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Breaking the Rules

*Artistic Expressions of
Transgression*

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MYSTICISM, MARTYRDOM, AND ECSTASY THE BODY AS BOUNDARY IN *THE MARTYRDOM OF ST AGNES*

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Francesco Del Cairo's The Martyrdom of St Agnes has been consistently overlooked in English-language research. This paper aims to redress the lack of scholarly attention by offering a close reading of the work. By locating the image within the visual and visceral piety of female mystics from the late medieval to early modern period, this article argues that its emphasis on the violation of the boundaries of the body taps into a vast heritage of embodied religiosity. Drawing on insights from George Bataille, this analysis explores the relationships between eroticism, death, and religious experience.

The present article offers a reading of a vastly under-researched work by seventeenth-century painter Francesco Del Cairo (1607-65). Very few studies in the English language reference the painter, and even fewer touch upon his work *The Martyrdom of St Agnes* (c. 1634/5) (Fig. 1). While this alone justifies a new examination of the work, the most resounding argument for this study comes from the plethora of meanings that can be drawn from the painting itself.

1 The upturned eye is also a key motif in Bataille's erotic writings and features prominently in Georges Bataille, *The Story of the Eye* (London: Penguin Books, [1928] 2001).

From the darkness rises a shining face, lips parted, eyes rolling backwards, head tilted towards the heavens. Are the eyes cast upwards in devotion? Or are they rolled back in ecstasy of a different kind?¹ Perhaps neither is the case, and we might instead be witnessing the surrender of life: the eyes rolling backwards



Fig. 1
 Francesco Del Cairo
The Martyrdom of St Agnes
 c. 1634/5
 Oil on canvas
 Galleria Sabauda, Turin

as life leaves the body. The face shines so brightly it holds the eye captive, and it takes a moment before our attention turns to the rest of the image. We see a pale expanse of flesh, the hint of an equally white robe, and the curve of a bosom only exaggerated by the harsh lines of a gaping wound. By contrast, the assailant fades into the background, his face almost entirely obscured in shadow. Just as his victim turns her shining face to the heavens, the assailant stares downwards, his gaze resting upon the terrible wound he inflicts. His darker skin and muted clothing are the perfect counterpoint to the gleaming female victim. In this painting, we find a transgressive confusion of violence, mysticism, and the erotic. Yet the work compels us to ask: can transgressions and violations of the body really lead to the transcendent? Can sexual climax, death, and religion walk hand in hand? Certainly, we sense a link between the

² Urban Dictionary is a crowd-sourced online dictionary offering definitions, continuously submitted by readers, of slang or pop-culture words and phrases. Urban Dictionary, s.v. “vagina,” accessed 29 December 2016, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/>.

³ While it is important to acknowledge the significance of geographical and denominational distinctions when reconstructing religious practices, there is also an argument to be made in favour of identifying more general trends.

wounding of the female body, sexual union, and the experience of the 'Other' when considering modern vernacular terms for the female sexual organs. Among the countless offerings on Urban Dictionary we find terms like 'gates of Heaven' and 'heaven's door' sitting alongside 'gash', 'hatchet wound', and 'slit'.² Through consideration of *The Martyrdom of St Agnes*, it is possible to reflect on more modern attitudes to female bodies.

The image is read here through two main methodological approaches. The first attempts to ground the image within the context of female mysticism in the medieval and early modern period. While the majority of examples given are drawn from Italian female mystics, parallels with other images are also explored.³ The second approach draws heavily on the work of French theorist Georges Bataille and argues that his emphasis upon the necessity of violence in religious experience is the key to interpreting Del Cairo's *St Agnes*. It seems that the revelation of the divine in female mysticism of the late medieval to early modern period often requires a brush with violence, be that violent emotional response to religious images, sympathetic experience of the Passion of Christ, or violence done to the mystics themselves.

