and it is because of her suffering that the divine comes to her. After the episodes of the most intense physical suffering, such as the one related above, Christina is always visited by a heavenly vision. In this instance, Christ breaches the walls of her self-inflicted prison to come to her in the guise of “the fairest of the children of men. . .

\[ \text{coagulati sanguinis. Hiis omnibus illi eratintollerabilius, quod exire foras non nisi sero licebat, ad alia quedam necessaria que natura postulabat.} \]

30. Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 132. Salih’s claim may be due in part to her approach. She places *The Life of Christina of Markyate* almost solely within a monastic context, reading the *Life*, as do Jocelyn Wogan-Browne and Stephanie Hollis, as an example of the increasing marginalization of women religious following eleventh century ecclesiastical reforms. See Wogan-Brown and Hollis, “St Albans and Women’s Monasticism,” 28.

31. For a discussion of the male hagiographer’s preoccupation with the physicality of late medieval female mysticism, see Amy Hollywood, “Inside Out: Beatrice of Nazareth and Her Hagiographer,” in Mooney, *Gendered Voices*, 78-98.

32. The number of visions in which Christ himself appears before Christina in the text are few; most visions feature angelic messengers or the Virgin Mary. However, the relative rarity of Christ’s appearances makes those visionary experiences all the more important to both the narrative of the *Life* itself and to our understanding of Christina’s experiences.

http://ir.uiowa.edu/mff/vol50/iss2/
bearing in His right hand a cross of gold.” He hands the cross to a terrified Christina with words of comfort and assurance that her suffering is for a good cause. In this case, her body’s physical torture promotes her soul’s search for a spiritual connection.

The way in which the narrative introduces Christina’s mystical visions as the result of her suffering in effect portrays the visions as divine recognition of her triumph, through enduring such terrible pain, over her worldly existence. Hiding and confining her body, severe deprivation, and, above all, the maintenance of her virginity are the main ways in which Christina acts out her religious devotion in the Life, especially within the framework of the conflict between her own desire for a religious vocation and society’s expectations for her. It is no coincidence that her greatest trial in the narrative comes specifically in the form of her own body—the body she has controlled and protected—betraying her. On the run once more after Roger’s death, Christina finds shelter with an unnamed cleric. The devil, unable to stand their chaste friendship, attacks them both: “loosing his fiery darts, he pressed his attacks so vigorously that he completely overcame the man’s resistance. But he could not wrest consent from the maiden, though he assailed her flesh with incitements to pleasure and her mind with impure thoughts.”

The cleric, driven mad by sexual desire, goes so far as to parade naked in front of her. Rather than claiming that Christina was unaffected by such sexual temptation—a route which surely would have emphasized her unquestionable purity—the author instead describes how she only pretends to be untouched by passion in the cleric’s presence. In reality, Christina is as much affected by the devil’s “fiery darts” as the cleric, but she proves to have the greater spiritual devotion and “violently resisted the desires of her flesh, lest her own members should become the agents of wickedness against her.”

33. Talbot, Life of Christina of Markyate, 107. The passage reads: intravit ad eam speciosus forma pre filii hominum obserato aditu, crucem ferens auream in dextera manu ad cuius introitum expavit virgo, quam ille blande confortavit tali alloquio.

34. Ibid., 114-15: Et ignita iacula mittens tanta virtute institit, quod viri fortitudo-nem penitus expugnavit, virginis autem et variis titillacionibus carnem, cogitationibus impetivit animum, nunquam tamen ab ea prevaluit extorquere consensum.

35. Ibid.: Violenter respuebat desideria sue carnis, ne propria membra exhiberet adversum se arma iniquitatis.
That Christina’s ultimate test takes the form of sexual desire for a mortal man is crucial to understanding the narrative’s depiction of her relationship with the divine and her role as a virgin. Christina’s experiences are split between carnal and spiritual desires, a duality only emphasized further by her femininity. The impassioned cleric, for example, “sometimes said that she was more like a man than a woman, though she, with her more masculine qualities, might more justifiably have called him a woman.”

