

**Marking the Face, Curing the Soul?  
Reading the Disfigurement of Women in the Later Middle Ages\***

**Patricia Skinner**

The facial disfigurement of women, whether through deliberate mutilation, accidental injury or the ravages of disease, was and still is a subject that evokes strong reactions, both positive (sympathy for the victim, attempts at rehabilitation and/or reconstruction of the damaged features, psychological counselling) and negative (shock or repulsion at the appearance of the victim, the passing of judgement or calculation of fault that led to the disfigurement, her rejection from the community).<sup>1</sup> Whilst men, too, might suffer traumatic facial damage, the gendered assumption that a woman valued and was valued for her beauty (regardless of the number of onlookers permitted to see her face) was and still is a strong element in the *habitus* of many communities. Our evolution as human beings has led us to scrutinise the face before all other features, to determine community membership (is s/he one of us?), recognition (who is s/he?), likely reception (is s/he friendly?) and subjective value (is s/he pleasing to the eye?).<sup>2</sup> Any disruption of the facial features confuses such signals, and may even send out misleading ones to the viewer (for example, if features are missing, or paralysis or disease

---

\* I would like to thank Liz Herbert McAvoy for her invaluable advice during the preparation of this paper. This chapter forms part of a wider study of disfigurement in medieval Europe, funded by the Wellcome Trust (grant no 097469).

<sup>1</sup> Some recent examples are discussed in Patricia Skinner, 'The Gendered Nose and its Lack: "Medieval" Nose-cutting and its Modern Manifestations', *Journal of Women's History* 26, 1 (forthcoming, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Vicki Bruce and Andy Young, *Face Perception* (London and New York, 2012). On identification see also Valentin Groebner, *Who are You? Identification, Deception and Surveillance in Early Modern Europe*, trans. Mark Kyburz and John Peck (New York, 2007).

limits facial expressions). The equation of beauty with good, and ugliness with evil is a powerful idea.<sup>3</sup>

Yet such categories are not set in stone. Dyan Elliot has pointed up the dangers of female beauty in the specific context of the medieval relationship between confessing women and their clerical confessors, and highlighted the increasing attention of commentators to preventing such relationships becoming carnal. Raymond of Peñafort, for example, recommended sitting opposite the penitent but not looking at her face during her confession. Moreover, the phenomenon of the frequently-confessing woman, she argues, came to be viewed not as a beneficial practice but a ‘pathological’ one.<sup>4</sup> Such terminology marks out one of the ways in which gender, religion and medicine - at least medical metaphors - could intersect, and has direct resonances with the case studies featured in this chapter.

This specific example, and a survey of later medieval texts suggests that the period between 1150 and 1500 was one of increasing attention to the facial features of both men and women within and outside clerical circles, driven partly by increased exposure of western Europeans to peoples of different physical appearance, and partly by the rediscovery of the ancient pseudo-science of physiognomy, which claimed to read character traits from facial features. The link between the two trends is visible in high and late medieval depictions and perceptions of non-Christians, as Irvan Resnick has demonstrated.<sup>5</sup> The latter field received a

---

<sup>3</sup> Umberto Eco, *On Beauty: The History of a Western Idea* (London, 2004); Umberto Eco, *On Ugliness* (London, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Dyan Elliott, ‘Women and Confession: From Empowerment to Pathology’, in *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary C. Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Ithaca, NY and London, 2003), pp. 31-51 (p. 44) for Raymond and p. 47 for pathology.

<sup>5</sup> Irvan M. Resnick, *Marks of Distinction: Christian Perceptions of Jews in the High Middle Ages* (Washington, D. C., 2012), pp. 13-52, especially pp. 34ff .

particular boost from Frederick II of Hohenstaufen's patronage of Michael Scottus (d. 1232), author of the *Liber Phisionomie*.<sup>6</sup> Scottus' work was copied, translated and excerpted in text compilations right up until the eighteenth century, and was in print by the 1470s. The textual popularity of the work, which had originally formed only part of Scot's encyclopaedic cosmology, the *Liber Introductorius*, owed much to the fact that physiognomy was viewed essentially as a branch of medicine, and many of the versions of the *Phisionomie* circulated in compilations alongside medical texts, as facial complexion was thought to reflect the balance of humours within the body, and thus had medical implications.

A third, and for this chapter the most influential, element in the focus on the face as a site of contemplation was the rise of an affective piety which, whilst it identified with and celebrated Christ's wounds (often through intense physical mortification), nevertheless sought to escape from the boundaries of the flesh, inspired by the heroes of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages.<sup>7</sup> Women were particularly attracted by this form of spiritual life,<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> The following discussion of Scot is based on Martin Porter, *'Windows of the Soul': Physiognomy in European Culture, 1470-1780* (Oxford, 2005), p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. ascetics, and self-mortification such as that of Radegund of France. See also Patricia Cox Miller, 'Visceral Seeing: the Holy Body in Late Ancient Christianity', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 12 (2004), 391-411.

<sup>8</sup> See Ulrike Wiethaus, 'Sexuality, Gender and the Body in Late Medieval Women's Spirituality: Cases from Germany and the Netherlands', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7 (1991), 35-52; Elizabeth A. Robertson, 'The Corporeality of Sanctity in the Life of St Margaret', in *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell (Ithaca, NY, 1991), pp. 268-87; Elizabeth Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (Oxford, 1994); and see the essays collected in *Intersections of Sexuality and the Divine in Medieval Culture: The Word Made Flesh*, ed. Susannah M. Chewning (Aldershot, 2005).

and the association between bodily pain and the health of the soul has been explored as a key strand in later medieval religious thought.<sup>9</sup> Jesus's perfection, however, made Him a challenging figure to contemplate. Commentators agreed that He had been born with a perfect balance of humours, with 'exemplary complexion and physiognomy':<sup>10</sup> only those who matched this could truly take their place by His side. Christ's face, depicted in agony in the later writings of Julian of Norwich,<sup>11</sup> for example, was presented by St Clare of Assisi in a letter to Agnes of Prague as a 'spotless mirror', to be gazed upon every day in the quest for a closer spiritual connection.<sup>12</sup> To that end, bodily mortification could serve as a means of expressing humility before God, a small step on the path to salvation. For example, St

---

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Carla Casagrande, 'Il dolore virtuoso: per una storia medievale della pazienza' ['Virtuous grief: towards a medieval history of patience'], in *Piacere e Dolore: materiali per una storia delle passioni nel Medioevo*, ed. Carla Casagrande and Silvana Vecchio (Florence, 2009), pp. 31-47; Jeremy J. Citrome, 'Medicine as Metaphor in the Middle English Cleaness', *Chaucer Review* 35 (2001), 260-80.

<sup>10</sup> Resnick, *Marks of Distinction*, p. 32.

<sup>11</sup> Julian of Norwich, 'A Revelation of Love', 10.1-8, in *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Women and a Revelation of Love*, ed. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (Turnhout, 2005), pp. 157-9: 'And after this, I saw with bodely sight in the face of the crucifixe that hung before me, in the which I beheld continually a parte of his passion: dispite, spitting, solewing, and buffeting, and many languring paines, mo than I can tell, and often changing of colour. And one time I saw how halfe the face, beginning at the ere, overeyede with drye bloud till it beclosed into the mid face. And after that the other halfe beclosed on the same wise, and therewhiles it vanished in this party, even as it cam. / This saw I bodely, swemly, and darkely.' I thank Liz Herbert McAvoy for pointing me towards this text.

<sup>12</sup> Joan Mueller, *Clare of Assisi: The Letters to Agnes* (Collegeville, MN, 2003), fourth letter, p. 87.

