Anorexia Mirabilis: A Secular Seduction

Nicholas A. Ross

Hagiographical accounts of the late Middle Ages emphasize an asceticism centered on food that became specifically a female genre. These accounts of selfless denial were intended to inspire the masses in times of doubt. Particularly with women, as they were 'susceptible' to demonic influence, the accounts began to follow a prototypical model. Saint Catherine of Siena's story, "*Leyenda*," written by her confessor and hagiographer, Fra Raimondo da Capua della Vigne, reveals this 'holy' struggle. Her dual goals of faith and purity were pitted against her family's worldly endeavors in an increasingly secular period.[1] The hagiography tells of her growing desire to please everybody, beginning in childhood and continuing up to her untimely death. The struggles of her life culminated in this saintly denial of food like many other female ascetics of her time. Saint Catherine's story labels her relationship with food as *anorexia mirabilis*, a divine loss of appetite. A psychomedical examination of her situation, however, forces one to ask: was her condition really divine in origin, or was the weight of society's unreachable goals too great, inducing a compulsive need for self discipline manifest outwardly as this *obsessive* concern with food?

To answer this, one must consider women's role as nurturers and their subsequent association, literally, *as* food. Close examination of Catherine's denial of food in the context of her disturbing childhood leads one to see that Catherine most definitely suffered from acute anorexia nervosa, heretofore considered a modern phenomenon. The increased attention given to anorexia nervosa has spurred a historical revision in the interpretation of anorexia mirabilis, revealing that, underneath its possibly divine inspiration, there exist ties to a deeper, emotionally twisting, struggle. It can be seen that her denial of food, although possibly divinely inspired, places the origins of anorexia nervosa much before modernity.

Catherine Benicasa was born on 25 March, 1347, entering the world in the midst of the Great Plague. People were dying in the streets, blurring the distinction between the private and the public. The religious and the secular were no longer in a position of power as everybody was at risk with this disease. It was an increasingly dismal time as "the dead seemed to outnumber the living."[2] The inability of elites and laymen to render these tragedies explicable made for a turbulent epistemological and psychological environment. It is possible that Catherine was affected by these communal stresses. Additionally, her familial environment added to this anxiety, as she survived her frail twin, Giovanna, at birth. One cannot be certain whether the disappearing social structure affected her development adversely, yet it can be inferred that she was impacted greatly by the guilt that she bore in being chosen to survive her twin. Fra Raimondo emphasizes Catherine's strength in dealing with her own survival; her life played out in an inspiring tale of fervor.

As Catherine grew older, economic misfortune drove her mother, Lapa Piacenti, to obsess over the family's socioeconomic future. Catherine had always sought to please Lapa, offering herself as a means to solve the Benicasa family problems. Historian Rudolph Bell suggests that the mother did everything possible to prepare her daughter for marriage, a common means to increase family wealth, "keeping after her to scrub her face and put on makeup." Although Catherine involved herself with these affairs out of a sense of duty, "such prettiness did not sit well with the child."[3] Catherine's older sister, Bonaventura, also coaxed her to fol-

[1] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 85.
[2] Rudolph Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 31.
[3] Ibid, 31.

low their mother's advice, explaining that she had found wealth and happiness in the same way. In acquiescing, the young girl, "became more worldly, yet never evil or unmindful of the Church's teachings, a shy and hesitant participant in the doings of Siena but increasingly a participant."[4] Catherine yearned to exceed both her filial obligations but also the religious expectations to remain a beautiful virgin. These goals present themselves as opposing ideals, creating an irreconcilable conflict for the mere mortal.

Although setting Catherine up for disappointment from the start, her hagiographer had faith in her superhuman nature. Again, it is important to note that this retelling of her life came from the work of her confessor. As such, her story inevitably follows the prototypical model that is to depict a saintly candidate torn between the secular and the spiritual. It is therefore difficult to decipher whether this conflict was indeed real, or a literary construct, serving to dramatize her portrayal as an ideal woman exemplifying the standards of religious authorities.