This deliberate reversal of gender roles emphasizes Christina’s exceptionality—she is the weak woman who has spent most of her life running from physically powerful men, but here her willpower—her inner being—is proven to be stronger than a man’s.

The blurring of the binary of masculine and feminine in this episode relates directly to Christina’s role as a virgin Bride of Christ. Virginity in this text is not just a common hagiographical trope; rather, it is the definitive physical embodiment of Christina’s religious devotion. Moreover, because Christina herself perceives her virginity as such a physical state of being, it is all the more fragile and easily threatened by external forces such as Ranulf, Burthred, and the cleric, and by internal sexual longing. Her virginity is so crucial to her devotion that merely feeling bodily desire for a mortal man but not acting upon such desire threatens her relationship with the divine.

Fearing that the mere act of desiring had caused her to fall from grace, Christina spends weeks torturing her suddenly uncontrollable body through fasts and self-inflicted injury, all the while praying to Christ and the Virgin Mary for a sign of forgiveness. They reward her with a vision of a crown like a bishop’s mitre, “whiter than snow and brighter than the sun,” being placed upon her head—in effect crowning her innocence and purity. It is only after receiving this

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36. Ibid.: Unde nonnunquam virum illam non feminam esse dicebat quem virago virtute virili predita recte effeminatum appellare poterat.

37. Notably, here Christina’s “inner being” is concerned directly with preserving the integrity of the outer body.

38. It is this concern over imagined sexual misconduct that leads Salih to use Christina as an example of the gradual shift to virginity as a mental state. See Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 128–30.

vision that Christina knows for certain “that Christ had preserved her chaste in mind and body.”  

It is the simultaneous state of both physical and mental chastity, the deliberate choice on Christina’s part of spiritual love over carnal passion, that allows her to be a fit Bride of Christ.

**Beware the Wrath of the Bridegroom:**

**Christina’s Spiritual Marriage to Christ**

If Christina was eventually rewarded for resisting sexual temptation, the hapless cleric received a far more terrifying message. Mary Magdalen, a saint whom the cleric especially venerated, comes to him in his sleep, “glared at him with piercing eyes, and reproached him harshly for his wicked persecution of the chosen spouse of the most high king. . . . afterwards he changed his way of life.”  

The cleric, along with all of Christina’s other male antagonists, has overstepped an invisible boundary: the ties of spiritual marriage between Christina and Christ. Indeed, the *Life* does not portray Christina merely as a particularly saintly virgin or professed holy woman—she is the actual Bride of Christ.  

The narrative even presents a marriage ceremony of sorts: as a child, Christina offered a penny as her oblation following Mass and vowed to give herself to God and his Son; her vow was even witnessed by the priest and the canon Sueno.  

Following this event, she refers to Christ consistently as her spouse; her parents, by trying to force her into a marriage with Burthred, were in effect attempting to make her an adulterer.  

This conflict between the two very different spiritual and secular marriages is particularly interesting given the historical context of the *Life*. The twelfth century witnessed the increasing spiritualization and

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40. Ibid., 128–29: quod Christus eam mente et corpore virginem usque servaverat.


sacramentalization of marriage among the laity, especially in terms of the marital contract between two individuals. Rather than relying on the act of sexual intercourse to signify the cementing of a marriage, clerics began to emphasize instead the consent of the individuals, a shift which Dyan Elliott refers to as the “process of purification” of marriage. Elliott argues that this sacramentalization of marriage encouraged the drawing together of secular marriage and marriage to Christ, which resulted partly in allowing “the human husband to edge out the divine.”

Certainly spiritual/chaste marriage among the laity fell out of favor in the eleventh and twelfth centuries in the eyes of ecclesiastics who wanted to emphasize the conjugal bed as the main delineation between secular and religious life. However, Elliott suggests that Christina of Markyate’s difficulties are an example primarily of clerical authorities deferring to secular marriage (on the grounds that Christina had consented to the betrothal to Burthred) over her vow of chastity. A different interpretation of the Life could imply otherwise. Christina’s parents and Burthred are always presented as being in the wrong, precisely because the narrative portrays Christina’s childhood vow of chastity as her marital contract to Christ—in other words, she gave her consent to be a Bride of Christ long before she was bullied into a secular betrothal. Here the tension seems to lie more so between external/communal expectations and the seriousness of an internal/individual vow. The desires, expectations, and machinations of her antagonists become the grounds for Christina’s trial as a saint-like figure because they will not admit or are ignorant of her spiritual marriage to Christ.