Margaret of Hungary (d.1270), according to her biographer Garinus, mortified her body in numerous ways, including wearing old and vermin-ridden clothing. When the sisters in her Dominican convent protested and refused to sit next to her, she pointed it that it was only her body, not theirs, being tormented by bites (a debateable point!), and that she wished to be so lacerated out of the love of Christ.<sup>13</sup>

This chapter, however, explores a series of contradictions inherent in high- and late-medieval responses to women's facial disfigurement, as presented in three works of hagiography. Deriving almost entirely from texts recording the male gaze, it considers the troubled relationship between women's beauty and their spiritual health. Religious texts, in particular, present the abnegation and destruction of a beautiful face, through often drastic, physical injury, as one option available to women in search of salvation, although such mutilation in secular life had quite different meaning, as we shall see. Throughout, therefore, the chapter will move between the fleshly reality of the wounded or damaged face, and the possibilities that existed, within medical and surgical fields, for its care; and the concerns of the victims and observers for their spiritual health, and how this might be assisted, or not, by bearing their physical deformities or even self-inflicting them. Whilst a damaged face might represent the threat of social disability – the removal of beauty tantamount to destroying a woman's chances of marriage (a theme implicit in the responses of the saint's family members), the texts themselves do not explore the potential for permanent, physical impairment. The tense relationship between religion and medicine is revealed in hagiographic texts, whilst gender clearly played a part in the ways hagiographers constructed their stories of the mutilations themselves.

---

<sup>13</sup> *AA.SS. vol. III, 28 January*, De B. Margaritae Hungariae Virginis, p. 517: 'permittatis corpus meum amore Jesu Christi Domini Nostri ab istis vermibus lacerari'.

Central to the chapter will be a consideration of three holy women, Oda of Brabant (d.1158), St Margaret of Hungary (d. 1270) and St Margaret of Cortona (d.1297),<sup>14</sup> each of whose lives feature an episode of actual or near-mutilation of the face. They have featured in passing in studies of female sainthood, but have not been considered as a group nor set into their historical environment. They differ considerably in how the hagiographer presents facial mutilation, both in terms of why the saints should consider self-mutilating, and the responses they received to their desire to do so. Were such differences conditioned by geography, or by changes over a century and a half in attitudes towards facial disfigurement? What purpose was such mutilation held to serve? And how did it fit into the wider, secular world of corporal punishment and ideas of healing the body and soul?

To place these lives into their chronological context, the central and later Middle Ages has traditionally been represented as a period of European history that saw a sharp increase of threatened and actual violence towards the body. Johan Huizinga long ago characterised these centuries as ‘the special period of judicial cruelty’ and during which, according to Sean McGlynn, judicial punishment ‘exceeded Old Testament notions of an eye for an eye’,<sup>15</sup> and mutilation as a tool of justice reached its peak. This, too, attracts Valentin

---

<sup>14</sup> *AA.SS. vol. XI, 20 April*, Vita Ven. Oda Praemonstratensis; *AA.SS. vol. III, 28 January*, De B. Margaritae Hungariae Virginis; *AA.SS. vol. VI 22 February*, De B. Margarita Poenit. Tertii Ord. S. Francisci Cortonae in Etruria respectively.

<sup>15</sup> Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, trans. F. Hoffman (London, 1955), especially his much-cited Chapter 1, ‘The Violent Tenor of Life’. A useful critique of Huizinga’s influence is Malcolm Vale, ‘Aristocratic Violence: Trial by Battle in the Later Middle Ages’, in *Violence in Medieval Society*, ed. Richard W. Kaeuper (Woodbridge, 2000), pp. 159-81, which comments: ‘Huizinga clearly went too far and overstated his case’ (p. 161). Sean McGlynn, *By Sword and Fire: Cruelty and Atrocity in Medieval Warfare* (London, 2008), p. 10.

Groebner's attention: his essays argue for a period during which violence to the body (and face) reached a particular peak of terror and intensity and, when used in a judicial setting, was intended to render its victims 'formless [Ungestalt]' in society.<sup>16</sup> The greater emphasis on the death penalty in later medieval England, it is also suggested, led to the development in that region of more forms of mutilation offered to the offender as 'clemency'.<sup>17</sup> From being a merciful punishment for crimes meriting the death penalty, mutilation took on a life of its own as a marker not only of criminality but also of immorality, blurring the boundaries between crime and sin and inflicting a permanent record of a temporary aberration on the body of the perpetrator. In her recent consideration of such penalties, Irina Metzler aptly draws attention to the distinction between mutilation of the limbs, which left the victim with an 'orthopaedic impairment', and mutilation of the face (including blinding), which could lead to sensory deprivation.<sup>18</sup> Saintry self-mutilation, therefore, carried with it a risk -

---

<sup>16</sup> Valentin Groebner, *Defaced: the Visual Culture of Violence in the Later Middle Ages*, trans. Pamela Selwyn (New York, 2004). He is careful to point out, however, that the records of punishments that modern historians use to reconstruct medieval violence 'arose as political texts' and were intended, primarily, to express the effectiveness of state control: *Defaced*, p. 43.

<sup>17</sup> McGlynn, *By Sword and Fire*, p. 13. This shift is made explicit in the so-called laws of William the Conqueror, although the precise origin of the statement attributed to him, that 'no one should be killed or hanged for any crime (culpa), but let their eyes be taken out and their testicles cut off' ['Interdico etiam ne quis occidatur aut suspendatur pro aliqua culpa, sed eruantur oculi et testiculi abscidantur'], quoted in *Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, ed. F. Lieberman, 3 vols (Halle, 1903-16), vol. 1, p. 488, is a matter of controversy: see Patrick Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century*, I (Oxford, 1999), p. 404. The clause relating to testicles, of course, also demonstrates that the perpetrator was assumed to have been male.

<sup>18</sup> Irina Metzler, *A Social History of Disability in the Middle Ages: Cultural Considerations of Physical Impairment* (London and New York, 2013), p. 13.

intended as a means to humble the pride of a woman in her own facial beauty, it might lead to complications of bleeding, infection, permanent loss of senses or even death. (Loss of sensory perception, of course, might be a welcome side effect, if denying oneself the ability to taste and smell – a possibility if the nose was damaged or removed – represented a further denial of worldly pleasures.) Facial mutilation was commonly threatened in legal codes for sexual misdemeanours such as adultery or pimping, and women emerge here far more frequently than men as the intended targets. In Groebner's words, 'Defacement . . . meant inscribing a complex story of sin and sanction onto the body of someone defenceless'.<sup>19</sup> For a female penitent such as the three women under discussion here, therefore, it may have seemed a logical culmination of their endeavours to remove themselves from secular concerns.

This period also saw a resurgence in the transmission of medical knowledge and texts, and these often included recipes to heal facial blemishes or disguise them with cosmetics.<sup>20</sup> It was a short step from here to the non-therapeutic use of make-up. The enhancement of facial beauty in this way in its turn caused greater ambivalence – for whom was such

---

<sup>19</sup> Groebner, *Defaced*, p. 87.

