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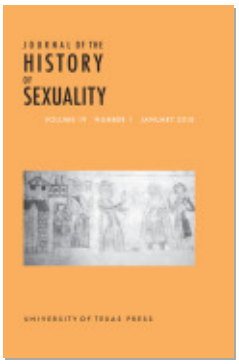

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The Chaste Erotics of Marie d'Oignies and Jacques de Vitry

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In Jacques de Vitry's thirteenth-century *vita* of Marie d'Oignies, the hagiographer, or author of a sacred biography, implicates himself in his knowledge of a priest's surprising reaction as he grasps the holy woman's hands in a moment of devotional fervor: "When one of her close friends clasped her hand from an excess of spiritual affection because he was very close to her although in his chaste mind he thought no evil—he felt the first masculine stirrings rising in him."[1] Although the motive for taking her hand seems innocent enough, the moment his hand comes into contact with hers, he no longer sees the two of them as priest and holy woman, as confessor and penitent, but as man and woman, subject to lust and physical attraction. The chances are very good that the priest in the story is indeed the hagiographer, Jacques de Vitry (ca. 1160–1240). Throughout his *vita* of the late-twelfth, early-thirteenth-century female mystic, he writes himself in a starring role, often referring to himself in the third person and vaguely as "a certain priest."[2] The woman, Marie d'Oignies (d. 1213) of the Liège

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[1] Jacques de Vitry, *Vita Mariae Oigniacensis* (hereafter *VMO*), in *Acta Sanctorum*, ed. Jean Bolland et al. (Brussels, 1868–1925), vol. 25 (23 June), 636–66, at 656, translated in Anneke Mulder-Bakker, ed., *Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2006), 102.

[2] In some of these moments it was almost certainly Jacques. For example, he recounted a miracle of Marie's visionary abilities when she saw "a certain priest's" first mass in Paris on the date when Jacques was known to have said his first mass there. Further evidence that it was indeed Jacques comes to us from the later *vita* of the beguine Lutgard of Aywières, written by Jacques' admirer, Thomas de Cantimpré. In the *vita* one of Lutgard's miraculous moments was her knowledge that Jacques was tempted by one of the holy women to whom he administered. The *vita* clarified that the love was "not a lustful love but . . . an excessively human love"; however, the implication was that the love was romantic. See Thomas de Cantimpré, *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières*, trans. Margot H. King (Toronto: Peregrina, 1987), 34–35.

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diocese, is widely considered the first beguine in the movement of female lay piety by that name that would soon sweep the Low Countries.

There is also an important difference in Marie's *vita* that sets it apart from many of her counterparts' *vitae*. Jacques is initially drawn to Oignies by Marie's reputation and upon his arrival there becomes both her spiritual follower and her confessor.[3] Jacques was closely involved in Marie's quotidian life, and his text is filled with implicit questions: How does a spiritually inferior man hear the confession of a spiritually superior woman? How does he prohibit her from doing things she is moved by God to do (such as mortify her flesh or beg for alms)? What are the boundaries between his love for her as a spiritual advisor and as a man? Jacques' *vita* is an attempt to embrace and address these questions in a confession of his own. He constructs a kind of queer sexuality both for himself and for Marie—an erotics surrounding celibacy, devotion, power, and secrecy. In this article I would like to look at Marie's ascetic and devotional practices and how Jacques, as both confessor and hagiographer, implicates himself into these practices. I will then examine how Jacques, in turn, complicates this narration by making his audience (of laity, semireligious women, fellow clerics, and the papacy) complicit in his and Marie's sexuality by using the technologies of confession and learned rhetoric both explicitly and implicitly. I would like to direct the discussion from how spiritual marriage and mysticism are portrayed by both observers and practitioners to how these are manifested in terms of sexuality, not just the gendered body or practice.

In the last decade or so scholars have looked at how female mystical spirituality is constructed and presented in medieval texts, hagiographical and otherwise. Caroline Walker Bynum's 1987 groundbreaking book *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* demonstrated how physicality and spirituality intertwined for female medieval mystics and suggested that eroticism was inherently encoded in their understanding of the divine.[4] Since then many scholars have looked at the hagiographical *vitae* of medieval women mystics through the lens of sexuality and gender, changing the discourse on medieval devotional texts for and by holy women.[5] Focusing particularly on the

[3] Jacques' student and follower Thomas of Cantimpré later wrote a supplement to the *vita* of Marie, addressing primarily the events in Marie's life that had to do with her relationship to Jacques. Thomas was deeply concerned with Jacques' departure from Oignies to Acre and was clearly hoping that the *vita* would serve to bring Jacques back. This *vita* is also translated in Mulder-Bakker, *Marie of Oignies*, 137–65.

[4] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

[5] See especially Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechtild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995); Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Dyan Elliott, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999);

construction of gender in the Middle Ages, these studies have shown that mysticism for these early medieval women was described as closely related to their physicality and that their encounter with the divine was often portrayed in erotic terms.

