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The Culturally Inscribed Canvas:
Bodily Agency in Late Antique and Medieval Depictions of Female Saints

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The aim of this paper is to explore the relationship between the Christian tradition and understandings of the female body as expressed through textual records and art depicting two prominent female Christian saints. The foundation of this study is based upon the rejection of the fallacious dichotomy of mind-over-matter in order to gain the perspective of the body as a receptor of cultural and religious knowledge and practice in developing an accurate understanding of the female body as an informed agent. This paper begins with The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, a record of the life of Saint Thecla of Iconium in the first century C.E. Through this close investigation, Thecla's intensely bodily experience of her religious path is revealed dramatically. The next text addressed is the* Rule of Saint Clare*, exhibiting the physically taxing and rigorous nature of the religious practice of Saint Clare of Assisi during the thirteenth century C.E. Through a close analysis of these two prominent saints through texts and figural depictions, it becomes clear that both the female body and the Christian tradition represent mediums through which culturally inscribed conceptualizations of femininity and the physical enactment of one's religious devotion become manifest.*

Ranging from celibacy, vegetarianism, and physical isolation to radical asceticism and martyrdom, self-sacrifice has been an integral aspect of Christianity since its advent. Due to the Christian tradition's heavy emphasis on self-sacrifice, the body itself became an important entity within Christianity both through its ability to illustrate the strict regulations of Christian doctrine and the martyrdom associated with succumbing to these hardships. Despite Christianity's patriarchal emphasis and structure, the bodies affected by self-sacrifice were not only masculine, and not only men's bodies suffered the demands of a life lived according to Christian principles. Women have also played essential roles in this tradition, using the regulation of their bodies to express their undying faith in their one true God and to reenact the passion of Christ through their suffering. Two of these women are Thecla, the "protomartyr" of Iconium, and Clare of Assisi, one of the most radical female ascetics in Christian history

and the leader of one of the first major female monastic movements, the Poor Ladies.[1] Both of these women exhibit the power innate to the physical body in a religious tradition in which it holds such an important and sacrificial position. By utilizing textual accounts of the lives of Thecla and Clare of Assisi as well as several depictions of them in religious imagery to gain insight into their lives and ideologies, it is evident that the bridge between the physical body and medieval Christian society was a mutually influential one. Both of these women's bodies act as canvases on which the regulatory constructions of the female body imposed by medieval society left their brushstrokes. However, their bodies also served another function: they were also mediums through which these women exerted their own forms of agency within their religious devotion, challenged those restrictive societal and religious constructions that inhibited them, and in turn imposed their own ideas of religious practice upon Christianity.

Theories and Methods

This paper utilizes a number of theories and methods to organize ideas regarding the female body and its place within Christian thought during late antiquity and the Middle Ages. First, it is pertinent to consider that each body is a lived body, one that experiences the world through life and not through thought alone.[2] The body carries its own knowledge, which informs life choices and impacts the owner of that body in how it experiences the world, culture, personal relationships, and religion in an increasingly tangible way. Alongside this idea, this paper also considers Michel Foucault's theory of the "docile body."[3] This body, according to Foucault, is the body of every human living within a specific cultural context. Within each cultural context there exist all-pervasive cultural constructions that are

[1] Kim Haines-Eitzen, *The Gendered Palimpsest: Women, Writing, and Representation in Early Christianity* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2012), 96. The term "protomartyr" entails that Thecla was a martyr before Christian martyrdom became popularized.
[2] Pamela Sue Anderson, "The Lived Body, Gender and Confidence" in *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Contestations and Transcendence Incarnate* ed. Pamela Sue Anderson (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), 164.
[3] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* Transl. Alan Sheridan, (New York: Random House, 1977), 135-69.

inscribed upon and then exhibited by the body from its birth to its death. The body acts as a permeable medium, both accepting and illustrating these constructions, and it uses them as the foundation from which it operates. Therefore, in the grander sense, the body—in this case, the female body—acts as a docile embodiment of the societal values, moral structures, and ideas of power. For the purposes of this paper, Foucault's "docile body" will be utilized to understand the position within society from which Saint Thecla and Saint Clare are acting. It will illustrate that these two women are, in fact, objects of their context and were probably not consciously attempting to subvert the patriarchal structure to which they were subject. However, it will also illuminate their agency by creating a stark juxtaposition between the authority expressed through their bodies and the patriarchal foundation from which they must function.

To supplement this theory, I will also be utilizing Judith Butler's theory of the "regulatory body,"[4] a concept quite similar to that of Foucault's docile body. Butler's theory suggests that the body is the subject of regulatory discrimination and subversion by the cultural and political ideologies prominent within the society inhabited by that body. She introduces this concept in order to draw attention back to the body as not merely a reflection of the tenets of the culture it inhabits, but as a construction itself, as a body imbued with knowledge and activated with an authoritative agency.[5] Butler notes that "bodies never quite comply with the norms to which their materialization is impelled," and therefore, suggests that although bodies are subject to a "regulatory law" within their culture, they are nevertheless able to "rematerialize" themselves through their intricacies and instances of noncompliance.[6] This concept has particular relevance for the ways in which the female martyr and ascetic in late antique and medieval Christianity were regulated by their societies' cultures and political constructions and how this regulation may have colored their individual actions as well as their depictions in contemporary and

[4] Johannes N. Vorster, "The Blood of Female Martyrs as the Sperm of the Early Church," *Religion & Theology* 9, no. 1-2 (2002): 11, referencing the theories within Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter.*
[5] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2011), 4.
[6] Butler, xii.

later accounts. As the saints Thecla and Clare were active during times of entrenched patriarchy, their depictions as well as the foundation of knowledge from which their actions arise are reflections and products of that time. However, as Butler argues, their bodies proved inconsistent with the demands that patriarchal society placed upon them and therefore, it is evident that Thecla and Clare utilized their bodies as avenues for physical agency, rematerialization, and redefinition of their Christian experiences.

I will employ the theories of Foucault and Butler within this argument as the lens through which I develop my comprehension of their lives and capability to act as physical agents in relation to the time in which Thecla and Clare lived and its implications upon them. Specifically, I will use these theories in the definition of the term "patriarchal cultural inscription." In order to develop a clear comprehension of Thecla and Clare, it is necessary to recognize that they are women grounded in their time. Not only did they operate from a foundation of knowledge imbedded within a deeply patriarchal society, but members of that society also recorded their lives in literature and art. Consequently, as Foucault asserts in his concept of the "docile body," their lives and bodies were subject to the inscriptions of their culture. However, I do not wish to assert that this disregards any agency or power that these women exercised within their lives. I also do not wish to suggest that the physical agency demonstrated by these women was an intentional attempt to undermine to patriarchal authority, but rather, that it was exercised only in the interest of enhancing their religious experiences and beliefs in ways meaningful to them. Through Butler's ideology of the regulatory body, I will argue that although Thecla and Clare were undeniably functioning on a basis of patriarchal knowledge within a patriarchal society, they were able to redefine their religious lifestyles in a way that challenged that foundation through physical agency.