<sup>20</sup> Carmen Caballero Navas, 'The Care of Women's Health and Beauty: an Experience Shared by Medieval Jewish and Christian Women', *Journal of Medieval History* 34 (2008), 146-63; Geneviève Dumas, 'Le soin des cheveux et des poils: quelques pratiques cosmétiques (XIII-XVI siècles)', in *La chevelure dans la littérature et l'art du moyen âge*, ed. Chantal Connochie-Bourgne (Aix-en-Provence, 2004), pp. 129-41; Laurence Moulinier-Brogi, 'Esthétique et soins du corps dans les traités médicaux latins à la fin du moyen âge', *Médiévales* 46 (2004), 55-71. It is significant that the treatise 'On women's cosmetics', circulating under the name of the female medical practitioner Trotula of Salerno, has been shown to be male-authored: see Monica Green, *The Trotula: A Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine* (Philadelphia, 2001).



enhancement intended and what purpose did it serve?<sup>21</sup> There was a difference between a flawless face and a decorated one, and Christian moralists since Tertullian had been quick to condemn the use of cosmetics.<sup>22</sup> By 1500, too, surgical intervention on damaged faces was beginning to be considered in texts: significantly, one of the earliest examples of such cosmetic surgery texts, the *Manual of Wound Care* of Heinrich von Pfolspendt, comes from Germany, where actual instances of facial mutilation, rather than just threats, were recorded.<sup>23</sup>

The faces of our three saints, then, were potentially sites of gendered discussion surrounding beauty, religious devotion, sickness and cure. But they were also mirrors of wider prevailing attitudes towards female agency, appearance and sexuality.

## NEW SECTION

### Beauty and the Beast

---

<sup>21</sup> Christine Martineau-Genieys, 'Modèles, maquillage et misogynie, à travers les textes littéraires français du moyen âge', in *Les soins de beauté, moyen âge-début des temps modernes*, ed. Denis Menjot (Nice, 2004), pp. 31-50; Susan Udry, 'Robert de Blois and Geoffroy de la Tour Landry on Feminine Beauty: Two Late-Medieval French Conduct Books', *Essays in Medieval Studies* 19 (2002), 70-89.

<sup>22</sup> Marie-Geneviève Grossel, 'Entre médecine et magie: les gestes de beauté (l'Ornatus Mulierum)', in *Le geste et les gestes au moyen âge: colloque* (Aix-en-Provence, 1998), pp. 255-72, traces the subsequent history of misogynist attitudes towards cosmetic enhancements.

<sup>23</sup> Heinrich von Pfolspendt, *Buch der Bündt-Ertznei (1460)*, ed. H. Haeser and A. Middeldorpf (Berlin, 1868), especially surgical rebuilding of the nose, pp. 29-31; Groebner, *Defaced*, pp. 68-70.

It is taken as read that the sight of a mutilated female face could engender horror and shock in the medieval viewer, and that this generated (and possibly exaggerated) the reports we now have of its occurrence. It was precisely this response that the Franciscan missionary William of Rubruck intended to elicit when he reported his encounter with the wife of the Mongol leader ‘Scacatai’ in 1253. William commented that:

De qua credebam in veritate, quod amputasset sibi nasum inter oculos ut simior esset: nihil enim habebat ibi de naso, et unxerat locum illum quodam unguento nigro, et etiam supercilia: quod erat turpissimum in oculis nostris.

[I was really under the impression that she had amputated the bridge of her nose so as to be more snub-nosed, for she had no trace of a nose here, and she had smeared that spot and her eyebrows as well with some black ointment, which to us looked thoroughly dreadful.]

Elsewhere he deduced from this that such flatness was a marker of beauty within Mongol culture, and that ‘Quæ minus habet de naso pulchrior reputatur. Deturpant etiam turpiter pinguedine facies suas’ [the less nose one has, the more beautiful she is considered, and they disfigure themselves horribly, moreover, by painting their faces].<sup>24</sup> William’s comments are of course designed to convey to the western European readers of his report – most notably

---

<sup>24</sup> *The principal navigations, voyages, traffiques, and discoveries of the English nation*, collected by Richard Hakluyt, ed. Edmund Goldsmid (Edinburgh, 1885-90), vol. 8, cc. 12 and 8 respectively, digitised at <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/h/hakluyt/voyages/rubruquis/> accessed 5 September 2013. English translations: *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck*, trans. Peter Jackson with notes by Peter Jackson and David Morgan, Hakluyt Society 2nd series 173 (London, 1990), c.X.2 (p. 100) and c.VI.5 (p. 89).

King Louis IX of France to whom he addressed it – the strangeness of his hosts. Part of the process of ‘othering’ the Mongols was to draw contrasts between their behaviours and those of westerners, and the appearance and practices of the women, although not strictly a matter with which a Franciscan friar should have been concerned, was just one noticeable difference among many.<sup>25</sup> There is, however, another dimension to William’s sketch of the Mongol women: although he highlights the flatness of their noses as ‘hideous’ and attributes at least one case to deliberate surgery,<sup>26</sup> he does not draw any comparisons about the meaning of this facial feature in his own world. Yet the bridgeless or flattened nose was commonly thought in the later medieval West to be a sign of leprosy, which itself was associated with dubious morality,<sup>27</sup> whilst a deliberately cut or maimed nose came increasingly to signify a

---

<sup>25</sup> Contrast William of Malmesbury’s depiction of the Turks during the First Crusade, where gender seems to be paramount in both his framing of the enemy and criticism of females among the crusaders: Kirsten A. Fenton, ‘Gendering the First Crusade in William of Malmesbury’s *Gesta Regum Anglorum*’, in *Intersections of Gender, Religion and Ethnicity in the Middle Ages*, ed. Cordelia Beattie and Kirsten Fenton (London, 2011), pp. 125-39.

<sup>26</sup> On the relationship of the Church with surgery, and the increasing anxiety expressed from the twelfth century onward, see Marie-Christine Pouchelle, *The Body and Surgery in the Middle Ages*, trans. R. Morris (Oxford, 1990), pp. 20-1.

<sup>27</sup> Carole Rawcliffe sounds a note of caution, however, against assuming that lepers were so regarded across Europe: see *Leprosy in Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2006), pp. 131-3. See Antje M. Schelberg, ‘The Beauty and the Beast? Medieval Ideas on Physical Appearance and their Psychological Meaning with Regard to Leprosy Sufferers’, in *The Myths of Medieval Leprosy: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Antje M. Schelberg (Göttingen, 2006), pp. 35-50.

punishment for sexual misdemeanour on the woman's part.<sup>28</sup> He left it to his readers to make such connections.

The *Vita* of St Margaret of Hungary (d.1270), however, provides a striking counterpart to William's text. For against the same background of Mongol aggression this Hungarian princess, given to the Dominican order in childhood, stated that, should the 'Tartars' invade Hungary, she would cut off her lips to ensure they found her so repulsive as to leave her unviolated.<sup>29</sup> Yet her hagiographer relates that when repelling (western) suitors for her hand in marriage, she declared that she would rather cut off her nose and lips, *and* gouge out her eyes, than marry any of the three royal suitors proposed.<sup>30</sup> Herein lies the paradox of facial damage for women. The account of Margaret's threat of self-mutilation to preserve her virginity against both pagan aggressors and Christian suitors belonged to a long tradition of 'the heroics of virginity': St Brigit of Ireland was said to have gouged out her own eye to avoid marriage, whilst one of the most celebrated cases of collective self-mutilation was that of Abbess Ebba and the nuns at Coldingham in England, faced with the

---

<sup>28</sup> Skinner, 'The Gendered Nose and its Lack'. It is worth noting, however, that as early as the eighth century Byzantine law had associated nose-slitting with a string of irregular sexual relations with nuns, virgins, god-daughters, close female relatives and prepubescent girls. In these cases it was the male perpetrator who was targeted, with the woman only punished if she had consented. In cases of adultery, both the male perpetrator and the adulterous wife had their noses slit: *A Manual of Roman Law: The Ecloga of Leo III and Constantine V of Isauria at Constantinople, AD 726*, ed. E. H. Freshfield (Cambridge, 1926), Chapter XVII, clauses 23-7, 30-4.