This analysis is primarily concerned with the results of transgressions of the body,⁴ specifically the physical violation of the body's boundaries: lacerating the skin or penetrating its surface. It explores how these acts of violence against the body are depicted in the visual arts, and whether transgressions and violations of the body can be used as visual symbols for transcendent experience.⁵ Francesco Del Cairo's work has been characterised by Bronwen Wilson as having a "particular investment in the erotics of horror".⁶ However, there is particular interest found in discussing the possibilities of reading this image through the lens of a seminal text on transgression, Georges Bataille's *Eroticism* (1957). If we move beyond the understanding of transgression as the breaking of a boundary and instead think in terms of the transitions or transformations that result from a boundary being eroded, then we may

4 While there are many ways in which the boundaries of the self may be broken down, such as the ones listed by Alphonso Lingis ("anguish, dejection, sobs, trances, laughter, spasms and discharges of orgasm"), this discussion focuses on violence done to the body. Alphonso Lingis, "Chichicastenango," in *Bataille: Writing the Sacred*, ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill (London: Routledge, 1995), 7.

5 Moreover, this analysis focuses particularly on examples from thirteenth- to seventeenth-century Italy.

6 Bronwen Wilson, "The Appeal of Horror: Francesco Cairo's Herodias and the Head of John the Baptist," in "Early Modern Horror," ed. Maria H. Loh, special issue, *Oxford Art Journal* 34.3 (2011), 361.

find that the consequences of transgressive acts are transformative events.⁷ Therefore, it is here suggested that the intact body functions as a boundary, a means of demarcating the self. Once this boundary is penetrated, a fusion with what Rudolf Otto terms the ‘wholly other’ is possible.⁸

INTRODUCING BATAILLE

First, it is necessary to clarify why a controversial French theorist writing in the 1950s has any relevance to the reading of a seventeenth-century Italian painting. Raised a Catholic, Bataille engaged in a lifelong study of mysticism and medieval manuscripts.⁹ It is evident that his readings on mysticism informed his theories of religion, and consequently it is most rewarding to read his work in tandem with more traditional scholarly research on the phenomenon. It is also worth considering that Bataille himself identified *Eroticism* as being more a work of theology than a scientific or historical account of religion.¹⁰ Despite his rejection of the Catholic faith, Bataille came so close to theology in works like *L’Expérience intérieure* (1943) that Sartre accused him of ‘mourning’ the death of God.¹¹ Bataille’s writings, and their focus upon transcendent and transformational experiences, take on a mystical character of their own.

While Bataille’s theories on transgression have been characterised by detractors as the “revenge of the individual ego on the collective unconscious”, an alternative reading of *Eroticism* suggests that it is the individual ego/self which is violated in order to bring about communion with others.¹² Bataille suggests that humans “yearn for [...] lost continuity”.¹³ Humans, to Bataille, are fundamentally ‘discontinuous’ beings who are born alone and die alone, a vast “gulf” prohibiting any true interaction between them.¹⁴ Bataille argues that “communication cannot proceed from one full and intact individual to another. It requires individuals whose separate existence in themselves is risked”.¹⁵ Any hope for intimacy requires the violent disassembling of the individual. It is through acts which call into question the isolation of the self, such as erotic

7 Michel Foucault (“Préface à la transgression,” *Critique* 19.195-96 [1963], 751-69) describes transgression as “a gesture concerning the limit”. Quoted in Suzanne Guerlac, “Bataille in Theory: Afterimages (Lascaux),” in “Georges Bataille: An Occasion for Misunderstanding,” special issue, *Diacritics* 26.2 (1996), 6.

8 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1923] 1958), 25.

9 Colin Macabe, introduction to *Eroticism*, by Georges Bataille, trans. Mary Dalwood (1962; repr. London: Penguin Books, 2012), i.

10 Bataille, *Eroticism*, 31.

11 As noted in Andrew Hussey, *The Inner Scar* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 17.

12 Ashley Tauchert, *Against Transgression* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 2.

13 Bataille, *Eroticism*, 15.

14 *Ibid.*, 12.