Within my analysis, I will utilize textual sources, both *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* and "The Rule of Saint Clare of Assisi," in order to provide further insight into their lives. Through the use of these texts as well as a historical study of the religious and political contexts to which Thecla and Clare were subject, I will attempt to expose the position each woman would have occupied within that patriarchal

framework as well as the physical agency she would have the ability to exercise in that position. To supplement these textual sources, I will introduce figural representations of these saints in art through an iconographical analysis. This study will enable me to ascertain both contemporary and later attitudes toward these women and whether these depictions of Christian female bodies either portray the agency these women exercised during their lives or if they instead embody the feminine ideal as defined by Christianity and cultural prescriptions. Through these avenues and with the theories of Foucault and Butler informing my concept of the patriarchal cultural inscription of these two women, I will create a holistic conceptualization of how the patriarchal contexts in which Saint Thecla and Clare lived limited their ability to act as physical agents. I will also argue that even from these patriarchal foundations, both of these women exercised undeniable physical agency in their religious practice.

The Acts of Paul and Thecla

The Acts of Paul and Thecla, one of the more important primary sources in the analysis of the near-martyrdom of Thecla as well as of her relationship with Paul, outlines Thecla's situation prior to meeting Paul, her journeys to the stadium to be martyred, and the remainder of her life as a prominent, influential figure within early Christianity. It begins with a picture of Thecla as a daughter of marriageable age within a prominent family of Iconium during the first century C.E.[7] She becomes engaged to Thamyris, one of the most important men of Iconium, through an agreement with her mother, Theoclia. Thecla hears word that Paul has come to town to preach the Christian word on chastity and purity for men and women. Though she cannot see him through the crowd, Thecla sits at her window to hear Paul speak on the value of virginity in gaining eternal life in the kingdom of God. She is so captivated and utterly taken by his words that she does not leave the window for days, rejecting food as well as visits from her fiancé. Thamyris, troubled by the rapt, hypnotic state in which Thecla

[7] Amy Oden, ed., *In Her Words: Women's Writings in the History of Christian Thought.* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1994), 21.

regards the speeches of Paul, conspires to have Paul arrested on charges of bewitching his betrothed. However, even this plot is not enough to separate Thecla from the teachings of Paul. She sneaks out of her parents' house late that night to visit Paul in prison, where she is found the next day by Thamyris and her family. She is then called to trial along with Paul. He is banished from the city, and Thecla, after refusing to provide an answer for the governor and instead staring intently at Paul, is sentenced to be burned at the stake by request of her own mother, Theoclia. Thecla is stripped and brought to the arena where she is bound to the stake. She shows no fear, having seen a vision of Jesus Christ in the form of Paul ascending into heaven in the crowd before her. After the flames are set to the base of the stake, they are immediately doused by a divinely caused earthquake and thunderstorm, saving Thecla for the first time.[8]

After being released from the arena, Thecla rejoins Paul, following him to Antioch and absorbing his teachings. Upon their entrance into the city, one of the most important men in Antioch, Alexander, falls in love with Thecla at first sight due to her extraordinary beauty and physical radiance. Alexander forces himself upon Thecla in the public streets of Antioch, causing her to beg him to preserve her chasteness and to attempt to fight him off. In his anger toward Thecla's public refusal of his advances and the ensuing shame, Alexander orders the governor of Antioch to throw her to the beasts for assaulting a nobleman. The governor consents and the next day, Thecla is brought to the arena and stripped, and the crowd is struck by her remarkable beauty. The beasts are brought in and a fierce lioness approaches her, but she sits at Thecla's feet and licks them, guarding her from any harm. The lioness kills all other beasts that approach and, in a final struggle with a male lion, she is killed along with him. The next day, Thecla is put into the arena a third time, bound between two bulls. Her bonds are

[8] William Hone, Jeremiah Jones, and William Wake, "The Acts of Paul and Thecla," in *The Lost Books of the Bible: Being all the gospels, epistles, and other pieces now extant attributed in the first four centuries to Jesus Christ, his Apostles and their companions, not included, by its compilers, in the authorized New Testament; and, the recently discovered Syriac mss. of Pilate's letters to Tiberius, etc., translated from the original tongues* (Cleveland: World Syndicate Publishing Company, 1926), 99-104.

broken and Thecla is freed once again by divine intervention. She then baptizes herself in a pond and is immediately ensconced within a protective cloud of fire that shields her from harm and hides her nudity from the crowd. Finally, she is clothed and released from Antioch. She reunites with Paul and gains his permission to travel and preach the word of God. After spending seventy-two years living a chaste, ascetic life in a cave, Thecla's life is threatened for a final time when rapists come to the cave seeking to defile the elder virgin. Coming to her aid once again, God opens a hole in the rock, allowing Thecla to escape her life in the material world for eternal life in the kingdom of Heaven.[9]

The Patriarchal Inscription of Martyrs

The early Christian social and political atmosphere is characterized by a traditional patriarchal constitution in which men are favored in most aspects of society.[10] Men were the "only active subjects in discourse," the authorities over and in control of households, political systems, sources of wealth, and, in effect, women and their children.[11] By contrast, women were considered mere objects within the considerable property that a man could accumulate, "occupying a dependent, childlike position."[12] As such property was considered inanimate and completely lacking in autonomy, feeling, and sentience, women were not considered full members of the religious community, and the female religious experience as felt and suffered by the female body was dramatically understated.

Accordingly, one of the first issues to consider when assessing the content and validity of an ancient primary source such as *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* is the identity of the author along with what personal biases or nuances could have been added through his or her interpretation of the event. According to Tertullian, this particular account of the martyrdom and life of Thecla was written by a

[9] Hone, Jones, and Wake, 104-11.
[10] Barbara J. MacHaffie, *Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 6.
[11] Ida Magli, *Women and Self-Sacrifice in the Christian Church: A Cultural History from the First to the Nineteenth Century* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc. Publishers, 2003), 9.
[12] MacHaffie, 7.

male presbyter during the second century. In addition to the basic issue of this text being written almost an entire century after the events took place, this work was also recorded by a man. Though "books…were a powerful resource and arena for debates about the human body among Early Christians…they were vulnerable to corruption and manipulation" due to the influence of the author's lived experience on the text—in this case specifically, the author's sex.[13] The influence of authorial experience on accounts of events in Christian history is a particularly sensitive issue within the early years of Christianity, as it was a time of intense patriarchy for the religion that resulted in both the physical and social control of women. Moreover, the knowledge from which the male author would have operated would have derived from this patriarchal foundation of thought. However unintentional it might have been, the author would have undoubtedly endowed his work with these biases. In effect, female subjects being written by males—in this case, Thecla—would be irrevocably crippled and defined by the interpretation of their actions according to the patriarchal conceptions of appropriate female behavior during the early Christian period.