Many of these studies have focused on thirteenth-century semireligious women of the Brabant and Liège region known as beguines. These women, individually and in groups, formed devotional practices outside of the formal structures and strictures of the convent, for although they had some clerical oversight, mainly from Dominican priests, they were—at least in the early days of the movement—very independent. There are a variety of reasons why this time period in the Liège area lent itself to this kind of flowering of affective female spirituality: overpopulation of women, the Dominican presence and their embrace of mystical practices, and a proximity to heretical movements like Catharism and the heresy of the Free Spirit, which encouraged a kind of religious reformation.[6] Because of these elements and the unique forms of devotion the beguines espoused, they were held up as examples of lay piety and simultaneously suspected of heresy. While some—like Marie d'Oignies—received official recognition from the church in the form of beatification or canonization, others—like Marguerite Porete (d. 1310)—were executed for what were perceived as heretical beliefs.[7] A few of these women's own writings have survived (as is the case with Porete), but for the most part what we know about the women and their practices has come to us through *vitae* written by male clerics in attempts at official canonization or as countermeasures to charges of unorthodox or heretical practices.

Only recently have scholars begun unpacking these *vitae*, especially those written by men who actually knew the women about whom they were writing (and in many cases knew them very well, as confessors or spiritual followers). In Catherine M. Mooney's 1999 volume, *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters,* many critics examined just this phenomenon, articulating the ways in which the women were constructed or given speech or—in a few cases—where their own writings contradicted or defied the descriptions and voices given to them by their male hagiographers.[8] In many ways the *vita* of Marie d'Oignies is stereotypical of the *vitae* of medieval holy women. Indeed, Marie is one of the very first women to live this sort

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and Juliette Dor, Lesley Johnson, and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, eds., *New Trends in Feminine Spirituality* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1999).

[6] For the most complete discussion of the Low Country beguines see Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200–1565* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

[7] Marie d'Oignies was beatified but never canonized despite attempts by Jacques and her followers to make this so. For more on Marie's "afterlife" see Brenda M. Bolton, "Marie of Oignies: A Friend to the Saints," in Mulder-Bakker, *Marie of Oignies*, 199–220.

[8] Catherine M. Mooney, ed., *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

of semireligious life in the diocese of Liège, and Jacques de Vitry—writing shortly after her death, probably in about 1215—was intentionally setting up a paradigm against which to read and understand this religious lifestyle.[9] It is where Jacques departed from hagiographical tropes and discussed his real, personal relationship with Marie, however, where we can read between these fissures.

Let me return to the moment when Jacques surprised himself with the force of his own sexuality rising up as he took Marie's hand. Jacques primarily blamed himself for this unguarded moment where his physical attraction for the holy woman superseded that of his spiritual affiliation with her, but he also pointed out that Marie's naïveté was partly to blame, writing that she herself was so immune to lust that she could not even conceive of its existence in the men she knew: "Thus did that youthful drummer, as it were, dry out her body by stretching it between two crosses so that she did not feel even the first stirrings of lust rise against her for many years. And from the great trust that she had towards men, from the abundance of her innocence and pure simplicity she thought them all to be like her."[10] Even his description of Marie's resistance to lustful feelings brought Jacques back to her body. His reference to Marie as a drum player (*tympanistria*) linked her to Miriam (also called Mary) the Prophetess in Exodus 15:20 who led the women through the parted Red Sea while playing her own small drum. The image also linked Marie to Mary Magdalene, recalling a well-known sermon on her conversion by the fifth-century archbishop of Ravenna, Saint Peter Chrysologus, that describes Mary beating her own body like a drum.[11]

But the sentence's metaphor immediately shifts from Marie as drummer to Marie as drum. Betraying a central occupation with Marie's body and its very materiality, Jacques likened her physicality to the skin of a drum that has been stretched out for use. Bruce Holsinger has linked this passage to another twelfth-century theologian's analogy: "Honorius Augustodunensis glosses the phrase 'Praise him with typanum and chorus' . . . from Psalm 150 as an image of the state of human flesh after the resurrection: 'The tympanum is made from dried and hardened skin, which signifies immutable flesh hardened against any corruption. Therefore praise God, because he has made your flesh, previously fragile, to be firm and because it will no longer be subject to corruption.'"[12] The image of Marie's body extended between

[9] At this time in Jacques' life he was actively preaching against the Cathar heresy in France and in the region of Brabant and Liège. In 1217 he was appointed bishop of Acre, and in 1229 he became cardinal bishop of Tusculum.

[10] *VMO*, 656, trans. Mulder-Bakker, 102.

[11] Bruce W. Holsinger, *Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), 40.

[12] Ibid., 217.

crosses also recalled Christ's own crucifixion, which was echoed in the slightly later English *Þe Wohunge of Ure Lauerd* (The Wooing of Our Lord), an anchoress's love poem to Christ: "My body will hang with your body, nailed on the cross, fastened, transfixed within four walls."[13] The stretched-out body is simultaneously desexualized and laid bare, a contradiction inherent in the holy woman's body in general: she is the sexually ready bride whose bridegroom is God.

Marie's body was also described as dried out (*desiccaverat*), desiccated. According to the medieval classification of men's and women's temperaments, women were expected to be moist but not dry, which was how men were supposed to be. By making Marie completely dry, Jacques further desexualized her by making her more masculine in the medieval mind. Indeed, as Joan Cadden has pointed out in her book on medieval medicine and gender, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, the twelfth-century mystic Hildegard of Bingen took these classifications to the conclusion that women of dry temperament could more easily abstain from sex and were thus more suited to the chaste life.[14] In producing no moisture, Marie was less likely to fall prey to the physical deficiencies (such as lust) usually inherent in the female body.