Nonetheless, it is without question that Catherine was left feeling more helpless and guilty as we see every element of continuity and security taken away from her. One can see a turning point in Catherine's mental state with the death of Bonaventura, who passed away during childbirth in 1362. Catherine blamed herself for this death, citing her own involvement in worldly affairs as a reason as the cause of God's punishment.[5] Feeling betrayed, she began to distance herself from her family and the secular; "[she] was repelled by all worldliness, absolutely refused to take any bridegroom but Christ, and entered upon the conquest of her body."[6] Bell argues that Catherine turned to the spiritual, seeking control over what she identified as the source of her problems: the profane.[7] She began flagellation, took a vow of silence for three years (except for confession) and reduced her sleep to less than thirty minutes per day. She also refused to eat meat, developing a "strong repugnance for its very odor," and soon ate nothing but bread, water and vegetables.[8] Catherine soon lost half her body weight. These austerities were considered extreme even by the rigorous standard of the time.[9] Such compulsive behavior is indicative of increasing mental instability.[10] Given that this psychological breakdown coincided with debilitating circumstances, her ascetic practices become even less likely an expression of spirituality.[11]

A series of misfortunes continued to plague Catherine's situation. Soon after this tragedy, her younger sister, Nanna, who had been the family's 'replacement' for Catherine's twin, died at the age of fourteen. Twice now, Catherine was left with the guilt of being a survivor.[12] Catherine felt even more obligated "to be a good girl." Moreover, as the only surviving daughter, she became her mother's sole focus to secure her family's social standing. Catherine showed signs of opposition and rebelliousness by cutting off her hair, to which her mother responded, "vilest girl…do you think perhaps that you are not going to do what we wish? ...Your hair will grow back and even if your heart should break, you will be forced to take a husband..."[13]

In 1370, Catherine's mother fell gravely ill. Catherine's sense of duty overcame the longstanding tensions between the two. She pleaded with God to restore her mother to health, in exchange for a life of "hard penance and solitude."[14] Raimondo describes this "personalized sense of guilt for the sins of others," which was particularly telling of saintly nature.[15] Soon, her father fell ill, and as he lay dying, Catherine pleaded with God to grant him immediate entrance into heaven in exchange for a cross that she might bear here on earth: more physical suffering.[16] His death seems to mark the end of her childhood, and life as the family knew it.[17]

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[4] Bell, 38.
[5] Ibid, 38.
[6] Bell, 39.
[7] Ibid, 45-46.
[8] Ibid, 43.
[9] Ibid, 43.
[10] Ibid, 52.
[11] Ibid, 43.
[12] Ibid, 40.
[13] Ibid, 41.
[14] Bell, 47.
[15] Ibid, 37.
[16] Ibid, 40.
[17] Ibid, 40; 48.

Twice now, Catherine's efforts to save her family, while keeping with spiritual teachings, had failed. Her inability to realize either her secular or spiritual obligations pressed her mind to desperate action.[18] It is thus with great caution that one must examine her anorexia: was Catherine's change in appetite a holy departure of hunger, inspired by her commitment to the salvation of others, or was she experiencing a mental implosion that forced her to subconsciously seek stability by any means of self control?

Pressed to this point of desperation, Catherine pleaded with her mother to let her join a nunnery. Initially, Lapa refused. She feared the loss of her last daughter. Catherine then became feverish, with boils that covered her body. Her mother invested all her energy in taking care of her even submerging her in boiling water. These efforts proved unsuccessful; it was not until Catherine fell gravely ill that her mother conceded to her request.

In joining the Sisters of Penance, a tertiary monastic order, Catherine retained her youthful virginity, and also continued with her denial of food. Fra Raimondo sees this as a 'holy' rejection of the physical body.[19] But was it? Catherine's mind turned to conquer the one thing remaining in its control: *food*. Why food? Women and food were intrinsically linked in the Middle Ages. The role of serving merely as a 'vessel' for reproduction and nourishment for the developing child was imposed on women; they *were* food. This imposition, however, had positive connotations. Like Christ, lifting his shirt so his followers might suckle from his wound, women did the same for their children. In so doing, they performed the symbolic and necessary duty of physical strengthening, which allowed for the growth of a soul.

On the other hand, the same association of women as food could have negative connotations. Dogma related, "woman is to man as flesh is to spirit."[20] Flesh became associated with the physical: it was *merely* food.[21] In such a way, women as bodies held a contradictory role: on one hand as food, which led to the nourishment of the soul, but on the other hand as flesh (food) as a source of sinful desire. Here we see why food, and the rejection of food, becomes particularly important to the female saint.