No matter the degree to which women became marginalized within textual representations and subsequent patriarchal inscriptions of them, women in the Roman Empire did, in fact, have an indispensable role within society. The main sphere of power and avenues for respect for the female in the Roman Empire were reproduction and motherhood. Due to the short life expectancy of twenty-five years in Rome during the first and second century C.E., Roman society depended upon each individual to marry and produce at least five children to maintain the population.[14] Therefore, women played an integral role in perpetuating Roman society. However, this obvious reliance on the female body is undermined and almost denied by the cultural disapproval and near-rejection of the sex act itself. It was seen as an innately impure act that was instigated by the inherently sensual and provocative female

[13] Haines-Eitzen, 105.
[14] Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 6.

body. Taking any pleasure in sexual union would be giving into this temptation and would weaken the bodies of both men and women.[15] Therefore, sex was an act of business in the Roman Empire as it was in many other cultures of the same era, intended only to produce offspring and not physical pleasure.

In this sense, the act of voluntary celibacy by a female body was considered a blatant threat to the Roman Empire and its continuity.[16] Not only did religious virgins challenge the traditional roles of women within ancient societies as good wives in supplication to their husbands; from the male perspective, such virgins also threatened to bring about "the end of the world" through their refusal to procreate.[17] This opinion was especially common among the upper classes, the more aristocratic levels of society that would ideally produce more valuable offspring. In the case of Thecla, breaking her betrothal contract with a high-ranking man such as Thamyris was not only a personal insult to the most important man in Iconium, but it was also a threat to the Roman Empire as a whole. In Thamyris's words, Paul "introduced a new teaching, bizarre and disruptive of the human race that denigrates marriage…the beginning, root and fountainhead of our nature."[18] By following the practice of celibacy preached by Paul, Thecla disregards the role for which she was groomed and disrupts the societal norm.

Though this chain of reasoning may seem to devalue the female body even more and to expand the control that the patriarchal society imposed upon women by demanding them to procreate, it also lends a tangible sense of agency to the choice of celibacy. No woman in the Roman Empire was required, let alone allowed, to remain celibate for fear of reducing the Empire's precariously small population. The idea of celibacy as a higher level of connection with God was almost an entirely

[15] Brown, 18-21. The male orgasm was seen as a sign of licentious weakness, a kind of "minor epilepsy" where vital energy was removed from the virile male body. Since sexual pleasure was seen as something causing the dominant male body harm, it was avoided.
[16] Magli, 22.
[17] Magli, 22.
[18] Brown, 5.

Christian value in relation to the general Roman population.[19] In this way, the ability for women like Thecla to *choose* to be celibate and remain a virgin was a grand feat in and of itself. Thamyris desired Thecla, but he "desired her as a female," suggesting that he desired to take her as a wife and endangering her ability to maintain her celibate lifestyle.[20] By leaving the Roman Empire and its patriarchal inscription of female lives and bodies, Thecla circumvents these rules of femininity, crossing into an entirely new dimension for the Roman female. Being a "protomartyr," one of the major martyrs before martyrdom became more universally practiced in Christianity, Thecla was a pioneer in this form of agency for both men and women.[21] That a woman was able to exert her own, individual willpower as Thecla did was so unheard of in this context that her renunciation of participation in sexual union in pursuit of holy celibacy was an expression of incredible bodily power.

Outside of its essential role as child-bearer and wife, the female body was thought of as the antonym of the male body. The male body existed as the perfected symbol of the Roman Empire, an unyielding, fruitful, and strong being capable of holding its place within society with ease and success. Even within the early Christian church, the male body was exalted and "to be a Christian was to embody masculinity."[22] On the other hand, the female body was considered weak and incomplete "based on the simple fact of 'not being male.'"[23] Their bodies held no political or social value besides the ability to procreate within a marriage as mandated by their society. This Roman Christian distaste for the female body went so deep as to prompt men to accuse women of being seductresses, guilty of the provocation that would lead to human impurity and distance between men and God. This ingrained belief was

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[19] Some Roman gods and goddesses pertained directly to virginity such as Artemis or Diana, the virgin huntress who presided over the lives of young pre-pubescent girls, and the Roman tradition utilized the Vestal Virgins in specific religious functions; however, virginity in general was not necessarily considered a significant religious quality in pre-Christian Roman religion.

[20] Maud Burnett McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins: From Thecla to Joan of Arc* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 36.

[21] Haines-Eitzen, 96.

[22] L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 3.

[23] Vorster, 12.

validated through the Genesis story, in which Eve was tempted by the "knowledge" offered to her by the serpent. In this case, knowledge meant an awakening to the world: the idea of an individual, physically defined identity as well as sexual knowledge.[24] In offering this same knowledge to Adam, Eve was the cause of God revoking immortality from humans and thus, the cause of a lifetime of pain and struggle for future generations that would only ever end in death.[25] Consequently, sexual desire became an instinct that was to be suppressed and resisted at all costs, and the female body a symbol of shame, a reminder of the sexual abomination that robbed humanity of immortality as well as a constant temptation for the male population.

This attitude toward the female body and toward the weakness of the body in general is exceptionally pertinent to the very public and exposing act of martyrdom in the Roman Empire. As is expressed in *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, many female as well as male martyrs were stripped before being burned or fed to beasts. Whereas the pagan Roman population would have thought of this act as an attempt to dehumanize the martyrs and accentuate their estrangement from the civilized Roman world, the Christian population thought of it differently, seeing it as a humiliating exposure of the true nature of human flesh. In Christianity, the physical body was seen as innately lacking and ultimately susceptible to temptation and sin. [26] Through the complete exposure of the martyr's physical body, its vulnerability to physical violence, temptation, and sin was readily visible. Therefore, this foundation of thought inscribed upon the flawed flesh of the body was highlighted through its exposure, this weakness made all the more apparent through the body's destruction by flames or fang and claw.

Stripping the female martyrs also served to feminize the body through nudity, revealing its inadequacies.[27] In this sense, the female nature was seen as the female body itself. Baring the body

[24] Anderson, 164.
[25] Brown, 85-86.
[26] Brown, 48.
[27] Cobb, 14.

would bare the martyr's femininity and inherent weakness as a woman.[28] It was not only exposed to the Roman public, but was also under the scrutiny and prejudice of the male gaze, causing the martyr more shame and objectification. For Christian men, this exposure of the naked female body posed an even greater threat, one of temptation and longing for the beautiful women on display in the arena. Thus, due to the exposure of the female body and the lust that it engendered in men, both the purity of the female martyr in her sacrifice as well as the religious dedication of the enticed men would be challenged. Therefore, nudity in the early Christian realm and in martyrdom was a debilitating and shameful tool utilized to emphasize the supposedly enfeebling femininity and the weakness of the physical bodies of these individuals.