15 Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, eds, *The Bataille Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, [1970] 2000), 93.

activity and mystical experiences, that brief moments of continuity can be attained by “dissolving” those who participate in such acts. For Bataille “the final aim of eroticism is fusion, all barriers gone”.¹⁶

This fusion that Bataille speaks of can be understood as an event which transcends the normal boundaries of human experience. Bataille locates the property of continuity within a conceptual realm which we might call the sacred or the transcendent.¹⁷ Crucially, the essence of religion is also “the search for lost intimacy”.¹⁸ In this sense, the experience of fusion or continuity can be read as an affective religious experience, a sense of something that is completely ‘other’ to our mundane, discontinuous experience, something which requires a violent rupturing of existing limits to be achieved. Thus, for Bataille, eroticism and mysticism serve the same purpose and grasp for the same end.

But how does this translate into symbolic and artistic expression? Claudia Benthien has demonstrated that in Western thought skin is “the place where boundary negotiations take place” as “it is only at this boundary that subjects can encounter each other”.¹⁹ If the experience of continuity requires a disruption of the intact self, then a physical wound – the penetration of the boundary layer of skin – becomes the obvious visual symbol to express this rupturing. In this way depictions of intact skin may symbolize distance and discontinuity, whereas broken skin may come to represent the possibility of communion.

EMBODIED MYSTICISM

Several scholars, most notably Caroline Walker Bynum in *Holy Feast, Holy Fast* (1987) and Daniel Bornstein in “Women and Religion in Late Medieval Italy: History and Historiography” (1996), have noted the particular focus of female piety upon the visceral, on “food and flesh”.²⁰ It stands to reason that

16 Bataille, *Eroticism*, 22, 23, and 129.

17 “Sacredness is the revelation of continuity.” *Ibid.*, 22.

18 Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, [1973] 2006), 57.

19 Claudia Benthien, *Skin on the Cultural Border Between Self and the World* (New York: Colombia University Press, [1999] 2002), ix and 1.

20 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). Daniel Bornstein, “Women and Religion in Late Medieval Italy: History and Historiography,” in *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, ed. Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi, trans. Margery J. Schneider (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 9.

female mystical experiences might be articulated through an equally visceral symbolism. The body becomes a site where relationships with the divine are negotiated and expressed. The emphasis upon visual religiosity is also a particularly female one, as restricted access to scripture also encouraged a more visually driven engagement in religious practices.

During the medieval and early modern periods the assumption of a more emotionally driven female piety led to the perception of meditation on the suffering of Christ using visual aids as “a devotional mode particularly suited to female capacities”.²¹ Visceral responses to images of the suffering Christ were strongly encouraged and seen as having soteriological benefits.²² Jeffrey Hamburger argues that particularly violent depictions of crucifixion were in fact specifically designed for female audiences for precisely these reasons.²³

By turning to examples taken from the lives of female mystics, the plethora of forms which this bodily symbolism takes is apparent. In such accounts, it is usual for the mystic who gazes upon images of the wounds of Christ either to feel a profound sympathetic union with Christ, or to feel that she has entered into the body of Christ through these wounds. Another variation involves the penetration of the mystic’s body, either during an ecstatic vision, or through penitential practices of self-mortification, enabling her to sympathetically identify with and take into herself the Passion of Christ.

We find several accounts of contemplation of the physical wounds of Christ leading to the establishment of intense experiences of continuity with the divine. Bataille argues that exposure to death is one way in which discontinuous beings may be jerked out of “a tenacious obsession” with their own discontinuity.²⁴ David Morgan, in his study of contemporary Protestant visual piety, argues that the act of looking at a religious image is often motivated by “a yearning to escape from the bounds of the ego and mingle with the object of the gaze”.²⁵ This concept is reminiscent of Bataille’s presentation of the

21 Bornstein, “Women and Religion in Late Medieval Italy,” 9.

22 Richard Viladesau, *The Triumph of the Cross: The Passion of Christ in Theology and the Arts from the Renaissance to the Counter-Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 19.

23 Jeffrey Hamburger, “To Make Women Weep: Ugly Art as Feminine and the Origins of Modern Aesthetics,” in “The Abject,” special issue, *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 31 (1997), 15.