44. Elliott, The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell, 112.
45. Ibid., 119.
47. Elliott, The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell, 118.
48. Elliott discusses this tension between what she calls the external forum and the internal forum in Spiritual Marriage within the context of late medieval mysticism; it seems to be applicable to Christina’s situation, too. See Spiritual Marriage, 219-20.
Christina’s virginal body becomes the symbol for her divine marriage, one which is not recognized as such by the other characters until fairly late in the narrative. In the scene mentioned at the beginning of this paper, in which Christina’s parents bring her before the local prior, the prior—ironically—lectures her on the holy bonds of marriage. “We know that the sacrament of marriage,” the prior explains, “which has been sanctioned by divine law, cannot be dissolved, because what God has joined together, no man should put asunder. For this a man will leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife. And they shall be two in one flesh.”

Believing he spoke of the betrothal between Christina and Burthred, the prior here unknowingly defines instead Christina’s spiritual marriage to Christ. Even here within the framework of a spiritual marriage to a divine being, Christina’s body plays a central role so that she and Christ can become “two in one flesh.” For Christina, this unity is ultimately made possible by her virginity. Indeed, her focus on the state of her physical being and the language with which she describes her ties to the divine can be seen as part of the gradual evolution towards late medieval erotic mysticism. Bodily experience—here, mostly in the form of intactness—reflects and cultivates inner understanding of and connection to the divine.

Paradoxically, it is also in this connection between physical body and inner being that Christina’s experiences differ noticeably from that of many later “erotic” mystics. Her relationship with the divine serves as the antithesis to the sexual passions that surround, threaten, and tempt her. While she desires to be close to Christ, it is a desire that transcends her immediate physical reality. She acts on her desire through physical deeds—weeping, genuflecting at the altar, fasting, self-mutilation—and she even sees and feels the divine as material beings and objects in her visions. However, her passion for Christ is not rooted in the same language of bodily desire as that which afflicts her during her trial of sexual temptation. Her blood does not burn and her veins do not burst with erotic passion for the divine as do the thirteenth-century mystic

Beatrice of Nazareth’s. Instead, her love of the divine is rooted in an understanding of the eternal; her vow of virginity is even prompted by a long meditation on the state of her soul after death. For Christina, bodily desire remains separate from her passion for the spiritual, though the ways in which she encourages her spiritual growth are often somatic in nature.

Perhaps the best example of the nature of Christina’s spiritual marriage to Christ is one of the few visions in which Christ comes to her personally rather than sending a company of angels or the Virgin Mary to relay his message. The vision occurs immediately following Christina’s initial sexual desire for the cleric. Terrified by her body’s response, Christina begged God to free her from temptation; while Mary Magdalen visited the cleric, Christ soothed Christina thusly:

For in the guise of a small child He came to the arms of his sorely tried spouse and remained with her a whole day, not only being felt but also seen. So the maiden took Him in her hands, gave thanks, and pressed him to her bosom. And with immeasurable delight she held Him at one moment to her virginal breast, and at another she felt His presence within her even through the barrier of her flesh.

Besides being a rare English case of mother-mysticism, this vision serves to counteract the preceding sexual temptation. Not only does it end Christina’s physical urges (though she continued to worry about the state of her virginity), but it also emphasizes the spiritual/chaste passion of Christina’s relationship to the divine. In this instance, Christ comes to her not as a grown man, but as a child, a form signifying innocence and purity. Although the imagery—holding another being against her