<sup>29</sup> *AA.SS. vol. III, 28 January*, De B. Margaritae Hungariae Virginis, p. 518: 'Ait Margarita, "Ego scio, quid faciam: labia mea detruncabo, et cum inde viderint me deturpatam, dimittent intactam".'

<sup>30</sup> *AA.SS. vol. III, 28 January*, De B. Margaritae Hungariae Virginis, p. 518: 'respondit, quod prius praecideret sibi nasum ac labia, et oculos erueret, quam cujuscumque matrimonio consentiret'.

prospect of Viking invaders.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless the action that Margaret was proposing – which in the context of the approaching pagan Mongols had strong parallels with Ebba’s – would not only leave her open to wound-related infection or even death, but also render her face similar to mutilated criminals, adulterers, pimps and fornicators. A generation earlier than William’s expedition and Margaret’s *vita*, legal texts were being promulgated in southern Europe which threatened the slitting of women’s noses (and thus flattening them in grotesque form) for instances of sexual misdemeanours. For example, the laws of Frederick II for Sicily (based on earlier provisions of King Roger II) imposed nose-slitting on adulteresses and mothers who pimped their daughters.<sup>32</sup> The chronology matters: such a measure had been unknown in western Europe before the eleventh century (although, as we have seen, it was mentioned in earlier Byzantine law). Thus earlier examples of threatened or actual self-mutilation differed starkly from Margaret’s message to her parents: if they forced her to break her

---

<sup>31</sup> Lisa Bitel, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland* (Ithaca, NY, 1996), p. 35 for Brigit; Shari Horner, *The Discourse of Enclosure: Representing Women in Old English Literature* (New York, 2001), p. 120 for Ebba. Jane Tibbetts Schulenberg discusses the early medieval precursors to Margaret: ‘The Heroics of Virginité: Brides of Christ and Sacrificial Mutilation’, in *Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance: Literary and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Mary Beth Rose (Syracuse, NY, 1986), pp. 29-72.

<sup>32</sup> *Die Konstitutionen Friedrichs II für das Königsreich Sizilien*, ed. Wolfgang Stürner, *MGH*, *Constitutiones et Acta Publica Imperatorum et Regum II*, Supplement (Hanover, 1996), Book III.74 (p. 439: husband has right to remove adulterous wife’s nose); 79 (p. 442: pimps suffer same penalty as adulterers); 80 (p. 442: mothers who pimp their daughters to have noses cut off). These laws were, however, attributed to King Roger II (r.1130-54), and were repeated in the constitutions under Frederick’s name: *ibid*, III.84-5 (pp. 446-7), but mitigated for those in poverty.

monastic vow, they gave her no choice but to carry out an action that would reduce her – irretrievably – to the status of marked whore.

## NEW SECTION

### Judgements

The fear of sexual violation, then, drove Margaret's intention to maim herself, mirroring contemporary legal punishments for sexual and other transgressions. Like most of the cases considered in this chapter, however, it was merely the *threat* of self-mutilation, rather than its actual practice, that was an effective deterrent. This is a point somewhat overlooked by those convinced that the high and late Middle Ages were a theatre of cruelty. Moreover, we need to ask how Margaret's religious commitment, and its subsequent reporting in hagiography, may or may not reflect the secular world. The records we have of actual judicial processes often stop at a court's verdict - the sentence of mutilation, rather than its actual execution - and women form a very small minority of those so sentenced. In fact, cases of women actually being judicially mutilated are quite rare, and not all examples were for cases of immorality. Helen Carrel has argued that 'The threat of harsh punishment, which was then ultimately remitted, was a set piece of medieval legal practice,' and suggests that although mutilation was prescribed for many offences, it was rarely put into practice after the late thirteenth century.<sup>33</sup> Margaret's threat, therefore, might be understood as just that - its extremity

---

<sup>33</sup> Helen Carrel, 'The Ideology of Punishment in Late Medieval English Towns', *Social History* 34 (2009), 301-20 (pp. 307-8). The process of mitigation, if not total mercy, is illustrated in the Shropshire eyre court record of 1203. A certain Alice, who with others was implicated in the murder of an unnamed woman in Lilleshall, had fled to Staffordshire, where she was apprehended with some of the chattels of the slain woman. Taken back to Shropshire for questioning, she first denied being

designed to convey her deep-seated religious commitment through the idea of radical, physical self-harm, invoking an image in the reader's mind but not carried out in practice.

Elsewhere in the secular world, the late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century German and Swiss urban records studied by Groebner reveal definitive evidence of actual facial mutilation taking place, but the targeting of the face of suspected or actual adulterers outlasted formal, juridical 'mirror punishments' by the authorities by the fifteenth century, and seems to have been an extreme, and unsanctioned, act of anger carried out on the face of a spouse suspected of adultery, or her/his lover, or even on the innocent partner of the lover. Such 'private' attacks, Groebner suggests, were still driven by the association of adultery with facial punishment, but these incidents make it into the records so that the *attackers* might be censured (somewhat lightly, given the injuries they inflicted).<sup>34</sup>

This unofficial understanding of violent, facial punishment against women for their perceived lapses may already have been an accepted social norm in other regions by the thirteenth century. Again, evidence comes from the records of proceedings against the perpetrator of the violence. A hearing before the *podestà*'s court in Venice in May 1291 centred on the assault of Bertholota Paduano of Torcello by a priest from the island of Burano. Bertholota testified that when she defended her friend Maria against the priest's slanderous words:

---

involved, then claimed before the county court that she had been forced by the malefactors to conceal them, for which she had been given the goods. At the eyre court, however, she withdrew this story. 'Therefore', continues the record, 'she has deserved death, but by way of dispensation let her eyes be torn out [*eruantur ei oculi*]: see *Select Pleas of the Crown, volume I: AD 1200-1225*, ed. F. W. Maitland (London, 1888), no. 77, p. 34.

<sup>34</sup> Valentin Groebner, 'Losing Face, Saving Face: Noses and Honour in the Later Medieval Town', *History Workshop Journal* 40 (1995), 1-15; Groebner, *Defaced*, p. 76.

et percussit dictam Bertholotam sub oculo sinistro cum digito, et postea cum pugno bis per caput, scilicet semel per vultum iuxta nasum, talieter quod sanguis exivit ei per buccam et per nasum et alia vice iuxta aurem, et postea iniuravit ei dicens, “Turpis vilis meretrix, nunc aliquantulum feci vindictam [*sic*] de te, vade acceptum bastardos quos fecisti de Valentio, quia sum dolens et tristis quod non proieci ipsam in aquam”. [the above parish priest raised his hand and hit the above Bertholota with his hand below her left eye, and then twice with his fist on her head: that is, on her face by her nose, so that blood began to flow from her mouth and nose, and another way by her ear, and afterwards he injured her, saying: ‘You shameful and vile whore, *now I have given you a little punishment* [my emphasis], go, and take the bastards you had by Valentio with you, for I am grieving and sad that I did not throw her [Maria] in the water.’]

Further witnesses added that they heard the priest say,

‘Illa turpis meretrix; modo feci quod cupivi et, nisi fuisset pro presbitero qui eam defensavit, male apparassem eam.’

[‘She is a filthy whore; now I have done what I wanted to do, and had it not been for the priest who defended her, it would have gone badly for her.’]<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> *Podestà di Torcello, Domenico Viglari (1290–1291)*, ed. Paolo Zolli (Venice, 1966), pp. 14–16.