24 Bataille, *Eroticism*, 16.

25 David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, [1998] 1999), 31.

26 Sarah Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993), 82.

27 Teresa of Avila, *Complete Works of St Teresa of Jesus*, vol. 1 (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975), 54.

28 Bornstein, "Women and Religion in Late Medieval Italy," 9, and Chiara Frugoni, "Female Mystics, Visions and Iconography," in *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, 137.

29 Frugoni, "Female Mystics, Visions and Iconography," 137.

30 Gabriella Zarri, "Living Saints: A Typology of Female Sanctity in the Early Sixteenth Century," in *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, 239.

31 In a British Medical Journal investigation of 321 cases of stigmata, 280 of those were experienced by women compared to only 41 cases experienced by men. C. J. Simpson, "The Stigmata: Pathology or Miracle?," *British Medical Journal* (Clinical Research Edition) 289.6460 (1984), 1746.

32 Emily Moerer, "The Visual Hagiography of the Stigmatic Saint: Drawings of Catherine of Siena in the 'Libellus de supplemento,'" *Gesta* 44 (2005), 93.

desires of the discontinuous being, and this motivation is certainly not peculiar to contemporary Protestant visual devotion.

Identification with the suffering of Christ is found in many accounts of female mystics from a variety of backgrounds. Famous episodes spring to mind, such as Margery Kempe's recounting of an incident where, upon thinking of Christ's suffering, she spread her arms wide and "cried out with a loud voice as though her heart would burst".²⁶ Here the act of spreading her arms seems to be a physical imitation of Christ on the cross. The cry loosed by Kempe may also echo the "loud voice" with which Jesus cries out in Matthew 27:46. Teresa of Avila recounted that when she pictured Christ, "it seemed to me that his being alone and afflicted, like a person in need, made it possible for me to approach him".²⁷ Thirteenth-century mystic Angela of Foligno recalled that upon watching a passion play, she felt as though she had "entered at that moment within the side of Christ".²⁸ In these examples, the body is the site where relationships to the divine are negotiated. For Kempe, her body is a tool with which she expresses a profound empathy for Christ. By physically mirroring an episode from the Passion, she establishes continuity with the object of her devotion. For Teresa of Avila and Angela of Foligno, the wounds themselves make access to the divine possible. In the case of Angela, the wounds of Christ act as a literal gateway into the divine.

It seems that the depiction (or meditation upon the image) of a wounded Christ was a crucial tool in enabling the devotee to experience an intermingling with the depicted. This could sometimes take extreme forms, reaching a crescendo in the sixteenth century as mystics participated in the agonies of the Passion.²⁹ Gabriella Zarri lists Lucia of Narni, Catherine of Racconigi, Chiara Bugini, and Catherina of Ricci as each experiencing stigmata.³⁰ Moreover, stigmata themselves have been described as an overwhelmingly female phenomenon.³¹ The experience of stigmata was considered evidence of sanctity. Texts such as the *Libellus de supplemento* emphasized Catherine of Siena's 'repeated

physical tortures' and stigmata to argue in favour of her canonisation. In this scenario it is the mystic who is wounded, as the body itself is inscribed with an external symbol of a close relationship with the divine.³²

THE MARTYRDOM OF ST AGNES

It is into this world of visual and visceral piety, of entering into the body of Christ through his wounds, and of receiving wounds which represent a fusion with the divine, that we must place Del Cairo's *St Agnes*. It was painted around 1635 at a time where Del Cairo's "experimentation with the potential of violence [...] intensified".³³ Del Cairo's violent obsessions may also reflect the religious turbulence caused by the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. With the wars of religion providing a troubled backdrop for Catholic attempts to rethink the role of saints within the Church, it is little wonder that violence is so entwined with religion in Del Cairo's visual imagery. A reaffirmed interest in the lives of saints contributed to the solidifying of a 'hagiographic stereotype' of the ideal female saint.³⁴ Gabriella Zarri describes this stereotype:

From childhood [...] the future saint feels a calling, [...] expressed by her renunciation of the world and intention to serve God alone. She exercises her virtues and combats the devil [...] She suffers persecution, which she bears patiently, to be universally recognized as a saint at the moment of death.³⁵

To adequately explore the depths of the violence in Del Cairo's *St Agnes*, it is important to first identify some defining features of the episode Del Cairo represents, especially as the image itself gives very few visual clues regarding the context of the events it depicts. One of the earliest accounts of Agnes' martyrdom comes from Ambrose's *De virginibus*, composed in the fourth century.³⁶ In his account, Agnes is an attractive girl of about twelve years of age, pursued by a suitor, whom she rebuffs on the grounds that she has

33 Wilson, "The Appeal of Horror," 361.

34 Zarri, "Living Saints," 234.

35 Ibid., 234-35.

36 Carolyn Diskant Muir, "St Agnes of Rome as a Bride of Christ: A Northern European Phenomenon c. 1450-1520," *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 31 (2004-2005), 134.

37 Jacobus de Voragine later expanded upon this episode in his highly popular *The Golden Legend*, writing that Agnes claimed, "he has set his seal upon my face, so that I can admit none but him as a lover", quoted in Diana Webb, *Saints and Cities in Medieval Italy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 121.

38 Diskant Muir, "St Agnes of Rome as a Bride of Christ," 134.

already given herself to Christ.³⁷ Enraged by her reaction, the suitor summons the full force of Roman law upon Agnes, and she is sentenced to death. The panegyric of Pope Damascus recounts that Agnes was sentenced to death by fire, and that during her execution she used her hair to cover her nudity.³⁸ In the account of Prudentius, Agnes is sent to a brothel before her execution, yet retains her chastity by causing a man to be struck down when he looks upon her. This provides only temporary respite and she is beheaded shortly afterwards. Traditionally Agnes is depicted either with a lamb (a play on her name's resemblance to the Latin *agnus*, meaning 'lamb'), or with a sword and possibly the remnants of a fire, referring to the method of her martyrdom (Fig. 2). With this in mind, what is most striking when we turn to Del Cairo's work is that he presents an Agnes who not only seems much older than a girl of thirteen, but who also sports a wound that cannot be interpreted either as the mark of decapitation, or immolation.

How are we to consider this wound? As previously noted, for many female mystics, the marks (or wounds) of stigmata served to highlight the close bond between the mystic and the divine. In the case of Catherine of Siena, the stigmata were also seen as evidence of sanctity.³⁹ The wounding of Agnes also fits the model of persecution unto death, which Zarri identifies as dominating late sixteenth-century discourse on female saints.⁴⁰ Indeed yearning for martyrdom was also seen as evidencing the virtuous character of saintly women. In the thirteenth century, the canonization proceedings for St Clare argued that her commitment to her virginity, along with her 'desire for martyrdom' evinced her saintly status.⁴¹ Del Cairo's Agnes does, on this level, conform to dominant contemporary religious narratives about the ideal qualities of a female mystic-saint. The particular emphasis on the pairing of death and virginity requires further unpacking.

Throughout the accounts of Agnes's martyrdom, the preservation of her chastity is emphasized. Therefore, it is notable that in Del Cairo's image her

39 Moerer, "The Visual Hagiography of the Stigmatic Saint," 93.

40 Zarri, "Living Saints," 234.

41 Zefferino Lazzeri, "Il processo di canonizzazione di Santa Clara di Assisi," *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 13 (1920), 480-81 (witness 12, art. 6), quoted in Clara Gennaro, "Clare, Agnes and their Earliest Followers: From the Poor Ladies of San Domiano to the Poor Clares," in *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, 47.

covering veil of hair is nowhere to be seen. Instead an expanse of breast is revealed, punctuated by the gaping knife wound. This relocation of the wound adds a disturbingly sexual element to the composition, as does the assailants grasp, which seems to take the form of a lover's embrace. The obvious age gap between the two, and the way in which the assailant angles Agnes toward the viewer/voyeur to display her feminine qualities, adds to the transgressive and thus erotic feeling. The dagger nestled in Agnes' breast seems symbolic of penetration, perhaps even an allusion to the violation of the virginity Agnes died to protect. The blood that flows from the wound symbolizes two very different penetrations. The prominent bloody gash becomes a relocated vagina, which is subject to a disturbing violation. The relocation of the wound to Agnes' breast also reinforces the interpretation of this wound as one which is delivered precisely because of Agnes' gender.