52. Ibid., 118-119: Ipse namque in forma parvuli venit inter brachia probate sibi sponse, et per integrum diem mansit cum illa, non modo sensibilis, sed eciam visibilis. Accipiens itaque virgo puerum in manibus: gracias agens astrinxit sibi ad pectus. Et inestimabili de lectacione nunc et virginali illum in suo tenebat sinu, nunc intra se immo per ipsam cratam pectoris apprehendebat intuitu.
53. For this episode as an example of early mother-mysticism, see Atkinson, “Authority, Virtue, and Vocation,” 179.
breast—can certainly be imagined as erotic, it is not carnal.\textsuperscript{54} In fact, it is the opposite of carnal passion. The imagery of the female breast and breastfeeding suggests nourishment; in a way, Christina is standing in for the Virgin Mary.\textsuperscript{55} This mother-mystical experience underlines Christina’s own purified state; would the God-child come to her breast if she were not as spiritually/physically pure as his own immaculate mother? In fact, chastity and purity are so crucial to Christina’s understanding of her marriage to Christ that the devil, in yet another effort to destroy her, fills her mind with “horrible ideas about Christ, detestable notions about His Mother.”\textsuperscript{56} Whether these horrific imaginings were truly instigated by the devil is unimportant. What is important is that once again purity—the divine embodiment(s) of purity in this case—is once again being attacked with filth, sexual overtones, and a sense of corruption.

The God-child vision also introduces one of the most important aspects of Christina’s spiritual marriage: the concept of the matrimonial bond unifying two individuals in one flesh. In the God-child vision, Christ is at first a physical, external presence which she holds against her own body; in the next instant, Christ is suddenly inside Christina, “through the barrier of her flesh.” The language here implies permeation and absorption into the virgin’s body, but not the destruction or even injuring of the body. Christ and Christina have truly become two in one flesh. Once again the woman’s virginity is emphasized—how else

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{54. Both Salih and Karras suggest that “erotic” and “carnal” are not necessarily synonymous or interwoven with each other. See Salih, “When is a Bosom not a Bosom? Problems with ‘Erotic Mysticism,’” in Medieval Virginities, ed. Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans, and Sarah Salih (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 18-19; Karras, Sexuality in Medieval Europe, 55-57.


56. Talbot, Life of Christina of Markyate, 130-31: Horrenda de Christo, de ipsius sancta genitrice detestanda.}
\end{footnotes}
could her body become a fitting vessel for the divine? In this episode the interplay between outer physical body and inner being/soul that Dailey posits is particularly clear: the virgin’s bodily/mental integrity has transformed the soul’s state of being into unification with the divine. After such an experience of unification with her divine spouse, it comes as no surprise that “from that moment the fire of lust was so completely extinguished that never afterwards could it be revived.” As Dailey says in Promised Bodies, “In attempting to make the outer person conform to its interior counterpart by performative and spiritual means, the outer becomes a truer reflection of the divine.” Christina’s struggles against sexual temptation were nothing if not attempts to make her body conform to her soul’s desire for spiritual love over carnal desire. As a result of her struggles, Christ makes himself a very part of the body that had been betraying her, and her body in turn reflects her soul’s ascension to a plane beyond carnal desire.

Following her “marriage” vow to Christ, Christina’s body no longer fully belongs to her alone, but rather to her spiritual husband. Indeed, this attention on the place of the body within marriage forms a main motif in the text. The prior Fredebert declares that a husband and wife surrender power over their own bodies in exchange for power over the other’s. Another cleric involved in the case comments that if a woman came before him for breaking the vows of marriage, he would impose the same penance “as if she had committed manslaughter.” Likewise, Christina’s mortal fiancé Burthred swears, when asked what he would do if someone stole Christina away from him, “I would slay him with my own hands, if there was no other way of keeping you.” Christina implicitly approves of this righteous husbandly violence when she responds in a similarly threatening tone, “Beware then of taking to yourself the spouse of Christ, lest in His anger He will slay you.” Burthred, by

57. Dailey, Promised Bodies, 7.
58. Talbot, Life of Christina of Markyate, 118-19: Ex tunc ille libidinis ardor ita extinctus defectit, quod nunquam postea reviviscere potuit.
59. Dailey, Promised Bodies, 8.
60. Talbot, Life of Christina of Markyate, 60-61.
61. Ibid., 84-85: penitenciam quam si perpetrasset homicidium.
62. Ibid., 72-73: Immo meis ipse manibus interficerem illum, si te aliter habere.