As this practice of stripping condemned women in the arena served to highlight the femaleness and, by extension, the supposed weakness of their bodies, the effect of martyrdom on the female body begs attention. There is an evident transformation that occurs within the full scope of martyrdom, typically a transformation from an avidly devout individual to a culturally recognized and venerated figure symbolizing personal and cultural sacrifice within textual depictions and iconographical representation. However, there have also been assertions that this transformation is different for female martyrs. In this view, through the act of martyrdom and any subsequent accounts of that martyrdom by male authors, the female is transformed into a male. She is transfigured into a figure worthy of praise and recognition in this cultural setting.[29] This conclusion, though it seemingly reinforces the notion of the supremacy of the male in Christianity, holds some truth. When female bodies are transformed through the act of martyrdom and when this act is later described in textual accounts of this event, these female martyrs are perfected. They are not turned into males physically or figuratively, but the body's femininity and, by extension, that body's imperfections according to Roman and Christian

[28] Margaret Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 176.
[29] Vorster, 24.

ideas of the female body as impure, dirty, and seductive are removed in their entirety. Since the ideal body of the Roman Empire and of Christian thought was the male body, it is technically acceptable to make the claim that when the body of the female martyr is perfected through its martyrdom, it is turned into the Roman and Christian ideal, a male body. Yet this hypothesis disregards all agency of the female body. During her attempted martyrdom and before, Thecla is given the opportunity to deny the charges against her, but she ignores the governor's questions with conviction and continues to stare at Paul.

Furthermore, when she is summoned for her burning, she "received with joy" the call from the guard with the knowledge that she would die a virgin and in accordance to her religious convictions.[30] The agency exhibited within this context is undeniable. She does not enter the arena in an attempt to achieve perfection through a metaphorical transformation— she does so with a depth of faith unable to be tainted or altered by the patriarchal inscription of the female body and the actions this inscription prescribes. Though she has the chance to save herself and return to the waiting arms of Thamyris or escape into matrimony with Alexander in Antioch, Thecla chooses through her own will to subject her body to the fire and wild beasts.

Imposing Saint Thecla

The image of Thecla in this analysis is an Egyptian Coptic limestone relief of the saint flanked by lions and angels from the fifth century C.E.[31] Though its creation is separated from the time of Thecla's life by a few centuries, it is one of the very few identifiable and comprehensive portrayals of her as it includes elements of the many extraordinary feats for which she was known. Firstly, the figure of Thecla herself is depicted face-on, a complete frontal view of the saint. This perspective lends a sense of strength to the image, as she is facing her audience fully and thus harnessing the attention of the viewer

[30] Hone, Jones, and Wake, 104.

[31] *Saint Thecla with Wild Beasts and Angels*, fifth century C.E., limestone, 3 ¾ x 25 ½ in. (9.5 x 64.8 cm.), The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. See Figure 1.

with conviction and authority. She is surrounded on either side by images of holy, watchful angels, expressing her legitimacy and sanctioned command in teaching and spreading the word of God. Here she is shown completely covered in draped robes, holding her body in a contained attitude with her hands and legs pulled close, suggesting that she is attempting to mask her femininity. However, it is interesting to note that despite her guarded posture, the curves of her hip and breasts are still visible, hinting at what is beneath.[32] Even the position of her left leg extending out from the line of her dress with its sensual bend expresses the importance of the artist's urge to identify her as female. In contrast, her facial expression seems to denote a much more serious attitude toward her identity within the church. Finally, she is flanked by lions, which have visibly turned their attention toward her figure. Their presence symbolizes her physical prowess while also alluding to her near-martyrdom and place within the Christian tradition.

The main point of interest within this image is the physical dominance that Thecla seems to exhibit even through her clear portrayal as female. Although her body is fairly contained in a vertical alignment, it stretches up to encompass the majority of the pictorial frame. As the largest figure within the frame, her dominance is immediately apparent. Her aggressive but curvilinear stance, fully facing her audience with one leg relaxed, commands attention. This is no passive depiction of a female succumbing to the patriarchal notions of a male sculptor, but a woman acting as an authoritative figure within her religious sphere. Her physical domination of this image asserts her power over the other figures in it as well as her influence and significance as a female martyr and saint.

Imposed against this portrayal of Thecla's supremacy is her depiction as a woman. As discussed earlier, the female figure was associated with many things, but dominance was not one of them. The dominant woman was seen not as empowering to women but as threatening to the perpetuation of the Roman Empire and to domestic peace within it. The physical body of the female in general was seen as a

[32] Magli, 101.

temptation, as a complete embodiment of the feminine wiles and the threat of corruption that they posed to a man ensnared by them. In fact, a woman is "the object of male fear and longing, who, in revealing her body, is said to have revealed 'herself.'"[33] Therefore, the female body is in itself all of the elements of femininity that were recognized and feared by Roman and early Christian society. Consequently, it would seem unusual that the artist of this relief depicted Thecla with her curvaceous hips, bosom, and provocatively extended leg and thus highlighting the female body which was feared and abhorred by the culture and religions of that time.

Again, though this distracting portrayal of Thecla as physically feminine would seem odd and destructive to the view of Thecla as a significant religious figure, the other elements of this image lead the viewer to believe otherwise. The presence of the lions within this frame combined with her obvious femininity serves as another testament to Thecla's power and holiness. The lions hold various different levels of significance to Thecla and this depiction of her. Most obviously, they reinforce her status as a protomartyr, alluding to the beasts she faced and tamed during her attempted public executions at Iconium and Antioch. The lions encircle her legs and focus on her with rapt attention, though they do not seem to have any inclination to attack her. Their passivity toward Thecla renders this image "not like a scene of combat but rather like a scene depicting the victory" over adversity.[34] However, there is another element that creates an additional level of dominance for Thecla. Extending from the necks of both lions are what seem to be ropes, and a collar or length of rope is even visible around the neck of the lioness. These ropes seem to connect with Thecla's hands as they rest behind her back, as if she is in control of their nature by physically tethering some of the fiercest beasts known to humankind. She holds their attention not only through her physical strength but through her divine presence and authority, controlling their natural ferocity with her own composed conviction of faith. The once-

[33] Miles, 172.
[34] Celal Şimşek and Barış Yener, "An Ivory Relief of Saint Thecla," *Adalya* 13 (2010): 327.

fearsome beasts that were held in wait for the next martyr have been turned into docile creatures at the hands of Thecla's chaste honor and the purity of her true devotion to Christianity.

Thecla's depiction as a powerful religious female figure in control of predatory animals may also have its roots in similar depictions of Greco-Roman deities. As stated above, the lions in the aforementioned image have ropes extending from their necks into Thecla's hidden hands. Her depiction as their handler seems to emphasize her dominance over them and turns them into servants rather than adversaries. Celal Şimşek and Barış Yener liken this depiction of animal servility to a female religious figure to images of pagan female religious figures such as Artemis or Diana and the *potnia*.[35] Artemis or Diana, the virgin huntress, is typically shown in the company of animals in Greek and Roman imagery; leopards, panthers, deer, or other creatures in her depictions all seem to fall under her control. This is also evident in images of the *potnia*, or "mistress," a kind of all-powerful mother goddess in Minoan civilization. In this way, there seems to be a trend of symbolism of powerful, sacred women expressing their divine authority through a control over nature in its basic, uncivilized state. Due to the lack of iconographical basis for artwork in Christianity during antiquity, much of the Christian art created during the time preceding and for some time after the legalization of Christianity in the fourth century employed artistic models that were familiar to the artisans. Consequently, images of Christian figures would be closely linked in style, structure, and metaphor with Pagan images that predated them.[36] Therefore, the likelihood that the artist of this image was utilizing the tradition of images of women typically accompanied by or dominating animals is high.