Fig. 2
 Google image search for "St Agnes
 of Rome"
 Screenshot
 Accessed 26 August 2016

Though Agnes' virginity remains intact, her bodily boundaries are still broken. Yet this violation of the boundaries of her body, the laceration of her skin, and the symbolic sexual penetration seems to leave Agnes swooning in a state of rapture. This too seems a particularly embodied depiction of religious experience. As with many contemporary depictions of martyrdom, we are witness to "a 'beautification' of some extremely distressing events".⁴² Liana De Girolami Cheney describes this phenomenon as a "resurgence of interest

42 Umberto Eco, *On Ugliness*, trans. A. McEwen (London: Maclehouse Press, [2007] 2011), 56.

43 Liana De Girolami Cheney, "The Cult of St Agatha," *Women's Art Journal* 17 (1996), 4-5.

44 Bataille, *Eroticism*, 240.

in porno-violent hagiography” in Italy from the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries.⁴³ Bataille has linked the swoon to both eroticism and mysticism, arguing that “the longed for swoon is [...] the salient feature not only of man’s sensuality but also of the experience of the mystics”.⁴⁴ The swoon is both orgasmic and religious ecstasy, most famously represented in Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (Fig. 3), which takes for its inspiration Teresa of Avila’s account of feeling her insides pierced by an angel’s ‘golden spear’.⁴⁵ Rapture itself is conceptually intertwined with transgression. Bataille describes the rapturous swoon as “the desire to fall [...] to faint [...] until there is no firm ground beneath one’s feet”.⁴⁶ The abandonment of a sense of self, experienced in rapture, is reminiscent of Bataille’s understanding of ‘continuity’, and it is analogous to the effects of transgression, as the previously solid limits are momentarily undermined and replaced by something far more fluid.

45 Ibid., 240.

46 Ibid., 240.

47 Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy*, c. 1606, oil on canvas, private collection, Rome. The painting can be viewed at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mary_magdalene_caravaggio.jpg/.



Fig. 3
Gian Lorenzo Bernini
Detail of The Ecstasy of St Teresa
1647-52
Marble
Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome
Photo: Napoleon Vier via Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 3.0

We might also draw parallels between Del Cairo’s *St Agnes* and Caravaggio’s *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy*.⁴⁷ Both women sport almost identical facial expressions: lips parted, eyes rolled backwards, and hands clasped in identical

gestures. In an almost mirror image of Agnes, the white robes of Mary Magdalene also slip down her chest, exposing a hint of bosom. Both virgin martyr and penitent prostitute are bodily united in their ecstatic union with the divine. Yet, Del Cairo's depiction of a virgin girl in such erotic throes is perhaps more unexpected, more transgressive than the presentation of Mary Magdalene in this way.

There is a further comparison to be made between the expression of Agnes and that of the subject of Del Cairo's *Saint Francis* c. 1630-1633 (Fig. 4). Again, both saints have their fingers interlaced, usually suggestive of an intense emotional absorption in a moving religious experience.⁴⁸ Again, the heads of both saints are thrown backwards, and facial expressions are an ambiguous mixture of pain and pleasure. The partially open mouths could be emitting sighs of joy, gasps of pain, or in Agnes' case, a last gasping breath or death rattle.⁴⁹ It is this ambiguity which makes *St Agnes* so compelling and so Bataillian in its combination of eroticism and religious piety. However, we must also note the stark contrast between the robed, male St Francis, whose angular jawline and gaunt face leave an impression of insubstantial frailty, and the robust, fleshy Agnes. While Del Cairo's work does depict both saints in the throes of rapture, it is only Agnes whose body is disrobed and violated. This is especially pertinent when we consider that St Francis received the marks of stigmata during a rapturous episode; the choice to depict only Agnes with wounds implies a consciousness of a distinctively female visual hagiography.

