The Medieval Woman’s Struggle for Agency

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Europe’s Middle Ages are infamous for many things: the primitive technology, the Black Death, and a cultish devotion to the Church are only a few of them. Many historical analyses of the Church’s importance in Medieval society focus on men: their roles as monks, heads of the Church itself, priors, bishops, etc. and their behaviors in such roles. Women were not permitted to take the same roles as men in the Church or elsewhere due to a strong patriarchal hold on society and religion, forcing women into roles of lesser importance as nuns or housewives. The social pressure of living as a woman in the Middle Ages was immense, and often intensely focused around the idea of marriage and childrearing. Understandably, not all women were so willing to simply fall into line with life in a convent or locked away in their husband’s home to bring forth his children and set them free into the world that was off-limits to her. The constant and intrusive policing of women’s bodies and minds created a toxic environment for women to try to assert agency over themselves. When women attempted to assert agency, historically, they were met with unfriendly responses or their pleas for justice fell upon extraordinarily deaf ears. Applying a modern psychological view to the behavior of medieval women may allow for some clarity into why they behaved as they did in the face of constant threats and oppression. When people are starved of autonomy and self-reliance, the desperate grabs for control are oftentimes turned inwards—a behavior commonly observed in modern sufferers of eating disorders, as well as women of the Middle Ages who attempted to assert agency over themselves and their bodies by depriving themselves of food.

Society’s opinion of women in the Middle Ages was low, often believing that women needed to be controlled and kept subordinate for their own good. Medical misunderstandings of
the female body did nothing to help women gain agency, only encouraging patriarchal control of women’s bodies at the time with the assumption that women’s bodies were “weaker” and that “maladies often abound[ed] in them, especially in the organs dedicated to Nature’s work.”¹ The mention of women in medical texts is primarily focused around their ability to reproduce, quite clearly indicating society’s intended role for women as mothers—a role which cannot be acquired without the help of a man. Male gaze permeated every inch of women’s lives at the time, sexualizing their bodies and lowering their status by doing so. When women dared to resist this male-created archetype of the wife and mother, they were scarcely listened to, and often ignored or coerced into falling back in line with the status quo.

Marital abuse was common in the Middle Ages, if not encouraged in some cases. The threat of impending abuse was frequently present in the lives of young noblewomen, growing up in an environment where their fathers had complete control of their mothers from the inside out through marital rape and impregnation. When allegations of abuse were brought against the husbands in these cases, the women were served little, if any, justice through the medieval judicial system. One unnamed woman “said that her husband loved several other women and therefore has a malevolent mind towards her, and she could not go on living with Henry [her husband] on account of his cruelty.”² Adultery may not be a form of physical or sexual abuse, although it is a form of emotional abuse and has been known to cause psychological harm in

more recent times than the Middle Ages. Regarding how the case was handled by the authorities at the time, both Henry and his unnamed wife “swore after touching the gospels that they would live together in future and give each other conjugal services . . . and that the husband will treat his wife with marital affection from [then] on.”

There is no punishment handed down to this man who has mistreated his wife, regardless of the nature of his mistreatment. This comparatively-mild case of abuse was given little attention, and in some cases marital abuse--rape, in particular--was even encouraged.

Marital rape was encouraged most often by family members of the wives in question, this is especially noticeable in the case of Christina of Markyate and Saint Wilgefortis before her. Both women were of noble birth--royal, for St. Wilgefortis--and were subsequently promised in marriage to men of equal or higher rank of their own. Understandably, neither was interested in the prospect of being assaulted by their future husband, and both had previously pledged themselves and their virginities to God. Christina’s attempts to avoid marriage failed, and the man she had attempted to avoid “was eaten up with resentment and . . . the only way in which he could conceivably gain his revenge was by depriving Christina of her virginity.”

After Christina was forcibly married, and had turned her husband away from carnal relations after their wedding, Christina’s parents “let her husband secretly into her bedroom in order that, if he found the

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3Ibid.

4Bemporad, Jules R. “Self-starvation through the ages: Reflections on the pre-history of anorexia nervosa.” International Journal of Eating Disorders 19, no. 3 (April 1996): 221. (For St. Wilgefortis, see Bemporad p. 221, for Christina of Markyate, see Karras p. 55)

maiden asleep, he might suddenly take her by surprise and overcome her.” Choosing chastity was Christina’s first attempt to assert agency over herself, and as she ran from her husband’s attempted assault, she “prayed . . . ‘let them be turned backward, that desire my hurt.’” Christina’s thoughts alone are another example of her breaking the patriarchal grip on her life, daring to think and pray against her domination by men. After her escape and entrance into religious life, Christina experiences self-deprivation and uncomfortable exposure to the elements, “what trials she had to bear of cold and heat, hunger and thirst, daily fasting!”