If the artist indeed was fashioning the image of Thecla after her strong Pagan female predecessors, it becomes important, even necessary, that the artist depict Thecla as female. Since the animals that would have been included in images of Artemis or the *potnia* would have not been threatening to these female figures, but friendly and under their control, illustrating Thecla side by side

[35] Şimşek and Yener, 326.
[36] Şimşek and Yener, 326.

with the vicious beasts sent to kill her in the arena and likening it to images of these pagan goddesses would assert Thecla as a female of power with the same authority and holiness as them.[37] Although she has been thrown to the beasts, she remains in control of both herself and the lions threatening her survival. However, patterning her portrayal after the dominant goddesses of the classical pantheon imbues this depiction of Thecla with another element of agency and meaning for the Christian populace. If the artist was intending to highlight the parallels between depictions of Thecla and the *potnia* or Artemis, he could have also been attempting to create a clear separation between paganism and Christianity by replacing pagan goddesses with a Christian martyr.[38] Depicting her as a controller of nature victorious over the known viciousness of animal instinct to which the pagan Roman government subjected her, Thecla is being promoted here as a strong female Christian who, depicted in the likeness of her pagan antecedents, is paving the way for Christianity over the predominant paganism.

"The Rule of Saint Clare"

In thirteenth-century Italy, the female body was presented with another avenue for physical religious expression. On the rise since the third century, asceticism had by this time become an incredibly popular and revered lifestyle for expressively religious individuals within Christianity.[39] Ascetics were "holy men and women who believed they would achieve maximum closeness to God by divorcing themselves as completely as possible from the world."[40] Asceticism is grounded in the idea that "we typically become conscious of what our body knows at moments when such knowledge is disrupted."[41] This line of thinking holds that though these behaviors are destructive to the body, it is precisely that destruction that makes them valuable to the religious experience. It promotes the

[37] Şimşek and Yener, 326.
[38] Şimşek and Yener, 327.
[39] MacHaffie, 44.
[40] Aideen M. Hartney, *Gruesome Deaths and Celibate Lives: Christian Martyrs and Ascetics* (Liverpool, U.K.: Bristol Phoenix Press, 2004), 59.
[41] Jennifer A. Glancy, *Corporal Knowledge: Early Christian Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 10.

creation of a drastic distance from the needs of the physical body that distract from the knowledge of God in order to arrive at the truth that is at the heart of Christianity and its worship. Though for many ascetic groups a large part of their practice included traveling and spreading Christianity, which excluded the participation of women, Christian women were drawn to this lifestyle nonetheless.

One of these women was Clare di Favarone, born in 1194 as the daughter of a well-to-do and spiritually aware family in Assisi, Italy.[42] Leaving her comfortable home and refusing her fiancé, Ranieride Bernardo, she joined the ranks of the ascetics with the blessing and permission of Saint Francis in 1212.[43] After traveling from monastery to monastery to escape the anger of her family, Clare settled at San Damiano, where she lived a monastic life and became a dedicated ascetic.[44] Forming her own cloister of the Poor Ladies and establishing her own Rule, Clare followed the teachings and lifestyle of Saint Francis in holy poverty.

"The Rule of Saint Clare" begins with its papal acceptance and the blessings bestowed upon the newly established practice of the Poor Ladies by Pope Innocent IV.[45] Formally, they "confirm forever this form of life and the manner of holy unity and highest poverty your blessed Father Saint Francis gave you for you observance," allowing for the subsequent practice and perpetuation of the radically ascetic lifestyle proposed by Clare.[46] In the first few chapters of the Rule, Clare calls to the Lord to bear witness to the beginning of a new life for herself and her sisters underneath their new regulations, vowing to be faithful and obedient to Pope Innocent IV and his successors. She outlines how new sisters will be received and examined. Each new sister was to have her head shaved and to be issued clothing suitable for cloistered life. Within this discipline, each sister was required to be fasting constantly. Unless they

[42] Sharon Baker-Johnson, "Saint Clare: The Anchored Soul," *Priscilla Papers* 26, no. 2 (2012): 16.
[43] Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady, Transl., *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1982), 170.
[44] Armstrong and Brady, 170.
[45] Armstrong and Brady, 173.
[46] Armstrong and Brady, 210-11.

were dangerously ill or weak, they were to eat only once a day except on the holy day of Christmas, when they were allowed to eat twice.[47]

In the Rule, Clare dictates the responsibilities of the abbess, the matron of the monastery, and the process of her election. She was required to make sure that the rules of silence and enclosure were kept in place. All sisters were to maintain a vow of silence for the majority of the day unless they were working in the infirmary or needed to voice something essential to another sister. At no point were the sisters allowed to converse with any visitor, male or female, unless they were granted permission by the abbess or her vicar. Outside of their ritual schedules of confession, prayer, and fasting, the sisters of Clare were to busy themselves with work that pertained "to a virtuous life and to the common good."[48] Idleness, an enemy of the ascetic Christian, would inevitably lead to undesirable thoughts or actions and a subsequent straying from the prescribed religious path.[49] As far as possessions and physical comforts were concerned, Clare dictated that they would be as minimal as possible, restricting the Poor Ladies to absolute essentials only. Clare told her sisters that being an ascetic and living in the most extreme degree of poverty made each of them "poor in the things [of this world] but has exalted you in virtue."[50] Therefore, without possessions or extraneous money, the sisters received alms of food and materials to make their impoverished, monastic lives possible.

Sisters were also not allowed outside of the monastery unless expressly asked. Whereas spiritual distractions and encounters with the opposite sex could be easily limited or prevented entirely under the abbess within the monastery, such protection was not always possible outside of it. The door into the monastery was secured day and night with one to two locks and guarded by a female porter, who would by no means open it "to anyone who wishes to enter, except to those who have been

[47] Armstrong and Brady, 209-15.
[48] Armstrong and Brady, 219.
[49] Armstrong and Brady, 215-19.
[50] Armstrong and Brady, 220.

granted permission by the Supreme Pontiff or by our Lord Cardinal."[51] The women's seclusion was seen as an absolute necessity and was enforced strictly as a preventative measure from straying from the Rule and being influenced by the more dangerous, inevitable distractions in the outside world.[52]

Creating a Body Rule

Whereas the first and second centuries C.E. were characterized by a cripplingly staunch patriarchal system that proved to pose a serious threat to the agency of the female body, the thirteenth century is characterized by something noticeably different. Images emphasizing the role of the mother in society and of the Virgin Mary in Christ's life abound and testify to her necessity and importance in Christianity as well that of all holy women. Mary provided the nourishment to Christ both inside the womb and out that sustained his life and promoted his growth.[53] Through these associations, women gained a new identity within Christianity, especially in monastic life, where women were awarded significant authority as well as recognition for their religious and devotional feats.[54] Using strict asceticism to moderate the control their bodies exerted over them and to manipulate their bodies' appearances, monastic women went to great lengths to secure their relationship with God and a place in his kingdom.