The gendered difference between the depictions of St Agnes and St Francis also brings into question the role of the penetrating gaze of the viewer. Is Agnes being offered up for the delectation of the male gaze? Or is she instead presented in a manner designed to appeal to a more feminine religiosity? If the latter is the case, then we must also consider that the allusions in the *St Agnes* to mystical or sexual experience are not the only references to transformative events. Even if the male gaze of the assailant rests at the site of Agnes' fleshy

48 Richard Viladesau notes that "hands clasped together [...] with fingers interlaced" often indicates that the pictured saint is "looking at Christ's suffering and taking it in to him or herself". Viladesau, *The Triumph of the Cross*, 67.

49 As an aside, this is also a device which Del Cairo used extensively in his depictions of the 'sinner' Herodias (a topic covered extensively by Bronwen Wilson in her paper "The Appeal of Horror"). In the Herodias images it is the female sinner who swoons, part in ecstasy, part in horror, as she penetrates the male saint.

50 Ex 34:29: "Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God."

wound, Agnes' upturned eyes glimpse something far more heavenly. Her shining face is reminiscent of the glowing face of Moses as he communicates with God in Exodus 34:29.⁵⁰ That this ecstatic religious experience is punctuated by agony is unsurprising; indeed, Bataille suggests that love may be the violent "desire to live in anguish in the presence of an object of such worth that the heart cannot bear to contemplate losing it".⁵¹ Here we grasp something of what the religious devotee might experience when contemplating images of the crucified Christ: the pleasure of being in the presence of the beloved and the agony of considering their pain. This experience of rapture, of pleasure so intense that it borders on pain, could similarly be interpreted as an experience concerning the limit.⁵²