Catherine was practically encouraged to bring out her relationship with food as society continued to segregate ascetic trends along gender lines, making the Eucharist miracle "almost entirely a female genre."[22] We find that Henry Suso was the sole male occurrence of similar holy refusal of food according to data collected by Richard Kieckhefer.[23] Carolyn Bynum states, "[it] was important for only one type of male saint—the hermit (who was often a layman)—whereas it was a crucial component of the reputation of holy women," society had labeled "food as a female concern," for without conscious denial it was impossible for the female to dominate the physical in search of the spiritual.[24]

Yet, this does not explain why Catherine's denial of food reached extremes so rapidly. Surviving practically without eating, many labeled her as an "unholy egotist."[25] Even Church leaders began to question whether her affliction was truly *anorexia mirabilis*, as she was suspected of consciously manipulating her lifestyle in a quest for sainthood.[26] She tried to dispel these rumors by forcing herself to eat in front of others, despite the painful vomiting that ensued, which she saw this as penance for her sins.[27] Her legend tells that she came to maintain nourishment from the host alone; to the chagrin of her critics, she still seemed healthier than those around her![28] After an official investigation of her practices, they were deemed truly Orthodox. She quickly developed a group of religious followers. Raimondo highlights her miraculous lifestyle as she survived without food *at all* under the increasingly popular model of transubstantiation.

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[18] Ibid, 42
[19] Bell, 40.
[20] Bynum, 263.
[21] Ibid, 262.
[22] Ibid, 76.
[23] Richard Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth Century Saints and their Religious Milieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 172.
[24] Bynum, 275.
[25] Bell, 29.
[26] Ibid, 29.
[27] Ibid, 28.
[28] Ibid, 26.

Coined by Hildebert de Lavardin in the 11th century, the idea of transubstantiation holds that the host, initially bread in appearance and 'substance', is transformed 'substantially' into Christ's body. It remains bread only in 'accidents' (i.e. appearances). In such a way, the Eucharist is purified of the profane as it becomes truly divine: "body as locus of the divine had become so powerful by the thirteenth century that the consecrated host was frequently compared to the bodies of the saints and even revered as a relic of the Church."[29] In the eyes of her hagiographer, Catherine's miraculous loss of appetite represented the holiest self sacrifice. Denying food, she denied herself, as women *were* food. In such a way, anorexia mirabilis was divine, as it was denial for the sake of self control, allowing one to release the spirit from the body, to unite with God.

Interestingly, monastic orders are frequently cited as the beginning of the modern obsession to conquer the physical to maximize output of the body; the same was Catherine's curse that led her to her saintly death. As Michel Foucault says, such discipline seeks a "functional reduction of the body," allowing one to control the mortal flesh through self improvement.[30] Yet, Catherine deemed her efforts crushed as she felt useless, unable to resolve the conflict of the Papacy during the times of Urban VI. Furthermore, her unrealized hopes to lead her followers to establish a community of religious purity, in light of the Great Schism, left her completely isolated. Her eating and vomiting patterns began to resemble those of an acute anorexic. In a childish reversion, she gave up, helpless, and brought about her own death in refusing even water. Her final month, spent in delirium and self-hatred, represents the socio-biological and neuro-biological breakdown and imbalance attributed to anorexia nervosa.[31]

In modernity, the Science of Man looked to identify a "norm." The definition of a statistical norm allowed society to locate, more effectively, the 'abnormal.'[32] Mass produced representations of earthly perfection led individuals to strive for unrealistic goals, resulting in a hopeless cycle of self-disapproval, compounded by an inextinguishable sense of failure. One can locate similar trends with the Medieval ascetic. Their quest to realize self-control of the body was reached through denial of self. The modern acute anorexic's quest to realize self-control of body *image* is reached through denial of food.

In the final analysis, can anorexia mirabilis be so different from anorexia nervosa? Anorexia mirabilis was identified as feminine, divine in origin, and positive in its ends. Anorexia nervosa has become a medical concern to males and females alike, grounded in the secular, with destructive and superficial tendencies. Ultimately, however, in seeking a common end, self-control, through similar methods of physical denial, the two clearly are born from the *same* mental imbalance. As such, anorexia mirabilis must be seen as a medical condition; anorexia nervosa can be located in a context far before modernity.

[29] Bynum, 255.
[30] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977) 165; 149.
[31] SA Wonderlich, LR Lilenfeld, LP Riso, S Engel, JE Mitchell, "Personality and anorexia nervosa," *International Journal of Eating Disorders,* 37 (2005) S68-71.
[32] Foucault, 184.

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