Through the uniquely confined and communal sense of asceticism advocated by St. Clare's Rule, "women's piety…took on certain distinctive characteristics that powerful males, both secular and clerical, noted, sometimes with awe and sometimes with suspicion."[55] Therefore, despite the recognition that Christian female piety garnered during this time, the patriarchal system at best was hesitant to embrace female monastic movements and at worst actively sought to delegitimize them. The

[51] Armstrong and Brady, 223.
[52] Armstrong and Brady, 223-25.
[53] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1987), 270.
[54] Bynum, 238.
[55] Bynum, 13-14.

remarkable and physically taxing feats of female ascetics would be praised by the church fathers, but "they also made sure to note that the females in question had somehow transcended the rest of their sex; they were not normal women."[56] Though negative patriarchal influences did not affect the religious female population nearly as much during Clare's time as it did during Thecla's, the masculine voice still dominated Christian discourse, both written and spoken, and was still able to exert its influence on the patriarchal inscription of the female body. Yet due to the advent of their newfound independence and increasingly structured devotion, spiritually inclined women were presented with a new avenue by which they could live their lives in pursuit of their religious convictions: the monastery. By entering into a monastic setting such as that prescribed by the Poor Ladies, these women were able to successfully devote themselves to celibacy, poverty, and fasting in a way that would not have been possible within the house of their fathers, a marriage, or on their own in society.

One of the most important attributes of the female ascetic life was that of enclosure. The necessity of the monastery to female ascetics such as Clare and the Poor Ladies during the thirteenth century was unique to the experience of female ascetics. Male ascetics such as Saint Francis travelled around Italy or their respective areas, spreading their beliefs and gathering followers. All the while, these men would retain their dedication to a life of renunciation and poverty in the face of the temptations, distractions, and unfamiliarity of the world around them. However, patriarchy and the power of the masculine voice within the Christian and Benedictine ideologies prevailed over Clare's situation. While the female body was seen as a temptation in itself, it was also weak and utterly corruptible by outside forces such as those that male ascetics would encounter during their travels. Thus, it would be easier for female ascetics to exist within the walls of a monastery, where such temptations could be minimized if not eliminated entirely, and for this reason such enclosure was

[56] Hartney, 107.

endorsed and then enforced by the papacy.[57] In this way, the insistent patriarchy of the time was able to exert some form of control over Clare and her fellows. Although she was granted the blessing of Saint Francis to continue her life of asceticism, she was made to do so within the confines of the San Damiano monastery.

Although Clare's forced enclosure within a monastery seems subjugating and detrimental to her ascetic practice, since the lives of her monastic contemporaries were defined by itinerancy, encountering the temptations of the world, and subsequently rejecting them, there is an undeniable sense of power that develops because of that enclosure. Within her Rule, enclosure became not only a requirement but also a preference, even a necessity. She believed that the best way to achieve the ascetic purity she desired in practice was through the seclusion of herself and her sisters. Her choice is visible most clearly through her fight for a more effectual and encompassing form of holy poverty for her and her sisters. She moved above the traditional idea of poverty within the Franciscan tradition towards a much more complete form of it within her Rule. After much contestation over its severity and concern for the well-being of the Poor Ladies, Clare's Rule was finally approved. Through her dedication and persistent attempts to gain a life of highest poverty, it is evident that there was not much that Clare would not undertake or challenge to achieve what she considered to be the most appropriate and worthwhile form of asceticism for her community. Therefore, her acceptance of and insistence on enclosure in her Rule is purposeful. She firmly believed that "the monastic enclosure of the Poor Ladies…provided the setting for the building of the kingdom of heaven."[58] Within her accepted enclosure, Clare was able to focus entirely upon the cultivation of an ascetic community worthy of recognition. By emphasizing severe control over her body in order to enhance the religious experience and devotion, Clare created a monastic life that could better achieve the goal of a community based on the ideal of mutual love by virtue of a controlled environment.

[57] Armstrong and Brady, 178.
[58] Armstrong and Brady, 180.

Along with this enclosure and the many other things that the Rule established, it recommended an intense schedule of fasting. Through asceticism and the Franciscan fellowship, food was constantly regulated. The restriction of the body through eating was seen as "a discipline far more basic than any achieved by shedding the less frequent and essential gratifications of sex or money."[59] Whereas the Franciscans and Poor Ladies considered sex and money both dispensable needs spawning from selfish desire, food was still considered a physical necessity and therefore was a crucial renunciation for Francis and Clare. Another aspect of fasting lies in the room it leaves to connect with the divine. In the ascetic view, "the body must not be permitted to force its needs upon the tranquil mind."[60] In essence, by separating oneself from dependence upon the physical body, one could in turn depend on Christ and the goodness that salvation brings. Some ascetics went so far as to not eat anything besides the Eucharist and in this way, "the renunciation of ordinary food prepared the way for consuming (i.e. becoming) Christ."[61] Therefore, the consumption of certain foods and abstinence from foods that were considered worldly contributed to the ultimate goal of emulating the life of Christ and achieving divine salvation. In effect, the ability to control one's intake of food and the frequency of that intake proved to be an incomparable means of separation from the innately flawed physical needs of the body that brings closeness with the divine.

This intense and essential fasting also proved empowering in the distinct control it gave Clare and her sisters over their bodies. Where some parts of their cloistered lives may have been under the control of outside powers such as the Friars Minor and papacy, the intake of food was almost uniquely not. Consuming food is an unavoidably physical and indispensable act that is individually regulated. Without food, the body deteriorates and relinquishes some of its earthly hold over the soul. With the extremity of the asceticism and food deprivation that Clare and her sisters practiced in San Damiano

[59] Bynum, 2.
[60] Brown, 27.
[61] Bynum, 3.

came the recognition that these women were the only ones who could control the food that entered their bodies, whether or not the lack of it took a toll on their ability to perform their daily duties. At one point, the women's malnourishment provoked Saint Francis to enter the monastery with the sole purpose of convincing Clare to lessen the rigidity of her fasting.[62] As Francis was the inspiration for her ascetic practice, Clare heeded his warnings but continued in her renunciation. In the end, the ability to control her consumption of food and, therefore, the role of her physical body in her spiritual life gave Clare and the Poor Ladies an unprecedented agency over their bodies and religious lifestyle.

Possibly the most apparent symbol of physical agency for Clare and her sisters was their separation from and lack of dependence on Saint Francis. From the start, Saint Francis played an important role in the advent of the Poor Ladies. Being "fully open to Christians of both sexes," Francis welcomed Clare into his following and blessed her with permission to continue a lifestyle like his on her own.[63] He held her in high regard as an "innovative hero of the faith in her own right" but also understood that spending as much time with women as he did with Clare was posing a temptation and danger to his religious vows.[64] He then distanced himself from her to preserve his "fragile male virtue" and became more of an absent role model rather than a constant influential presence.[65] Eventually Francis died, leaving Clare to alone govern her order for twenty-seven years until her own death.[66]

It was after Saint Francis's separation from the Poor Ladies that Clare developed her own Rule, which was eventually accepted by the Pope himself. Her dedication and sheer perseverance in the establishment of her Rule illustrates the agency that Clare was able to exert over herself and her chosen lifestyle without the hand of Francis. Despite the repeated attempts of Francis and leaders of the church to convince Clare to adhere to a Rule more in line with their own, Clare constructed a life for herself and

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[62] Bynum, 85.
[63] André Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi: the Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint,* trans. Michael F. Cusato (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012), 101.
[64] Baker-Johnson, 16.
[65] Bynum, 15.
[66] Baker-Johnson, 17.

her followers based upon the control of the body in order to express her religious devotion in the manner in which she found value and holiness.