The section of the *vita* where Jacques included the incident where he grabbed Marie's hand was entitled *Spiritu fortitudinis* (The Spirit of Fortitude) and was meant to highlight Marie's physical and spiritual strength in the face of adversity, but what Jacques recounted was more about *his* temptation and trial. He continued with his story of the encounter, which was ostensibly relating one of Marie's miraculous visionary moments, demonstrating her close relationship with God:

> She knew nothing about [his lust] and when she heard a voice from above saying "Do not touch me" she did not understand what it meant. Truly the God of mercy has compassion on our weaknesses and he did not want to discompose the man in front of the holy woman but, as though he were jealous, he wished to guard the chastity of his friend. He therefore warned the man of the danger that was looming and when she said to him "I just now heard a voice saying 'Do not touch me' [*Noli tangere me*] but I do not know what it means," he understood what was meant by it. And giving thanks that his weakness had not been discovered, he withdrew from her presence and thereafter

[13] *Þe Wohunge of Ure Lauerd*, ed. W. Meredith Thompson (London: Early English Text Society, 1970), 36: "Mi bodi henge wið þi bodi neiled o rode sperred querfaste wið inne fowr wahes." Translated in *Anchoritic Spirituality: Ancrene Wisse and Associated Works*, ed. Nicholas Watson and Anne Savage (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 256.

[14] Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 274.

> he carefully guarded himself against such temptations whenever such occasions might occur.[15]

Marie was again explicitly linked to both Christ and Mary Magdalene in Jacques' story as she heard and uttered the words spoken by Jesus upon encountering Mary after his resurrection in John 20:17: "Do not touch me [*Noli me tangere*]." The Gospel *Noli me tangere* encounter was an often-used image in the medieval iconography of Mary Magdalene and would have resonated very clearly with Jacques' readers as well as with Marie herself. Jacques had a specific reason for linking Marie with Mary Magdalene in his readers' minds: for him, Mary was the symbol of repentance, a focus of his sermons and his ministry, and her cult was strong and active in the diocese of Liège.[16] Jacques also drew a parallel between his own relationship with Marie and that of Mary Magdalene and Christ. While he was purportedly Marie's spiritual advisor and confessor and, as priest and man, her superior in many ways, he was—like Mary to Christ—her follower and spiritually inspired by her. This tricky power dynamic surfaces repeatedly throughout the *vita*.[17]

Marie's claim that she did not know what the words *Noli tangere me* meant did not refer to the actual *meaning* of the words but to her compulsion to say them at that moment.[18] This claim, of course, appears to underscore Jacques' assertion that Marie's innocence and denial of her own lust extended to her understanding of the men around her. However, the exchange may in fact point to the opposite—Marie's heightened understanding of man (or at least of Jacques) and his desires. By claiming ignorance of the words while still stating them, Marie managed simultaneously to remove herself from a sexually charged situation with her confessor and to preserve his reputation and dignity, saving him from shame.

[15] *VMO*, 656: "Cumque illa prorsus hoc ignoraret, audivit vocem ab excelso, scilicet, Noli tangere me, nec tamen intellexit quid significaret. Deus enim mitis, & nostris infirmitatibus compatiens, noluit illum coram sancta muliere verecundia confundere: volebat tamen, tamquam zelotes amicæ suæ custodire, & illum propter imminentia pericula castigare. Unde cum illa diceret ei, Audivi nunc quamdam vocem, sed quid significet prorsus ignoro; scilicet, Noli tangere me: ille, quid hoc esset intelligens, & sibi de cetero diligentius cavit, & Domino qui ejus infirmitatem detegere noluit, gratias agens recessit" (trans. Mulder-Bakker, 102).

[16] For more on the link between Mary Magdalene and Marie d'Oignies see Michel Lauwers, "'*Noli me tangere*': Marie Madeleine, Marie d'Oignies et les pénitentes du XIIIe siècle," *Moyen Âge* 1 (1992): 209–68.

[17] For a similar reciprocal power dynamic see H. M. Canatella, "Long-Distance Love: The Ideology of Male-Female Spiritual Friendship in Goscelin of Saint Bertin's *Liber confortatorius*" in this issue.

[18] The interpretation of this incident changes when reading the Middle English version of the *vita*. There the translator chose to keep *Noli tangere me* in Latin, making it seem that Marie does not even understand the Latin words that she has heard. See Jennifer N. Brown, ed., *Three Women of Liège: A Critical Edition of and Commentary on the Middle English Lives of Elizabeth of Spalbeek, Christina Mirabilis, and Marie d'Oignies* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2008), 152.

Although the story appears superficially to be about Christ's protection of the maiden Marie's chastity and innocence, even this intervention was couched in the terms of God's maintaining the *priest's* privacy and saving him from embarrassment in the face of the woman he followed. Jacques appeared to address his male clerical audience, drawing them in and almost making them complicit in his emotional and physical arousal: "Truly the God of mercy has compassion on *our* weaknesses and he did not want to discompose the man in front of the holy woman but, as though he were jealous, he wished to guard the chastity of his friend."[19] The God of the story is both compassionate (about a male's lust) and jealous (about a woman's chastity), attending to the two elements of this sexual encounter.[20] This episode also constructs a kind of erotic love triangle between Jacques, Marie, and Christ. John Coakley has observed a similar tension between another contemporary beguine, Christine of Stommeln (1242–1312), and a Dominican friar, Peter of Dacia (ca. 1235–89), which revealed itself in letters between them that Peter later edited.[21] However, Peter saw himself as the failed bride of Christ and thus as the outsider in their relationship. For him, Christine was the intermediary between himself and an intimacy with God. Later in his life, Coakley observes, Peter saw a "kind of bigamy, whereby Christine is married not only to Christ, but also to himself."[22]