The full transcript of the hearing is translated into English in *Medieval Writings on Secular Women*, ed. Patricia Skinner and Elisabeth van Houts (London, 2011), pp. 156-8.



We do not know how this case ended – presumably the clerical perpetrator of the assault would have objected to being hauled up before the secular *podestà*'s court and the case may well have been referred to his clerical superiors, which would explain the lack of sentencing as it survives in the *podestà*'s records. What the hearing did to Bertholota's reputation is also unknown, but the record is revealing in how it presents the case, and what it chooses to include. Arguably, the victim's physical appearance after the attack (temporarily bloodied face and black eyes, and more permanently a probable broken nose) would have raised questions about her status as a respectable woman, but it is striking that she is named in the record whilst her assailant is not, and that her reputation as a whore was rehearsed in court (twice) and then written down.<sup>36</sup> The case itself may therefore have been more punitive on *her* than on him, and this may have been the latter's intention.<sup>37</sup> He was, after all, a priest, and may well have considered himself within his rights to challenge Bertholota's (and Maria's, for that matter) way of conducting their lives, particularly if Bertholota's children had been born out of wedlock as the record suggests. But it is clear that there was a distinction to be drawn between legally-sanctioned punishment, controlled by the Venetian state, and the violence occasioned by this individual's sense of outrage against the women.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> On the power of rumour and slander, see the essays in *Fama: The Politics of Talk and Reputation in Medieval Europe*, ed. Thelma Fenster and Daniel Lord Smail (Ithaca, 2003) and Jesús Ángel Solórzana Telechea, 'Fama Publica, Infamy and Defamation: Judicial Violence and Social Control of Crimes against Sexual Morals in Medieval Castile', *Journal of Medieval History* 33 (2007), 398-413.

<sup>37</sup> Medieval court cases often revolved around much wider issues of community adhesion than the specific matter at hand, as illustrated by Chris Wickham, 'Gossip and Resistance among the Medieval Peasantry', *Past & Present* 160 (1998), 3-20.

<sup>38</sup> In fact Venetian law does not appear to have prescribed corporal punishment for sexual offences: an adulterous wife simply lost her dowry: Linda Guzzetti, 'Separations and Separated Couples in

Religion is present here of course – the assailant was a priest – but his actions were hardly designed to bring Bertholota to repentance.

The theme of the punished fornicator brings us to our second holy woman, in the form of St Margaret of Cortona. Her lengthy *vita*, consisting almost entirely of Margaret's dialogues with Christ (and thus effectively positioning her in a face-to-face relationship with Him), centres on Margaret's remorse at her previous life of sexual freedom that had resulted in her bearing an illegitimate child. Margaret was apparently strikingly beautiful, and the motif of denying this beauty recurs throughout the life, as she struggles ever closer to her true love, Christ himself. Early in the life Christ says:

‘Recordare, quod tui aspectus decorem, quem hactenus in mei magnam injuriam conservare conata es, imo et augere, adeo abhorrere et odire coepisti, ut nunc abstinentia, nunc lapidis allisione, nunc pulveris ollarum appositione, nunc diminutione frequenti sanguinis, delere desiderasti’.

[‘Remember how you previously endeavoured to maintain and even increase your beautiful appearance, much to my injury, and now you have begun to abhor and hate it, so that now you desire to rub it out with fasting, by dashing your skin with stones, by covering it with dust, and by frequent bleeding’].<sup>39</sup>

---

Fourteenth-century Venice’, in *Marriage in Italy, 1300-1650*, ed. Trevor Dean and K. J. P. Lowe (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 249-74 (p. 254). Having children out of wedlock seems only to have become a live issue if it threatened the stability of the Venetian nobility, leading to the bastard-exclusion law of 1376: Stanley Chojnacki, ‘Nobility, Women and the State: Marriage Regulation in Venice, 1420-1530’, in *ibid.*, pp. 128-51 (p. 136).

<sup>39</sup> *AA.SS. vol. VI 22 February*, De B. Margarita Poenit. Tertii Ord. S. Francisci Cortonae in Etruria, *Vita*, c.I.6, p. 305.

But such trials are not yet enough - when Margaret asks Christ to call her ‘daughter’, he replies rather tersely, ‘Non adhuc vocaberis filia, quia filia peccati es; cum vero a tuis vitiis integraliter per generalem confessionem iterum purgata fueris, te inter filias numerabo’ [‘You won’t be called daughter yet, for you are the daughter of sin. Only when you are completely purged of your vices by constant confession, then I will count you among my daughters’].<sup>40</sup> This handily reminds us that Margaret had to overcome not only her past life, but her very status as woman, as a daughter of Eve, whose original sin marked her with a sexuality that fasting, scarification and the denial of bodily comforts could only control, not destroy. Margaret’s request to become a recluse is also refused, by God, who has other plans for her.<sup>41</sup> The *vita* was written by Margaret’s confessor, and he has a major role to play as she becomes increasingly frustrated by her failure to achieve her goal.<sup>42</sup> Seeing that her abstinence is not destroying the beauty of her face fast enough, she secretly hides a razor and asks her confessor’s permission to use it to cut off her nose and top lip, for ‘Et merito, inquit, hoc vigilanter desidero, quia vultus mea decor multorum animas vulneravit’ [‘I deserve it and strongly wish it, since the beauty of my face has injured the souls of many’].<sup>43</sup> But he refuses

---

<sup>40</sup> *AA.SS. vol. VI 22 February*, De B. Margarita Poenit. Tertii Ord. S. Francisci Cortonae in Etruria, *Vita*, c.II.22, p. 308.

<sup>41</sup> *AA.SS. vol. VI 22 February*, De B. Margarita Poenit. Tertii Ord. S. Francisci Cortonae in Etruria, *Vita*, c.II.27, p. 309: ‘Cur postulas, ut te in cella recludam? . . . Vade, et non te recludas, quo usque te abscondere volam’. This frees the way for Margaret to become a Tertiary.

<sup>42</sup> Beverly Kienzle, ‘Margherita of Cortona: Women, Preaching and the Writing of Hagiography’, *Medieval Sermon Studies* 54 (2010), 38-50: she explores this relationship between life and text.

<sup>43</sup> *AA.SS. vol. VI 22 February*, De B. Margarita Poenit. Tertii Ord. S. Francisci Cortonae in Etruria, *Vita*, c.II.40, p. 311.

permission, and threatens not to hear her confession again if she carries out her intent.

Margaret's later request to Christ, to inflict her with leprosy, meets a similar refusal. If she wanted to reach Christ, the message appears to be that she had to do it the hard way, not by quick solutions such as enclosure, self-harm or disease.

## NEW SECTION

### Inverting Sickness and Health

There is a strong thread of medical allusion running through the *vita* of Margaret of Cortona, centred on Margaret's desire to rid herself of her facial beauty. Many of her actions seem to be rather ill-conceived – regular bleeding, after all, was meant to be a therapeutic act,<sup>44</sup> rather than a deleterious one, and raises the question of whether we should read her slow journey towards Christ as effecting some kind of 'cure' for an affliction incurred by her previously sinful life. She is not permitted to mutilate herself, her confessor explains, because she would lose too much blood, or the wound would change into another type of evil.<sup>45</sup> Although it is not stated explicitly, the inference is that the only wound capable of resisting such 'infection' is Christ's own wound. Her desire to draw her own blood, therefore, might

---

<sup>44</sup> Pedro Gil-Sotres, 'Derivation and Revulsion: the Theory and Practice of Medieval Phlebotomy', in *Practical Medicine from Salerno to the Black Death*, ed. Luis García-Ballester, Roger French, Jon Arrizabalaga and Andrew Cunningham (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 110-55.