Painting the Unworthy Handmaid

The image of Clare that I will be analyzing is from a fresco by Simone Martini in the Saint Martin chapel of the Basilica of Saint Francis.[67] It depicts a framed and haloed Saint Clare in a relaxed stance, holding a stem of blooming lilies. The vibrant and saturated blue of the backdrop and gold of her halo create a stark contrast with the colors shown on her body. The earth tones of tan, light green, and cream visible on her dress, cloak, and head wrap depict her as a figure choosing to exist outside of the worldly realms of fashion and material influence. Her clothing hangs heavily upon her slack frame, insinuating a fabric rougher and less expensive than her noble birth would otherwise demand. The rope belt that hangs from her waist adds to this perception, alluding to the roughly hewn and uncomfortable clothing of the Franciscan order. Her hair is not visible beyond the wrap of her head and neck, reminding the viewer of the depersonalization of having her head shorn. She stands calmly in her plain clothing; letting her head fall and tilt, she gazes serenely to her left and slightly up,, meeting the gaze of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, another prominent female saint associated with the Franciscans. Finally, in her hand she delicately presents her viewers with a stalk of lilies that seem to be less for them than for her own enjoyment and religious pride.

The first element worthy of attention here is Clare's lack of overt femininity as seen through the plainness of her habit and her lack of hair. Possibly the most important aspect of asceticism was the strict and absolute separation of identity from the human body that the soul inhabits. Upon becoming a formal follower of the Franciscan lifestyle, Saint Francis cut Clare's hair, "cutting off a much prized

[67] Figure 2. St. Clare and Elizabeth of Hungary. 1320-25. Fresco, 215 x 185 cm.
Cappella di San Martino, Lower Church, San Francesco, Assisi. From The Web Gallery of Art.
http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/s/simone/3assisi/1saints/saints40.html.

attribute of feminine beauty."[68] The significance of this act and its portrayal here lies in the distinct depersonalization and even dehumanization that came with removing such an integral and identifiable aspect of identity and humanity. Ascetics were aware that "our perceptions and judgments are corporally located and informed" and that bodies themselves were necessary in this exchange.[69] However, instead of relying upon their bodies as informants and translators of the world around them, ascetics wanted to create a separation from the world's distractions and enticements. This separation required disengaging from their bodies.

Removing Clare's hair in this image and placing her in the coarse, traditional habit of the Franciscan order allows Clare to transcend the prevailing cultural constructions of femininity of the time and the assumptions they placed upon the female sex. Her depiction in the fresco accentuates the depth of her humility and the necessity of her desire to remove her physical self from earthly distraction and bodily desire by demonstrating a freedom from her body and the culturally inscribed physical identity that it might otherwise manifest.[70] Though she is clearly still depicted as a woman, the swell of her breasts illuminated by their lighter shading, it is readily visible that she is above the significance that the human world places upon sexual identifications and social constructions. She has escaped "the heaviness with which the mortal body weighed down the soul," transcending into a higher level of religious practice.[71]

The humility of Clare's appearance is thrown into stark relief against the sumptuous cloth and vibrant colors of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary standing next to her. Saint Elizabeth of Hungary was born to the King of Hungary in 1207 and died at the untimely age of twenty-four in 1231.[72] Born in a position of

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[68] Jeryldene Wood, "Perceptions of Holiness in Thirteenth-Century Italian Painting: Clare of Assisi," *Art History* 14, no. 3 (1991): 315.
[69] Glancy, 8.
[70] Haines-Eitzen, 126.
[71] Brown, 47.
[72] Elizabeth Ruth Obbard, *Poverty, My Riches: A Study of St. Elizabeth of Hungary 1207-1231* (Southampton, U.K.: Saint Austin Press, 1997), 70.

social privilege as Clare was, Elizabeth also rejected her riches and position in the Hungarian monarchy in favor of living in holy poverty and serving the poor. Although she did not opt to live a cloistered life with the Poor Ladies, Elizabeth was one of the first members of the "Third Order" of the Franciscans.[73] This order was not monastic but allowed individuals who desired to do so to pursue poverty, fasting, abstinence, and charitable works while remaining a member of the society. This option allowed the "freedom to respond to need" rather than living an entirely cloistered and ascetic lifestyle.[74] Elizabeth distributed her wealth among the impoverished and helped to build hospitals with the remainder of her fortune, all the while ascribing to the live of poverty she desired in her religious devotion.[75] Living at the same time as Clare, the religious convictions of Elizabeth of Hungary directly coincided with that of the Poor Ladies with the exception of the cloistered life to which the Poor Ladies cleaved. Clare of Assisi and Elizabeth of Hungary were considered so similar in practice and Franciscan spirituality that "identical sermons were used for the feast days of both, indicating…the two to be of equal stature."[76]

Due to the closeness in devotion between Clare and Elizabeth of Hungary, it was not unusual for the two saints to be depicted together in art. However, this particular configuration of the women is not standard for its time. During the Trecento, the fourteenth century in Italy when this fresco was painted, images with both Clare and Elizabeth would typically display Elizabeth in the humble monastic garb in which Clare is here shown, insinuating an inequality between the saints.[77] It was not until the Quattrocento that they were portrayed as equals. Therefore, this depiction of Elizabeth of Hungary draped in her soft, rich clothing with her long hair elaborately braided and wrapped around her head held up by a crown seems to instead emphasize the plainness and humbleness of Clare in comparison. Elizabeth's body language also suggests a reverence for the humility of Clare. While Clare's body is

[73] Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby, *The Cult of St. Clare of Assisi in Early Modern Italy* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014), 61.
[74] Obbard, 70.
[75] Debby, 61.
[76] Debby, 61.
[77] Debby, 61.

oriented toward the viewer and her gaze is dropped slightly to the side to catch the other saint's, Elizabeth's body is turned completely to face Clare, with her gaze fixed upon Clare intently. Consequently, the focus is shifted away from the sumptuous garb and rich ornamentation of Elizabeth to the plain and humble image of Clare. In this way, the artist highlights the dehumanization of Clare's body and the strictness of the Rule to which she forces her body to adhere, illustrating her as an icon in the Franciscan spirituality for its other followers such as Elizabeth of Hungary.