Jacques' three-way structure of desire, however, was vastly different from that which bound Peter, Christine, and Christ. Jacques did not see Marie as a way of getting closer to God but instead saw his own relationship with God (as priest and confessor) as a way of getting closer to Marie. This was a forbidden sexual attraction built on mutual vows of chastity and devotion to Christ and potentially one-sided; that is, there is no indication that Marie returned any of Jacques' sexual affection. The attraction was in one sense heteronormative, a man's sexual desire for a woman, but in another it was profoundly queer—a forbidden (and consequently perverse) desire of chaste for chaste, a desire where gender roles are not clearly defined and power is constantly shifting between the two parties. Queer theorist Theresa de

[19] *VMO*, 656, trans. Mulder-Bakker, 102, emphasis mine.

[20] There is a similar moment in the *vita* of Lutgard of Aywières by Thomas de Cantimpré. Lutgard was wooed by a man and was tempted by him. However, Christ appeared to her while she was in conversation with the suitor: "He showed the wound in His side, bleeding as if recently opened, and He said, 'Do not seek any longer the caresses of unseemly love. Contemplate here what you should love and why you should love it. Here, I pledge to you are the delights of total purity which will follow it'" (de Cantimpré, *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières*, 13). Lutgard immediately left the wooer for her spiritual lover, Christ.

[21] John Coakley, "A Marriage and Its Observer: Christine of Stommeln, the Heavenly Bridegroom, and Friar Peter of Dacia," in Mooney, *Gendered Voices*, 99–117. See also John Coakley, "Friars as Confidants of Holy Women in Medieval Dominican Hagiography," in *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 222–46.

[22] Coakley, "A Marriage and Its Observer," 109.

Lauretis has stated that it takes "two women, not one, to make a lesbian" and that "lesbianism is a sexual practice, as well as a particular structuration of desire. . . . It is that desire, rather than woman-identification or even the sexual act itself . . . that specifies lesbian sexuality."[23] Jacques' sexuality here is created in his desire for Marie, and Marie's is in opposition to it. Throughout the text Jacques reveals the ways in which his and Marie's ascetic erotics were connected and mutually constituted their sexualities.

Jacques was Marie's confessor, but in his moment of grasping Marie's hands and confronting "the masculine stirrings rising within him" *he* was the one withholding his secret sins from Marie. Karma Lochrie, who situates the practice of medieval confession alongside Michel Foucault's theories about the intersection of secrecy and sexuality, argues that confession naturally sets up "a ritualized power relationship conducted through secrecy between the one who confesses and the one who keeps the secrets. . . . Secrecy thus becomes a function of the power relationship, the pleasures of confession, and the makings of the Christian subject, rather than a function of the secrets supposedly confided."[24] Although, as we shall see later in this article, Jacques clearly reveled in the power of hearing, knowing, and ultimately revealing (within the *vita*) the secrets of Marie's confessions, here the incident reversed this power dynamic; Jacques' pleasure of confession only came when he wrote the *vita* after Marie's death. The holding of this secret shame is in its way Jacques' own ascetic practice, the self-inflicted pain that will only find its release with the writing of his text.

In returning to the moment of the priest's emotional reaction at the conclusion of his story, we again see that it was most likely Jaques's own experience being recounted here: "And giving thanks that his weakness had not been discovered, he withdrew from her presence and thereafter he carefully guarded himself against such temptations whenever such occasions might occur."[25] His thanks were not given because Marie's chastity was preserved or because the sexual encounter did not happen; instead, they were given for the continued concealment of his sexual desire for the holy woman. Indeed, this last line indicates that this desire was ongoing, a constantly disruptive force in the relationship between Marie and Jacques, at least on his part. Knowing this secret alters our readings of seemingly more innocent exchanges between the two.

In the narration of the *Noli me tangere* incident we glimpse the central paradox of the *vita* of Marie. Forced by her aristocratic parents to marry young, despite a religious calling, she quickly dedicated herself and her husband to God, and they lived their lives out in a chaste union. Eventually,

[23] Theresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 284.

[24] Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 21.

[25] *VMO*, 656, trans. Mulder-Bakker, 102.

Marie entered into a semi-enclosed life at the monastic priory of Oignies, separated from her husband in every way. However, Marie's union with God and her relationship with the brothers at the priory of Oignies suggest a sexuality that was denied in Marie's relationship with her husband. Jacques de Vitry—both confessor and hagiographer—consistently discussed Marie in opposition to women who give in to carnal and sexual desires and constructed Marie as a woman who resisted the temptation for a sexual life and who never felt such fleshly desires in the first place. To the brothers of the priory and to Jacques, Marie vacillated between being seen as a kind of mother or wife and—of course—as Christ's bride and lover. But however she was seen or described, she always occupied a sexualized space.