St. Wilgefortis rebelled against her own betrothal in a different way than Christina had, as she faced the betrothal head on with upfront resistance rather than trying to mitigate the risk of assault diplomatically. The seventh daughter of a Portuguese king between the years 700 and 900, St. Wilgefortis outright rejected her betrothal to the Saracen king of Sicily and “prayed to be stripped of her beauty and refused nourishment.” After a while of refusing food, St. Wilgefortis’s body “lost [its] feminine contours and also grew hair all over her body.” St. Wilgefortis’s loss of feminine bodily contours was a fervent statement against the patriarchal forces in her life, as was the excess of new hair all over her body. The growth of hair all over her body is extremely profound, considering how important the lack of body hair was to the medieval concept of feminine beauty. Medical documents sometimes served as cosmetic manuals as well, hair being mentioned quite frequently—both on the body and the head. Hair of

6 Ibid. 51.
7 Ibid. 53.
8 Ibid. 103.
10 Ibid. 221.
the head was desired to be dark and long, as can be inferred from the instructions “if a woman desires long black hair, she should take a green lizard, remove its head and tail, and cook it in regular cooking oil. Then rub the oil into her hair, it will make the hair long and black.” The hair of a woman’s body did not receive the same loving attention, however. Women were encouraged to rid themselves of body hair with “ointment used by noble women that removes hair, refines the skin, and removes blemishes.” Body policing was as common then as it is in today’s world, and the hatred for women’s body hair has not fallen away at all; if the aforementioned ointment were to fail in allowing a woman to pluck out her body hair, “she should pour hot water over herself,” possibly leading to injuries such as scalding. Part of St. Wilgefortis’s importance in the medieval woman’s fight for agency is her rejection of body policing, manifested in the growth of hair all over her body--and, quite famously, the beard she grew as a byproduct of her self-starvation, causing her body to produce hair all over in an attempt to keep itself warm in lieu of body fat. As a form of punishment for her refusal of marriage and subsequent actions to make her suitor lose interest, St. Wilgefortis was crucified by her father.

St. Wilgefortis’s resistance to the patriarchy through her relationship with food strongly resembles the tumultuous relationship that modern sufferers of Anorexia share with food. They

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12 Ibid. 111.
13 Ibid. 111.
feel “a need for control” in regard to their body, or, as in St. Wilgefortis’s and Christina of Markyate’s situations, “a fear of sexuality” may have been present.¹⁵

This all circles back to the difficulties women had whenever they tried to establish agency over themselves and their bodies, taking immediate control over the most basic, grotesque aspect of their lives: eating. In rejecting food, femininity was also rejected, as the contours of the body fell away, and hair grew over the body to keep it warm as in St. Wilgefortis’s story, the base functions of the female body were shorn away--St. Wilgefortis, it ought to be noted, is the patron saint “for those who wish[ed] to be relieved of problems associated with procreation . . . [and] by those who wish to free themselves from the control of others.”¹⁶ As beauty fell away, so did the ability to carry a child, one of the primary functions according to medical documents of the time, referring to the uterus and related body parts as “the organs dedicated to Nature’s work.”¹⁷ The shedding of sexualized femininity and its related responsibilities such as childbirth, menstruation, and the production of food for human young were also seen as incredibly pious acts, allowing women to leave behind the unchaste nature of their gender in favor of a closer relationship to God. This is most noticeable in the case of Angela of Foligno, who “prayed successfully for the death of her husband, mother, and children in order to strip herself of worldly ties.”¹⁸

The desexualization of holy women can be seen most prominently in the case of Mary Magdalene, viewing her prior to her religious life, as a sexualized being (Figure 2) and after, where she is not (Figure 3). With Mary Magdalene, the presence of her hair in both depictions are quite important, for in the first (Figure 1) she is presented as beautiful, full-figured, everything a medieval man could dream of, while in the second (Figure 2) she is emaciated and covered in hair, in a desexualized light. In the desexualized portrayal of the Magdalene she is presented almost as a living image of a transi, her skin is pulled tight over the muscles and bones beneath, her eyes are sunken and her jaw looks almost masculine in shape.

Desperation for control over things has been a constant theme in history, be it an empire desperate for the control of its subjugated people, those considered to be part of the state, or personal desperation for self-determination and autonomy. Women of the Middle Ages were starved for autonomy in any measure, and oppressed at nearly every turn in their lives; controlling one’s food intake is, and has always been the most basic, grotesque method of control available to people of any time period, gender, or other classification. Disordered eating patterns have been present in humans for a long while, garnering attention at first with Mary Magdalene and continuing through the Middle Ages to the present day, and they show no signs of disappearing any time soon for there will always be an innate human desire to control oneself.
Appendix

Figure 1: image of St. Wilgefortis in the Diocesan Museum, Graz, Austria.

Figure 2: Mary Magdalene in the Cave by Jules Joseph Lefebvre.
Figure 3: Penitent Magdalene, by Donatello, 1453-1455.
Bibliography