In comparison with the relief of Thecla discussed above, the complete disregard of Clare's femininity in this fresco is also emphasized. The figure of Thecla from the relief is illustrated as swathed in a clinging garment, exposing her feminine curves and the swell of her breasts to all viewers and displaying her as without a doubt a woman. In the case of Clare in Martini's portrayal, she is almost entirely de-sexed. Her curves, if they existed despite the austerity of her Rule, are hidden in the folds of the heavy hanging monastic frock, and her hair is shielded behind a thick veil. However, in the images of both of these saints, they are nevertheless expressing their agency through their particular type of religious devotion. For Thecla, that devotion came from her love of the teachings of Paul and the faith that enabled her to face and then escape martyrdom by the Roman Empire. By portraying her as a female-bodied figure and thus likening her iconographically to images of Artemis and the *potnia*, powerful pagan female religious figures depicted as exhibiting their authority over animals and the forces of nature, the artist could be allowing Thecla to emerge as a Christian figure to circumvent these predecessors. Consequently, her femininity in this case is of vast importance, as it allows her to be elevated to the same sacred plane as Artemis and the *potnia*. However, for Clare, portraying her as a female-bodied person would have been counterintuitive and would have undermined her need to distance herself from the tempting and distracting needs of the physical form in order to achieve the holiness she desired, as outlined in her Rule. Therefore, Clare's lack of visible sex allows this image of her to express not only her strict monastic and ascetic convictions but also to portray the success of those

convictions in achieving holiness through control of her body. Although these images of Thecla and Clare differ in their expression of femininity in their bodies, they both allow for an understanding of their importance as Christian figures and their use of bodily agency in achieving it.

The other significant element of this image lies in the stem of blooming lilies in Clare's hand. The lily, a recognizable symbol of chastity in western medieval Christianity, represents Clare's dedication to a life of perpetual celibacy in accordance with her religious beliefs.[78] Yet women in Europe during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were expected to obey their fathers, to marry the man their male relatives selected for them, and to produce a family for that man. However, the safety of this lifestyle is debatable. There was inherent danger in childbirth as well as in marriages with violent or unsuitable husbands, making it "the presence, not the absence of the bridegroom that activated desire for perpetual chastity."[79] According to some, there was also an innate sense of danger in "what is hidden in maleness…which women fear all the more in that they have been condemned by men themselves to know nothing about it, except that it is something to fear."[80] Therefore, although the ascetic lifestyle was one entailing extreme levels of poverty and renunciation, it could be seen as a sanctuary for religious women from their culturally and religiously dictated responsibilities and the threat of the unknown posed by forced and often unwanted contact with maleness.

By becoming part of the Poor Ladies, "a woman could choose to devote herself to a life of celibacy, answerable to no man, only her God."[81] However, celibacy was not merely an escape from the restrictive expectations of Christian and Roman patriarchy; it was also a means of attaining an appealing and more intimate relationship with the divine. Therefore, by depicting the delicately illustrated fingers of Clare's hand grasping the stalk of lilies, the artist is professing Clare's vow of virginity to remain

[78] Wood, 312.
[79] Bynum, 20.
[80] Magli, 69.
[81] Hartney, 92.

"intact, untouched" for her divine bridegroom.[82] This image of symbolic marriage to Christ is incredibly sacred to the Poor Ladies as well as other monastic women and men during the medieval period. It creates a bond, "sexless, but nevertheless sexually construed," of an intimacy unparalleled by any other action.[83] In this way, by portraying Clare with the lily of her virginity held carefully in her hand, the artist is demonstrating the significance of her vow of chastity as well as its value in life after death.

This portrayal of Clare highlighting her choice of celibacy also coincides with Thecla and her similar vow of chastity. In the late antique and medieval periods of Christianity, there were high expectations placed upon women to both marry and procreate in order to be fruitful members of society. In some cases, the refusal to do either was seen as threatening to the continuity of that society, as in the case of Thecla. For Clare, there was the possibility of physical danger involved in the reproduction process as well as at the hands of the powerful, dominant male body. However, although Thecla and Clare's vows of celibacy were likely not in an intentional attempt to subvert the patriarchal rule over the lives of women, both saints had to create a concrete separation between themselves and the norm of society when they made their vows of chastity. In the image of Thecla, her choice to lead a celibate life and never marry or reproduce is visible in the inclusion of the lions by her side. They are symbols of her near-martyrdom by wild beasts for breaking her engagement with Thamyris and refusing the sexual advances of Alexander in Antioch. By depicting her with lions lying at her feet in a subdued and domestic attitude, this artist portrays Thecla as a strong figure who, through her vow of chastity and faith, is able to survive the Roman Empire's attempts to execute her for refusing to fulfill her role as a Roman female. In the same manner, Clare is depicted in Martini's fresco delicately holding a lily flower symbolizing her deliberately chosen virginity. She is shown in control of it as she alone holds the stem, rejecting the path that society had delineated for her in favor of a marriage with God. Consequently, by

[82] McInerney, 34.
[83] Elizabeth A. Clark, "The Celibate Bridegroom and His Virginal Brides: Metaphor and the Marriage of Jesus in Early Christian Ascetic Exegesis," *Church History* 77, no. 1 (2008): 1.

portraying both of these saints as women asserting themselves through celibacy, these images express the bodily agency that both Thecla and Clare gained from devoting their lives to their religion.

Conclusion

The treatment of women in the Roman Empire and within the context of early Christianity provides a fascinating study of culturally constructed ideas of femininity and the inscription of them upon the female body. In its early years, Christianity was characterized by patriarchal norms that portrayed the female body as distasteful and declared it something to be feared and controlled. Though this attitude could manifest itself through the degradation and attempted destruction of the bodies of female martyrs such as Thecla whose actions subverted the patriarchal order, Christianity later offered an avenue for women's own form of physical agency. Undoubtedly, Christian constructions and ideas of femininity were impressed upon the female body, but to the woman who was being tied to the stake, martyrdom was her choice. It was her unfailing and unshakable belief that empowered her to maintain her convictions and to suffer for the validation of her chosen religious path. For the female ascetic in the medieval period, patriarchal control was more easily circumvented; while cultural and religious conceptions of femininity and prescriptions of female behavior were very much alive in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, by this time women had earned their place among the esteemed practitioners of asceticism. This acceptance of female ascetics not only allowed for Clare's uncompromising and complete dedication to her ascetic lifestyle, but also provided a means of circumventing patriarchal control over her body and transcending the stigmas that Christianity placed upon the female body. Therefore, it becomes evident through these analyses of Saint Thecla of Iconium and Saint Clare of Assisi that although the Christian female body was still in some respects a canvas for the inscription of patriarchal ideologies and values, it also emerged as an avenue for the establishment and enactment of a unique, religious female agency.

Appendix: Images

Figure 1: *Saint Thecla with Wild Beasts and Angels*, fifth century C.E. Limestone, 3 ¾ x 25 ½ inches (9.5 x 64.8 cm). The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 48-10. Photo: Jamison Miller.

Figure 2: Simone Martini, *St. Clare and Elizabeth of Hungary*, 1320-25. Fresco. Cappella di San Martino, Lower Church, San Francesco, Assisi. From *The Web Gallery of Art*. http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/s/simone/3assisi/1saints/saints40.html.

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