Marie's chaste marriage is also central to understanding her sexuality and Jacques' relation to it. The *vita*, probably intentionally, did not make clear whether or not Marie's marriage was consummated before she and her husband chose to live chastely and apart, but the marital bed was still marked by an emotional passion and a physical sensuality. However, it was neither Marie nor her husband who endowed it as such; it was Jacques who placed himself in the space between Marie's desire and sexuality:

> Living apart from her parents, she was now set on fire with such an ecstasy of ardour and punished her body with such warfare that she enslaved it to such a degree that it frequently happened that after she had toiled for a large part of the night with her own hands, she would pray for a lengthy period after she had finished her work. As often as was licit for her, she passed a very short part of the night in sleep on planks that she had concealed at the foot of her bed. And because she clearly did not have power over her own body, she secretly wore a very rough cord under her clothing that she bound with great force.[26]

Liberated from her oppressive parents, who looked down on Marie's religious aspirations, she realized the extent of her desire for such a life when she was set up in her new husband's home. Again, Jacques knew these intimate details through Marie's confession, but here he identified with this newly married bride in his depiction of Marie's ascetic practice after the marriage.

Words that out of context would seem to apply to a woman's lust for her husband ("she was now set on fire with such an ecstasy of ardour") actually showed that Marie's lust was for God. The thought culminated in her prayer and physical labor, the work she did with her hands (a point of fascination for Jacques throughout the *vita*, particularly in relation to Marie's physical stamina and her ability to work long beyond the point of exhaustion). Marie answered the fire in her soul with the mortification of her flesh. Jacques invited his readers not only into Marie's marriage but

[26] *VMO*, 639, trans. Mulder-Bakker, 54.

also into its very bed, and he showed how Marie imbued it with an entirely different kind of sensuality than would be expected. Marie's marriage bed was filled with passion and physicality, but they were not for her husband; instead, they were for God. Neither was the man who knew these details her spouse but rather Jacques.

In marrying, Marie necessarily entered into a sexual life. Although it is never explicitly stated in the *vita* whether the marriage was ever consummated (although the very ambiguity of this point indicates that it probably was, since Jacques rarely missed an opportunity to point to and praise Marie's chastity), Marie's physical self-punishment implied a kind of rebuke for her body's physical acts or urges.[27] Jacques reminded the reader that Marie was subject to male power—power over her very body and its movements—and he also exposed how she subverted it. She stole away to sleep on the planks at night, and she secretly wore the hairshirt-like cords under her clothing, all because she was subject to her husband's will when it came to her body, Jacques explained, paraphrasing 1 Corinthians 7:4: "The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband."[28] While she may not have had power over the man to whom she was married (or even that she was married at all), Marie clearly found power "over her own body" in her self-mutilation. For Marie, the confines of the marriage and subsequent liberation from her parents gave her the means with which to realize her devotional fervor and practice, despite the ascetic and self-punishing form that it took in her mortification of the flesh.

Jacques addressed his many audiences here: on the one hand, he explained the validity of the practice of spiritual marriage to his superiors and endorsed Marie's own ascetic practice, but on the other, he warned his women readers away from taking the story as *exemplum*, writing: "I do not say these things to commend the excess but so that I might show her fervour. In these and in many other things wherein the privilege of grace operated, let the discreet reader pay attention that what is a privilege for a few does not make a common law. Let us imitate her virtues but we cannot imitate the works of her virtues without individual privilege."[29] Jacques cautioned his readers against the kinds of austerities and self-punishments of which Marie partook, even though he clearly reveled in his literary construction of these moments; this passage alone demonstrates his flair for poetic rhetoric and alliteration, with its "paucorum privilegia," "vero virtutem," and "privato privilegio imitari non possumus." He also revealed, perhaps unwittingly, his own identification with the holy women to whom he preached as well

[27] Dyan Elliott, in her book on the phenomenon of chaste or spiritual marriages in the Middle Ages, has noted that in medieval depictions of saintly women who are forced to wed, "ascetic austerities" increase dramatically after the marriage (*Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993], 224).

[28] The rest of the verse, which Jacques ignored, states that the husband likewise does not have power over his body, but his wife does.

[29] *VMO*, 639, trans. Mulder-Bakker, 54.

as his own feelings of inferiority to Marie's spiritual and bodily practice by folding himself into the audience in his use of the first-person plural.

In Jacques' description of Marie's physical mortification, the *vita* betrayed again his overfamiliarity with Marie's body and her sensuality—if not her sexuality. John Baldwin discusses Jacques' writings about Marie in *The Language of Sex*, where he examines medieval French texts and their descriptions and discussions of sex and sexuality. Baldwin claims that Jacques was particularly influenced by the philosophy of Peter Cantor, who had been his teacher and who had preached extensively on the kinds of sex that were legitimate in the eyes of the church (within marriage and for the sake of procreation) and those that were not (pretty much everything else, but especially sodomy and masturbation). Jacques was highly aware of sex as a moral issue when writing Marie's *vita*, and that awareness permeated his descriptions not only of Marie's marriage but also of her life generally. Baldwin speculates that in Marie's *vita* Jacques found something that "exemplified the new religious life that opened the monastic calling to adult and married women."[30]

Although Jacques had hitherto erased Marie's sexuality and had described her as a woman without physical lust for her husband (as separate from the ardor she had for God), he used her decision to live in a chaste marriage as an opportunity to preach about the quelling of sexual desires. Marie became both an archetype and an exception: she was a beguine, an identity to which all women desiring a semireligious life could aspire as well as the model of perfection that they could never hope to reach. After describing how John, Marie's husband, easily agreed to her request for chastity, Jacques wrote:

> Let the unhappy men blush and tremble who befoul themselves outside marriage with illicit comminglings, when these two blessed young people abstained from licit embraces for the Lord and overcame the intensity of fervid adolescence with the fervour of an ascetic life. They extinguished fire with fire and deserved triumphal crowns. . . . They did not burn in the fire but immolated their self-will even while they were close to an abundance of sexual delights. Although near a river, they thirsted and in the midst of banquets, they hungered.[31]

Jacques used the familiar language of mysticism here, about desire for God and about self-abnegation and loss of the body. As Michel de Certeau wrote in his seminal work on Western mysticism, "What is termed a rejection of 'the body' or of 'the world'—ascetic struggle, prophetic rupture—is but the necessary and preliminary elucidation of a historical state of affairs; it constitutes the point of departure for the task of offering a body to the spirit, of 'incarnating' discourse, giving truth a space in which to make itself

[30] John W. Baldwin, *The Language of Sex: Five Voices from Northern France around 1200* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 10.