<sup>45</sup> *AA.SS. vol. VI 22 February*, De B. Margarita Poenit. Tertii Ord. S. Francisci Cortonae in Etruria, *Vita*, c.II.40, p. 311: 'ex nimia sanguinis emanatione de vulnere posses deficere, vel vulnus in alterius speciem mali poterit transmutari'. The use of the verb *deficere* here offers two readings – either she will physically fail, i.e. run out of blood, or she will have failed in her mission through taking the quick option.

be worse than the ‘ill’ – her beauty – she is trying to cure. Similarly, in seeking to be afflicted with leprosy, she is taking too easy a path. The disease might well disfigure her and prevent her beauty from causing further offence to Christ (‘ne de cetero te offendam’), but in fact the disease is presented almost as a comfort: Christ comments that ‘quod ei [Christ] sufficerent poenae suae, quia cum lepra segura esset, sed cum tentationibus et infirmitate corporea ipsam conservabat in timore et gratia’ [‘with leprosy she would feel untroubled, but with temptations and corporeal weakness he was keeping her in fear and grace’].<sup>46</sup> By the thirteenth century, after all, lepers were increasingly being viewed as a means for the healthy to gain spiritual rewards through gifts to hospitals and the prayers of the afflicted, and thus being valorised rather than rejected for their condition. The message in the *vita* was that Margaret was not worthy even to join this special group. The message of patient submission having got through to her, she likens taking communion to a sick person coming to the doctor and getting medicine, and says she is still unworthy of this care.<sup>47</sup> By this time, she herself has become the reluctant object of veneration by the sick seeking cures through touching her.<sup>48</sup>

Margaret’s *vita*, then, offers an interesting series of inversions regarding religion and medicine: she uses bleeding - a therapeutic act - to harm herself physically, seeks

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., c.V.118, p. 328.

<sup>47</sup> This is a motif found in other hagiographic texts, as is illustrated by Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa, ‘Mysticism and Medicine: Holy Communion in the Vita of Marie d’Oignies and *The Book of Margery Kempe*’, *Poetica* 72, Special Issue, Convergence/ Divergence: The Politics and Late Medieval English Devotional and Medical Discourses, ed. Denis Renevey and Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa (Tokyo: Yushodo Press, 2009), 109-22.

<sup>48</sup> *AA.SS. vol. VI 22 February*, De B. Margarita Poenit. Tertii Ord. S. Francisci Cortonae in Etruria, *Vita*, c.V.131, p. 330 (communion) and c.IV.55, p. 314 (resisting the sick).

sickness to cure her bodily temptation, and wishes fervently to cut her face in order to destroy what she clearly sees as the root of her troubles, the beauty which she had previously deployed in her sinful life. The horror with which her confessor greets her proposal suggests that he sees her act as one of vanity (the ‘*alterius speciem mali*’?), regardless of its intentions. Although in some respects the polar opposite to William of Rubruck’s report of the Mongol women, whose nose-cutting is interpreted as a means to *acquire* beauty, the *vita* still seems to share that author’s mistrust of women’s agency. Self-mutilation of the face seems to have been gendered a specifically feminine practice. Despite medical metaphors of cutting away evil flesh circulating in the Church since its inception, the actual putting into practice of this on real bodies was always viewed with ambivalence.

This problem dogs the last, but earliest, tale of saintly self-mutilation under consideration here. Blessed Oda of Brabant (d.1158) actually went ahead and cut off her own nose when threatened with marriage by her parents. Her *vita*, written by Philip of Harvengt, recounts:

domumque veniens, in matris thalamam secessit. Firmatoque ostio super se, Deum in adjutorium suum orat intendere; et arrepto gladio, quem ad caput lectuli videt dependere, nasum suum festinat praecidere. Sed manus tremula nec docto in gladio percutere, dum nervorum superiorem duritiem ictu feminino non praevallet excutere; indignata sibi ait, “O ensis quam retusae es aciei, qui mordaci acumine nequis destruere meae decorem faciei!” Haec dicens, erexit se contra se, ferrumque pressit durius, et obliquo vulnere nares sibi detruncavit, pretiosumque rosei sanguineis rivulum in pelvim distillavit; sicque vultus sui genuinum splendorem admodum deturpavit.

[Coming home, she shut herself in her mother's bedroom. Having closed the door she began to pray to God for help; she seized the sword, which she saw hanging at the head of the bed, and hurried to cut off her nose. But her hand was shaking and she had not been trained to strike with a sword, and her feminine blow was not enough to cut through the greater hardness of the nerves. Indignantly she said, 'Oh sword that is considered sharp, how is it that your biting sharpness does not wish to destroy the beauty of my face?!' Saying this, she lifted it up to herself again, and pressing the blade harder, cut off her nose with a sideways stroke and caught the precious river of rosy blood in a basin; and thus she fully destroyed the beauty of her cheeks and face.]<sup>49</sup>

The *vita* continues:

Ut non esset idonea huic nequam seculo conformari, elegit naso vivere pravo; et seductibilis formae speciem deformari, quam adulterino fuco falsa pulchritudine depingi, et lascivos oculos in se procaciter impingi; 'cute sordida et humili cultu'; 'ornatu superfluo in modum vulpium caudis pulverem tergere, corpusque meretriciis fovere unguentis, quibus solet adulterorum nausea provocari.'

[So that she might not be shaped by the worthless ideals of secular life, she chose to live without a nose; and to deform the type of seductive cheeks that are painted with false beauty in adulterine red, and to dash the impudence of lascivious eyes.

She preferred to live in the house of Christ 'with a dirty face, cultivating humility', rather than 'polish herself up with overdone embellishments like a fox's tail, and

---

<sup>49</sup> *AA.SS. vol. XI, 20 April, Vita Ven. Oda Praemonstratensis, c.III.14, p. 774.*

pamper her body with whorish lotions, with which it is usual to provoke the vice of adultery.]<sup>50</sup>

For all the hagiographer's rhetoric, however, Oda was never formally canonised. Why? I should like to suggest that the face-cutting episode was in fact damaging to her reputation. Firstly, it is essentially an act of disobedience, carried out in secret in a bedroom, done without warning to her parents or confessor (unlike the two Margarets) and apparently premeditated (she catches the blood in a bowl - but is the hagiographer trying too hard here to insert a Eucharistic motif as well?) Moreover, unlike Margaret of Cortona, whose concealment of a razor suggested planning and a certain surgical precision, Oda's clumsy use of a sword renders the scene of her mutilation almost farcical in tone, although the detail that she cut her face sideways does perhaps suggest that the sword was inverted and that she was kneeling or leaning against it. Secondly, whilst Oda had been aided by prayer to God, her self-inflicted disfigurement was simply the means to an end - the preservation of her virginity. Even their horror at seeing their daughter did not immediately persuade her parents, however. As other, contemporary and later, lives of female saints demonstrate, going to such drastic lengths was extremely unusual. Christina of Markyate (d.1155-66), for example, had eventually prevailed and seen her (unconsummated) marriage dissolved without such a demonstration, and by the thirteenth century merely the threat of self-mutilation was sufficient to indicate the firmness of purpose of both Margarets.<sup>51</sup> Oda's capitulation to the urge towards physical self-harm, essentially marked her as less strong in purpose: Larissa Tracy, citing the work of Ruth Mazo Karras has remarked that for male religious, autocastration was 'an easy way out because spiritual salvation came from overcoming

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. Note here the attack on cosmetics.