51 Bataille, *Eroticism*, 241.

52 Foucault describes transgression as "a gesture concerning the limit" (quoted in Guerlac, "Bataille in Theory," 6).

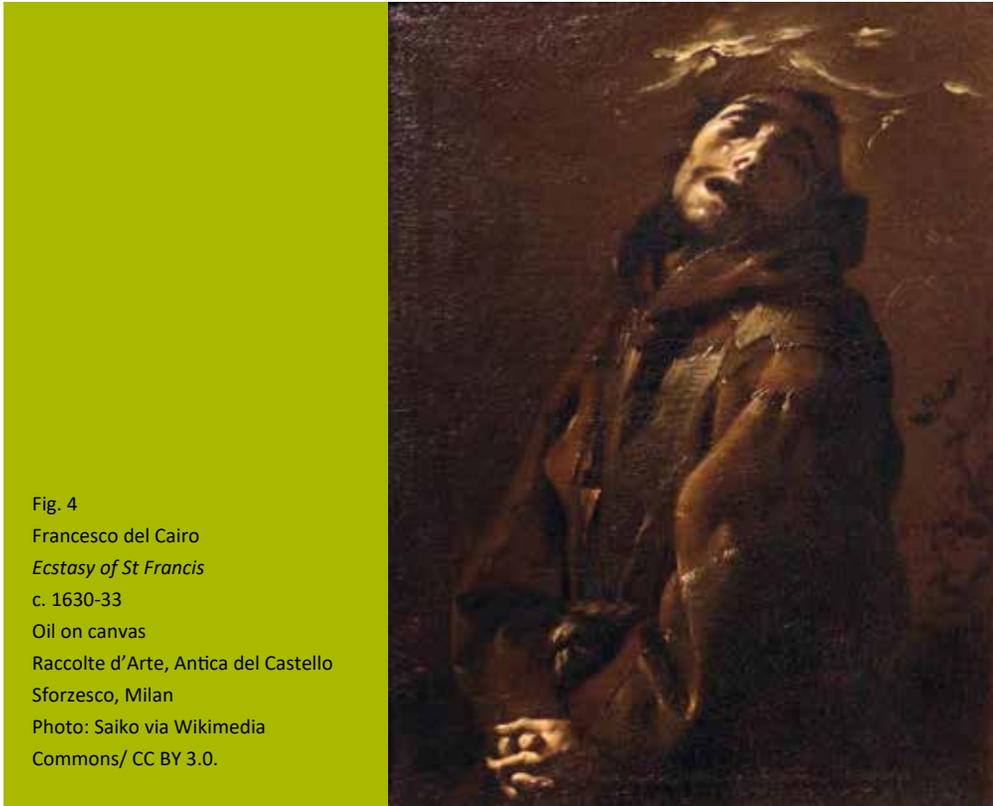


Fig. 4
Francesco del Cairo
Ecstasy of St Francis
c. 1630-33
Oil on canvas
Raccolte d'Arte, Antica del Castello
Sforzesco, Milan
Photo: Saiko via Wikimedia
Commons/ CC BY 3.0.

Agnes' rapturous agony is both existential and physical; while the moment of orgasm is sometimes termed 'the little death', it is true death which Agnes is experiencing. Yet, as Lorenzo Carletti and Francesca Polacci note, in images such as *St Agnes*, death, rather than representing an end, is in fact "the crucial point of transformation from life to afterlife".⁵³ Bataille also argues that in sacrifice, the sacrificer is returning the sacrificial victim to "the intimacy of the divine world".⁵⁴ The bloody wound which the assailant inflicts tears through Agnes' flesh but also serves to speed the saint's passage into a heavenly afterlife. The wound which so resembles the vaginal passage both preserves her virginity and becomes a more spiritual gateway. Her bodily boundaries are being violated, her inner blood flows freely outside her body, yet her facial expression clearly demonstrates that we are witnessing a transition rather than an ending. Violence and eroticism fuse together to allow a glimpse of something transcendent. The trials of the flesh pave the way for the release of the spirit.

A final explanation for the combination of eroticism and violence in *The Martyrdom of St Agnes* can be found in the Northern European traditions which depict Agnes as the bride of Christ.⁵⁵ Del Cairo's work alludes to a more violent variation on this theme, as it is at the moment of her death that Agnes is united with her beloved. Her attacker fades into the background, into irrelevance, he is merely the facilitator of the required suffering which paves the path to sainthood.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored the ways in which erotic activity and other violations of the body are used as visual symbols of a particularly female experience of continuity (or fusion) with something profoundly "other". It has suggested that violence, the feminine, the erotic, and the divine are entwined, not only in our visual consciousness but also in the religious discourse of women

53 Lorenzo Carletti and Francesca Polacci, "Transition Between Life and Afterlife: Analyzing the 'Triumph of Death' in the Camposanto of Pisa," supplement, *Signs and Society* 2 (2014), 88.

54 Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 44.

55 For a complete discussion of this iconography, see Diskant Muir, "St Agnes of Rome as Bride of Christ," 134-55.

throughout the medieval and early modern period. This female religiosity relies on embodied mystical experiences, which are accessed either through the wounding of the female mystic or through the contemplation of the wounds of Christ. Such violence ruptures the boundaries, not only of the body but also of the divide between human and divine. In this manner transgression also involves a transition, or transformation. Bataille's insights in *Eroticism*, and in particular his emphasis upon the violence inherent in mystical experiences, have been invaluable for this re-interpretation of *The Martyrdom of St Agnes*. The opening of the body is portrayed as a means of passage to a transcendent experience, through simultaneous reference to violence and erotic activity. Furthermore, this particular passageway to the transcendent retains its particularly female characterization into the modern day. In highlighting these issues through reference to *The Martyrdom of St Agnes*, an argument has also been made for a renewed interest in the work of Francesco del Cairo in English-language scholarship.

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Freedom Flowers Project
Manuel Salvisberg and Ai Weiwei
2014/15
Bomb and urn
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