[31] *VMO*, 640, trans. Mulder-Bakker, 55.

manifest."[32] In other words, the starting point for the mystic is necessarily a rejection of corporeality. But Jacques spoke specifically of the denial of sexual desire here (as opposed to the comforts of the body and the material world) and its reassertion as devotional desire.

Unlike the woman described in the *Noli me tangere* incident who was so divorced from her own physicality and sexual feelings that she could not even imagine such emotions in others, this Marie and her husband were both so tormented by lustful desire for each other that they replaced it with a lust for devotion. For Jacques, Marie and John's decision for a chaste marriage was a difficult one, but their rewards would be great in heaven, where crowns normally reserved for martyrs awaited them. Significantly, he was describing a kind of martyrdom—that of their sexual desire—and for Jacques, this deserved an almost equal celestial recognition that "real" martyrdom would merit. Torn between highlighting Marie's natural desire for chastity and lack of lustfulness and emphasizing what she had in fact given up by choosing a chaste life, Jacques opted for the latter here. Surely it made for a better *exemplum* for the married men and women whom Jacques might have been steering toward a monastic life.[33]

Jacques had to create his own kind of "desiring system" in order to control and explain Marie's desire (or lack of it). As de Lauretis explains, "Desire, not love or need, is specific to sexuality."[34] Jacques positioned himself as both Marie and as John to describe their lustful fervor for each other in order to explain how they extinguish that ardor ("fire with fire"). Jacques' rhetoric revealed the multilayered audience to whom he addressed the *vita*. On the one hand, he condemned sex outside of marriage (a reproach that could be directed at clergy or adulterers), while on the other, he also upheld the virtues of chaste marriage and the choice of celibacy (which could be directed to the beguines, to the clergy, or to any of the married men and women he was hoping would see a new kind of religious devotion exemplified in Marie's life).

Part of what seems like a paradox in his descriptions of Marie, beyond his own confusion as to how he saw and loved her, may be due to Jacques' complex audience, including already practicing beguines. While most of these women were for the most part truly devoted to Christ and to a religious life, some saw the movement as a way to escape society's rules. A woman could easily leave and rejoin a beguinage, unlike a convent, and there was very little monastic oversight. As a result, beguines were generally suspected of everything from sexual promiscuity to heresy. Indeed, one of the accusations (not entirely unfounded) leveled at beguines was that

[32] Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, vol. 1: *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 80.

[33] See Baldwin, *The Language of Sex*, 86–87.

[34] De Lauretis, *The Practice of Love*, 284.

they often joined the devotional communities after having children out of wedlock as a way both to preserve their reputations and to support their children.[35] One of the purposes of Jacques' *vita* of Marie, the prototypical beguine, was doubtless to counter that prevalent belief among the church hierarchy (and to get official sanction for the movement from the pope), but part of his strategy was to address the *vita* in part to women who were sexually or religiously marginal, condemning them for their actions and simultaneously trying to convince them of the superiority of Marie's religious life to a secular one.

In addition to the comments Jacques directed to his other various readers and listeners, he also implicitly addressed more learned theologians and even the pope through his heavy use of biblical allusion and *auctoritas*, or references to theological and ecclesiastical writings, as well as his rhetorical play. In the last passage quoted at length above, for example, Jacques played on the doubling of *voluptas* (pleasure, usually of a sexual kind) and *voluntas* (will, desire), showing how the latter replaced the former. Later, he used the term *voluptas* again to describe Marie on her deathbed but reappropriated it for her relation to God, noting how the force of Marie's *voluntas* supplanted and then became her desire.

Praising Marie's chastity and devotion to God, Jacques also played on the familiar "bride of Christ" metaphor, which had often been used to explain the female mystic's relationship with Christ, writing in his prologue to the *vita* that just as women like Marie "had previously tried to please their husbands in the flesh, so now the more did they attempt to please their heavenly Bridegroom in the spirit."[36] By directing his comments to women who had chosen to live chastely—always "with the assent of their husbands"—Jacques both offered a kind of *exemplum* for the women who might have been reading or listening to the *vita* as well as worked to craft a new role for women within the church.[37] He encouraged and endorsed a life of chaste marriage by showing how the carnal affections of a wife for her spouse could be transferred to a devotional ardor for Christ. Again, Jacques constructed a kind of female sexual desire for himself in order to convey Marie to his audience.

Despite Jacques' focus on Marie's spirituality, her sexuality was always intertwined with it, and his sexuality colored his understanding of her devotional ardor. This unavoidable intertwining was partly because of the medieval conception of women as being predominantly linked to the physical. Jacqueline Murray has shown that even confessors' manuals, which were meant to describe the care of an ungendered soul (as was put

[35] See Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, esp. 19–23, 118–37. Simons also points out some of the ways in which Jacques tried to counter particular accusations against beguines in his *vita* of Marie and his sermons.