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trying to force himself on Christina, however ignorant he might be of her spiritual marriage, is breaking at his own risk what the narrative portrays as a sacramental, contractual bond.

This threat of divine wrath against Christina’s enemies is a common one in the text. Christ clearly takes a proprietary interest in the state of his bride’s body, and he protects this virginal space with a vengeance. At one point the author writes, “But so jealously did Christ watch over his handmaiden that if any molested her, they were visited with swift punishment or afflicted with some bodily ailment, so that we heard that one was stricken with blindness, another had died without the sacraments.”

The abbot of St. Albans, later Christina’s ally, initially dismissed her and as a result faced divine wrath in the form of physical suffering. He woke up one night and “saw several black and terrifying figures standing about him: who attacked him, threw him out of bed, struck him, suffocated him, and in various ways tormented him.” In both of these instances, divine vengeance takes the form of bodily abuse. In the abbot’s case, at least, one such attack is more than enough to convince him to change his ways; following this horrifying vision, the abbot devotes himself to Christina, notably providing for her in very material ways. This focus on bodies other than Christina’s—especially the theme of physical punishment or torture—helps to demonstrate further the indelible connection between an individual’s—male or female—physical state of being and spiritual health. If Christina’s virginity embodies the purity of her soul, it is only fitting that those men and women given to evil deeds and thoughts should suffer physically as a result. Moreover, if their actions directly threaten Christina’s pure body/soul connection, it is only just that her divine bridegroom avenges her suffering.

nequirem. Quo dicto: subintulit illa. Et tu ergo cave sponsam Christi velle tibi tollere, ne in ira sua interficiet te.

63. Ibid., 172–73: Tantum autem Christus suam zelabat ancillam: ut si qui eam infestarent aut cita corrigerentur penitencia: aut incommodo corporis aliquo multitarentur, ita ut audiremus de illis aliquem cecitate percussum, alium absque viatico viam universe carnis ingressum, alios invidia tabescentes omnem fere qua prius claru erant religionis oppinionem amisisse.

64. Ibid., 136–37: vidit plures nigras horridasque circumstare personas. Que facto impetu eum de lecto excuciant, impellunt, soffocant, ac diversis excuciant modis.
To conclude, the *Life of Christina of Markyate* portrays the experience of the divine as clearly rooted in a dual and intertwined notion of the physical and spiritual, demonstrated best by Christina’s own spiritual marriage to Christ. It is an experience that privileges chastity and purity while rejecting the carnal, all the while remaining rooted in the bodily senses. This is the most fascinating aspect of Christina’s mysticism: unlike later mystics who discuss the ultimate dissolution of the self in the divine as necessary for unification, Christina instead focuses on the purification of the self to become a vessel worthy of housing the divine. She is always aware of herself as Christina, though she sees her body as belonging to Christ. And Christ, like a true bridegroom, enters and becomes one with her flesh, but in a chaste, spiritual manner. The *Life* lacks for the most part the erotic, passionate, often self-destructive language that serves as a mark for late medieval affective mysticism, yet remains rooted in its subject’s body. In this, *The Life of Christina of Markyate* can be seen as a step, a later part of the process identified by Fulton, toward the compassionate, somatic medieval Christianity that took place in the High Middle Ages. There is undoubtedly, as this paper has shown, a crucial connection between Christina’s physical body and spiritual well-being. It is because of the connection between body and soul—because of the preparations concerning her body that Christina completes to reflect the desire of her soul—that Christina’s physical body becomes such an important space in the *Life*. As Christ tells her, “[T]he key of your heart is in my safe keeping, and I keep guard over your mind and the rest of your body. No one can enter except by my permission.”65 But it was Christina who first decided to give him the key to her heart when she gave herself to him as a bride.

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65. Ibid., 132–33: cordis enim tui clavis in manu mea est seramque mentis tue ceterique corporis custodio nec patebit cuiquam ingressus nisi mee disposicionis arbitrio.