<sup>51</sup> *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, ed. Samuel Fanous and Henrietta Leyser (Oxford, 2008).



sexual temptation through sheer force of will'.<sup>52</sup> In the same way, actual destruction of facial beauty, for women, deprived them of the opportunity to show that they could be more than simple temptresses, that they had overcome the internalised rhetoric of blame equating them with Eve and were capable of strength in the face of carnal challenges.

It is helpful at this point to consider other contemporary hagiography that dealt with the thorny question of mutilation in a judicial context. In theory, the Church was broadly in favour of judicial mutilation as an alternative to seeing someone put to death, since it offered the possibility of repentance, but the punishment of the body in this way did not on its own have any effect on the health of the criminal's soul,<sup>53</sup> even if it 'mirrored' the offence in the location of the mutilation (for example, cutting of the tongue was both prescribed punishments in late medieval secular lawcodes in France for blasphemy).<sup>54</sup> This disjuncture

---

<sup>52</sup> Larissa Tracy, 'Introduction', in *Castration and Culture in the Middle Ages*, ed. Larissa Tracy (Cambridge, 2013), p. 11; Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others* (New York and London, 2005), p. 39.

<sup>53</sup> G. R. Evans, *Law and Theology in the Middle Ages* (London and New York, 2002), pp. 8-19, outlines how medieval writers addressed the difference between sin (dangerous to the soul) and crime (leading to punishment of the body).

<sup>54</sup> Nathalie Gonthier, *Le châtement du crime au Moyen Âge (XIIIe-XVIe siècles)* (Rennes, 1998), pp. 141-2. Escalating punishment of blasphemers in Provençal code of 1472: from splitting of the upper lip for a second offence, to splitting the lower lip for the third and finally the cutting-out of the tongue: McGlynn, *By Sword and Fire*, p. 23. Only blinding seems to have been understood as 'a deprivation of moral sight' by enacting it upon the bodies of criminals as the deprivation of sensory sight': Edward Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2010), p. 22. Wheatley, *ibid.*, pp. 36-7, highlights Alice's case, discussed above in note 25, but suggests that as the thirteenth century progressed the blinding of criminals, which had always been exceptional, became less frequent.

was as relevant to cases of self-mutilation as judicial punishments - bodily mortifications have even been described as ‘penitential pantomimes’ by Mitchell Merback, who emphasises the spectacle: ‘For medieval people, the experience of *seeing and imagining* a body that was ravaged and bleeding from tortures inflicted upon it lay at the centre of a constellation of religious doctrines, beliefs and devotional practices.’<sup>55</sup> But a wrongly-mutilated body could be problematical.<sup>56</sup> The anxieties surrounding corporal punishment are most clearly expressed in miracle stories, as saints strove to put right the physical defects of unjustly inflicted punishments. Thus a layman falsely accused of arson in c. 1177 was deprived of his eyes and testicles by his successful accuser – but as reported in the miracles of St William of York, this injustice was corrected by the saint, who caused both pairs to grow back.<sup>57</sup> In hagiographic tales such as this, mutilation was presented as the negative outcome of a miscarriage of secular justice. Moreover, the clergy were to be protected at all costs from the

---

<sup>55</sup> Mitchell T. Merback, *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel: Pain and the Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (London, 1999), pp. 19-20.

<sup>56</sup> It might be satirised, as in Adam of Bremen’s eleventh-century portrayal of the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, Adalbert, throwing people into prison and ‘joking that bodily affliction was good for the soul (asserens cum risu afflictionem corporis animae utilem)’: Adam von Bremen, *Hamburgische Kirchengeschichte*, ed. Bernard Schmeidler, *MGH SRG in usum scholarum II* (Hanover, 1917), Book III, 56 (57), p. 202. Or, as in later texts directed at holy women, excessive self-harm might be actively discouraged: see below, note 61.

<sup>57</sup> *English Lawsuits from William I to Richard I*, vol. 2, ed. Raoul C. Van Caenegem, Selden Society Publications 107 (London, 1991), case 504. Hudson, John, ‘Violence, Theft and the Making of the English Common Law’, in *Crime and Punishment in the Middle Ages*, ed. T. H. Haskett (Victoria, BC, 1998), pp. 19-35 (p. 31), highlights the element of vengeance visible in this case, in that the accuser, rather than the court, carried out the ‘punishment’.

risk of this type of punishment: an English case of a cleric who had committed manslaughter c.1163, for example, was dealt with by the episcopal court, and his punishment would be achieved ‘through a decree of the archbishop [Thomas Becket], that was sanctioned by old and authentic canons, by a spiritual and not a corporal punishment (absque omni mutilatione vel deformatione membrorum)’.<sup>58</sup> The deceased Becket himself also assisted a certain Eilward of Westoning, restoring the man’s eyesight and testicles after he had been unjustly blinded and castrated.<sup>59</sup>

Indeed, exploring clerical accounts of extreme violence done to the face in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Europe reveals that a substantial number of the reports are designed, just as in the hagiography, to evoke pity for the victim and condemn the tyranny of the perpetrators/s. Mutilation of the face was an extreme, an atrocity. I suggest therefore that it caused the writer of Oda’s *vita* some difficulty in positioning it as a positive act. Rather, Oda’s dramatic shedding of her own blood may have been spiritually meaningless and was also potentially life-threatening, if the effusion of blood described is anything to go by. Her hagiographer seems to have been aware of this for, after persuading her parents that she should now become a nun, Oda experienced another physical trial, this time through God’s intervention, rather than her own:

Illa namque viridis ac robusta membrorum compactio, indigesta ciborum cruditate, soluta est; et corruptis humoribus, nitidae cutis superficies maculosis tumoribus infecta est. Attendentes igitur, Sorores virginiae speciem faciei in pallorem gelidum tam celeriter immutatam; et cutem, quae fuerat vitro clarior, quibusdam in locis inflatione vitiosa jam rugatam; suspicatae sunt eam leprae contagio praegravari.

---

<sup>58</sup> *English Lawsuits*, vol. 2, case 416.

<sup>59</sup> The *Miracula* of Benedict of Peterborough, reproduced in *English Lawsuits*, vol. 2, case 471B.

[She, unable to digest the rough food, was weakened by the joining-together of her youthful and strong limbs; and with the corrupt humours, the shining surface of her skin was infected with mottled tumours. The sisters, seeing the virgin's face so quickly transformed into a frosty pallor, and her skin, which had been clearer than glass, corrupted in reddened and swollen places, suspected that she was infected with leprosy.]<sup>60</sup>

She was rapidly confined and isolated, suffering the social death of the leper within the community, but in fact this was a test of her humility and patience – she was not leprous at all, recovered and was made prioress. Again a sickness is seen as a redemptive strategy in the hagiography: only when Oda submitted patiently to an illness sent by God was she able fully to embrace her religious life. (And as we have already seen, ‘leprosy’ only worked as a redeeming condition if the person suffering it did not expect or request it.) This message of submission – and of moderation – is of course conveyed strongly by the guide for anchoresses, the *Ancrene Wisse*, composed in England in the early thirteenth century. Whilst its author was openly contemptuous of those who sought to preserve their bodily health whilst neglecting their spiritual strength, the guide also sought to control the urge to mortify the flesh, stating that such self-inflicted torments as beating, drawing blood or wearing garments designed to abrade the skin were only to be done with the confessor's permission.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> *AA.SS. vol. XI, 20 April*, Vita Ven. Oda Praemonstratensis c.V.20, p. 776

<sup>61</sup> *Ancrene Wisse: A Corrected Edition of the Text in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 402*, ed. Bella Millett (Oxford, 2005), Parts VI.11, p. 139 (care of health) and VIII.16, p. 158 (mortification). Modern English translation in *Ancrene Wisse: Guide for Anchoresses*, trans. Bella Millett (Exeter, 2009), with same pagination as edition.