[36] *VMO*, 636: "Sicut maritis suis prius placere nitembantur in carne, imo ita amplius Sponso cælesti placere studebant in spiritu" (trans. Mulder-Bakker, 42).

[37] *VMO*, 636: "enim maritorum consensu" (trans. Mulder-Bakker, 43).

forth in medieval exegesis), "reinforced the notion of women as primarily, even exclusively, sexual."[38] Jacques could not divorce himself from these conceptions and described Marie's meditations on Christ as long days spent between a bridegroom and his bride in bed, returning to physical metaphors of passion to explain her feelings:

> Once when she had lain continuously in bed for three days and had been sweetly resting with her Bridegroom, the days slipped by most stealthily because her joy was so great and so sweet, and it seemed to her that she had been lying like this for barely a minute. At other times she hungered for God with a wondrously changing affectivity, and at other times she thirsted for him. And since it is written "They who eat me shall yet hunger and those who drink me shall yet thirst," the more she knew God with her senses, the more her desire increased. She was tormented, she cried out and begged that he remain and it seemed that she embraced him within her arms lest he leave and tearfully prayed that he show himself more clearly to her.[39]

Jacques' description of Marie hearkened more to a lover who mourned the departure of her beloved than it did a spiritual relationship between Marie and God. For Jacques, Marie's relationship with God was precariously placed between pleasure and pain. This borderline space is what theorist Karmen MacKendrick has termed "counterpleasure," and it manifested itself in the saint's life both through her ascetic practices (pleasure taken in the fact of denial) and her desire to be with God (a desire that is painfully always just out of reach).[40] In the above passage Jacques underscored this counterpleasure: Marie always hungered and thirsted for her lover, and even while her joy at his presence was all-consuming, her torment at his absence was equally overpowering. These counterpleasures were familiar to Jacques because they mirrored his own relationship to and desire for Marie.

The elements of confession haunt the margins of the *vita*. For his contemporary readers, and even for Jacques, the institutionalized elements of confession were absolutely new. Individual confession had only been officially instituted as a sacrament by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, just two years after Marie's death and just about the time that Jacques wrote the *vita*. Jacques used Marie's *vita* as a way of promoting the elements of confession even as he also unconsciously revealed its pitfalls. For some the confessor-penitent relationship was especially complex. Elizabeth Petroff, who examines the varied relationships between male confessors and female

[38] Jacqueline Murray, "Gendered Souls in Sexed Bodies: The Male Construction of Female Sexuality in Some Medieval Confessors' Manuals," in *Handling Sin: Confession in the Middle Ages*, ed. Peter Biller and A. J. Minnis (York: York Medieval Press, 1998), 79–93.

[39] *VMO*, 659, trans. Mulder-Bakker, 110.

[40] Karmen MacKendrick, *Counterpleasures* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), esp. 68–88.

penitents (Marie and Jacques included), concludes that in some cases the power dynamic was so shifted from the one to the other that the relationship becomes one of equality.[41] However, I see a constantly shifting negotiation of power between Marie and Jacques that neither he nor she knew exactly how to control.

Jacques had earthly control over Marie's spiritual self, but Marie's special access to the divine gave her a spiritual control over Jacques.[42] To this end, Jacques often focused on Marie's physicality (including her desire and her ascetic practice), areas over which he would have had control and knowledge as confessor. This dynamic manifested itself most forcefully when Jacques discussed Marie's body with the knowledge of a lover. In describing her ascetic practices he wrote: "Now after her confession we will add how much and how wondrously she offered her body in sacrifice to the Lord and with what great love and wondrous delight she was tortured in body by embracing the cross of Christ. . . . Not only did she afflict her body but she utterly gave up her own will and denied herself through obedience by subjecting herself to the will of another."[43] As with the disturbing accounts of Marie's body in its marital bed, Jacques betrayed an altogether too familiar understanding of how Marie's mutilation of her body was part of her worship. Again, he turned to terms used to describe love affairs in explaining himself: she "offered" her body, she was tortured in her "embracing," and again echoing 1 Corinthians 7:4, he depicted Marie as not having power over her own body but subjugating it to Christ and his will. This revelation also displays the confessional nature of the *vita* as Jacques' own disclosure. Jacques was compelled to reveal his and Marie's secrets in order to authorize her sanctity. Dyan Elliott observes a similar dynamic between Dorothea of Montau and her confessor, John Marienwerder: "The absolute seal of secrecy enjoined on the confessor recognized but two exceptions. It was clearly not only acceptable, but even commendable, for the confessor of a potential saint to reveal aspects of his or her holy penitent's confession posthumously for

[41] Elizabeth Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). The chapter in which Petroff discusses the relationship between Jacques and Marie is entitled "Male Confessors and Female Penitents: Possibilities for Dialogue" (139–60). Significantly, Petroff does *not* look directly at Jacques' *vita* of Marie but rather at Thomas of Cantimpré's *Supplement to the Vita of Marie d'Oignies*, where he discussed Marie's relationship to Jacques in further detail. Petroff sees Cantimpré's contribution as a text that "completes and corrects the earlier" *vita* (156) because of the intimate details that it describes. However, I think that Jacques revealed this intimacy implicitly in his own text and that Thomas merely gave more context.