Almost all of the facial mutilations discussed so far, whether carried out or not, would have involved heavy bleeding and the risk of infection (and we have already seen this acknowledged in metaphorical terms in Margaret of Cortona's *vita*). We do not know whether a medieval surgeon was regularly on hand to attend the aftermath of judicial punishments: the report dated 1172 of the restoration of Eilward's lost eyes and testicles, this time by Thomas Becket himself, indicates that some care was available. Thus as the miracle of restoration of his sight occurred, 'malagma cereum, quod sive ad extrahendas orbium vacuorum purulentias seu ad ipsa cilia claudenda fuerat appositum' ['he scratched and removed with his fingernail the wax and the emollient which had been applied to eliminate the pus'].<sup>62</sup> But the fact that Oda's face was permanently disfigured, to the horror of her parents (and, it seems, to the discomfort of some of her fellow nuns), meant that had she remained in the secular world, she would have been stigmatised for life by the confusing message of her damaged face. From English examples of the following century, we know that men who had accidentally become disfigured often approached the court to have it put in writing that their injuries were not a result of criminal penalties: this seems to confirm how such deformities would be scrutinised within the community.<sup>63</sup> For all that later medieval Europe saw a flourishing in both medical and surgical knowledge, wounds to the face were (and remain) the hardest to conceal.

## NEW SECTION

### Marking, Stigma, Cure

---

<sup>62</sup>The *Miracula* of Benedict of Peterborough, reproduced in *English Lawsuits*, vol. 2, ed. Van Caenegem, case 471B.

<sup>63</sup> Patent Roll records cited by Andrew G. Miller, "'Tails" of Masculinity: Knights, Clerics and the Mutilation of Horses in Medieval England', *Speculum* 88 (2013), 958-95 (p. 977).

It is this sense of disproportionate damage, I argue, that made facial disfigurement such a powerful motif for hagiographers. As Erving Goffman points out, the ancient Greek term ‘stigma’, in the sense of a bodily sign exposing something unusual or bad about the moral status of the bearer, retained its meaning until relatively recently, when the behaviour or characteristic itself, rather than the physical sign, became known by that term.<sup>64</sup> Shlomo Shoham points to the shaved head and segregation of the medieval penitent as an example of stigmatising the wrongdoer visibly in order to act as a deterrent to those viewing the offender.<sup>65</sup> As is well known, however, the term *stigma* took on an entirely different significance in the later Middle Ages. Rather than isolating the bearer, the term was used to describe bodily signs of holy grace, as manifested, for example, on the bodies of St Francis (1181/2-1226) and of St Catherine of Siena (1347-80).<sup>66</sup> The key difference, however, is that the marks (invisible in Catherine’s case) were placed on their bodies by God, not self-inflicted. Nevertheless, it is striking that the *vitae* of three women, all following different orders for their religious vocation (Oda was a Praemonstratensian, Margaret of Hungary a

---

<sup>64</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1963, repr. London, 1990), p. 11.

<sup>65</sup> S. Giora Shoham, *The Mark of Cain: the Stigma Theory of Crime and Social Deviation* (Jerusalem, 1970), p. 7.

<sup>66</sup> St Francis: *The Stigmata of Francis of Assisi: New Studies, New Perspectives*, ed. Jacques Delarun et al. (New York, 2006). St Catherine: *A Companion to St Catherine of Siena*, ed. Carolyn Muessig, George Ferzoco and Beverley Kienzle (Leiden, 2011). On stigmata see now Carolyn Muessig, ‘The Stigmata Debate in Theology and Art in the Late Middle Ages’, in *The Authority of the Word: Reflecting on Image and Text in Northern Europe, 1400-1700*, ed. Celeste Brusati, Karl Ehenkel and Walter Melion (Leiden, 2011), pp. 481-504.

Dominican and Margaret of Cortona a Franciscan Tertiary), should explore the issue of bodily marking as a sign of spiritual devotion. Nor were Francis and Catherine alone in their acquisition of holy markings: John Coakley highlights the case of Christina of Stommeln, whose visions included bloody violence and who also received *stigmata* to her body.<sup>67</sup> But it is significant, it seems to me, that a century later Catherine's *vita* reports her request to God to keep her *stigmata* invisible: Raymond rather presents it as an example of her humility, but was this to set her apart from the growing number of stigmatics?

The major difference between these examples and our cases is, of course, that *stigmata* were a spontaneous phenomenon, rather than a calculated act, and herein lies the tension between the desire to mortify the flesh and the prevalent attitudes in twelfth- and thirteenth-century secular Europe to the facially-mutilated. The *vitae* of the three holy women discussed in this essay all explored facial mutilation as a possible way of expressing their commitment to a chaste or virginal life. But the dangers of following this path were all too apparent against a secular world in which facial mutilation was a sign of wrongdoing.

To some extent, the geographical separation of the three women's *vitae*, situated as they were in Flanders, Italy and Hungary, is mitigated by the obvious similarities in their message about submission to God (and their confessors). Yet they each convey something of their specific location: it may be no coincidence that the only *actual* mutilation recorded is from northern Europe, where judicial penalties targeted on the face are, if not commonplace, at least well-known and better-documented in the sources. Margaret of Hungary's *vita*, on the other hand, was able to draw upon the potential for physical martyrdom in the face of a pagan hoard, perhaps inspired by earlier models of sainthood. Margaret of Cortona's life, however,

---

<sup>67</sup> John W. Coakley, *Women, Men and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and their Male Collaborators* (New York, 2006), pp. 89-110.

needed a different reason to justify her desire for penitential mutilation, and so focuses far more on her previous, secular life in the cosmopolitan, urban world of late medieval Italy.

There are strong parallels in the tales of mutilation, however, with contemporary hagiography about male saints. Larissa Tracy, exploring images in the *South English Legendary*, comments that ‘Castration may have been taboo in hagiography as a genre because the authors did not want to align their saints with the criminals against which the sentence was historically applied’.<sup>68</sup> Whilst the *vitae* discussed here did not entirely elide the subject of a similarly-charged form of mutilation – they demonstrated that women’s sexuality and allure to men was thought to reside in facial beauty – they presented the problem as to some extent ‘contained’ by the fact that female religious needed the authority of their male confessors before putting their impulses to self-harm into practice. Oda’s case was meant to be shocking on several levels, but it most effectively showed up her weakness: women’s ultimate vanity, as highlighted by these texts, lay in imagining that a physical change could rid any of them of their main ‘affliction’, which was simply being female. Of all three saintly careers, Margaret of Cortona’s is most concerned with this theme, since she had led the most ‘sinful’ life of the three, and it is also the most valuable for exploring intersections of medicine, religion and gender. She, after all, had the lengthiest consultation with ‘Christus Medicus’: the motif of Christ as doctor was well-established, even if it does not explicitly appear in the *vita*. But no amount of bodily isolation, mutilation or self-denial, to the point of weakness and illness, could substitute for inner qualities such as patience, humility and submission. Only then would these women truly *see* the ‘doctor’, and achieve a ‘cure’.

---

<sup>68</sup> Larissa Tracy, “‘Al defouleden is holie bodi’’: Castration, the Sexualization of Torture and Anxieties of Identity in the *South English Legendary*’, in *Castration and Culture*, ed. Tracy, pp. 87-107 (p. 96).