[42] As Janette Dillon describes it, "Undoubtedly [Marie's] visionary access to [Jacques'] soul takes precedence over his merely practical access to hers" ("Holy Women and Their Confessors or Confessors and Their Holy Women? Margery Kempe and Continental Tradition," in *Prophets Abroad: The Reception of Holy Women in Late-Medieval England*, ed. Rosalynn Voaden [Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1996], 115–40).

[43] *VMO*, 641, trans. Mulder-Bakker, 59–60.

the greater glory of God."[44] The other exception was for heresy. Jacques clearly believed that he was revealing the inner life of a saint, but at the same time he was defending her (and other beguines) from charges of religious unorthodoxy.

The seductive nature of Marie's asceticism for both Jacques and his readers is understandable in two ways. On the one hand, it confirmed Marie's heightened spiritual status, but on the other, it placed her firmly in her body and showed the physical understanding of God that women, especially, were supposed to have. For Marie, the ascetic practice was probably much more complex. As MacKendrick writes:

> It is the "violent seduction of sacrifice" that forms the heart of the ascetic paradox—sacrifice constituting the sacred, humility out of arrogance, life out of death, affirmation out of denial. It is profoundly perverse, self-denying and yet self-overcoming. The desire that drives it at once turns against the body and demands (and glorifies) the presence of the body as the space of suffering. The seduction of the sacred by the delighted (and thus mocking, even if utterly serious) sacrifice of pleasure reembodies God: it repeats the sacrifice of the first incarnate Word, God's body; it draws the divine back into the body and transports the body in the intensity of its pain to the divine.[45]

Marie sought out God in her asceticism, but in the process she found her own body. Although Jacques claimed that, as with her husband, Marie's body was here subjugated to the will of another in her submission to God, it was her own will that drove this self-abnegation. These self-seductions and self-punishments were intensely personal, but Jacques' position as Marie's confessor took him into that confidential and private space of Marie's ascetic practice. In order to understand Marie's desires, Jacques needed to become her essentially and practice a self-immolation of his own.

Marie's ascetic practices were her mysteries, but through confession they became Jacques' own pleasurable secrets. These counterpleasures were complicated even further with Jacques' knowledge because he also took a kind of perverse pleasure in knowing about Marie's body and its pain. Marie clandestinely punished herself for her own pleasures, and Jacques later betrayed his own delight at knowing this secret. In one particularly illustrative incident, Jacques described how the women who prepared Marie's body for burial after her death were shocked to find scars on her body, while he knew what had caused them. He recounted the moment that caused Marie's scars together with their revelation after her death:

> One day she brought back to her memory a time when she had been forced to eat meat and had to drink a little watered wine because she

[44] Dyan Elliott, "Authorizing a Life: The Collaboration of Dorothea of Montau and John Marienwerder," in Mooney, *Gendered Voices*, 168–92.

[45] MacKendrick, *Counterpleasures*, 86.

> had had a very serious illness. Then from a kind of horror at her previous delight, she did not have rest in her spirit and by wondrously torturing her flesh, she afflicted herself until she had made recompense for those delights she had had before. From the fervour of her spirit and as if inebriated, she began to loathe her flesh when she compared it with the sweetness of the paschal Lamb and she needlessly cut out a large piece of her flesh with a knife which she then buried in the earth from a sense of reticence. She had been so inflamed by an overwhelming fire of love that she had risen above the pain of her wound and, in this ecstasy of mind, she had seen one of the seraphim standing close by her. After she had died, the women who were washing her corpse were amazed when they found the places of the wounds but those who had known of this event through confession understood what the scars were.[46]

Jacques enfolded many things into this moment. The story was ostensibly about Marie's extreme piety and how the memory of enjoying food (even when she was forced to eat it out of illness and frailty) led her to austere self-mutilation. The pain and torture that Marie engaged in were in equal amounts to the pleasure she received from the food—a literal counterpleasure and the clearest indication of how Marie viewed her ascetic practice; it was, indeed, a self-punishment exacted for the pleasure experienced. Marie did not ever permit herself a straightforward unmediated pleasure; rather, it was always layered with its counterpart in pain or asceticism. Even though Jacques couched the horror of Marie's actions in at least one word of disapproval (*non modica*, "needlessly"), he quickly turned to the ecstasy that such mutilation brought to Marie as well as the closeness to God that it provided. This ecstasy, of course, also countered the pain of the mutilation (*another* counterpleasure), leading Marie back into a state of rapturous devotional fervor.

Ultimately, however, the story also served to demonstrate Jacques' intimate knowledge of Marie's body brought about through her confession to him. His assertion that he had known about the scars reveals his familiarity with what is concealed under her clothes. Again, Jacques knew Marie's body like a spouse would. Jacques' own pleasure was rooted in this moment of revelation, that he understood the scars when Marie's sister beguines did not. When the secrecy of confession was no longer required, Jacques unburdened himself, and Marie's secret was literally exposed with her naked corpse. It was a double pleasure for Jacques: at his hidden knowledge and at its ultimate revelation.

The relationship between Marie and Jacques in many places also mirrors that of a mother and son, even further complicating its sublimated eroticism. Many of the miracle stories revolved around her relationship to the monks at Oignies, and she was consistently described as saving them from their own sins and foibles. Indeed, one of her gifts was to separate the truly spirit-filled priests from those merely acting the part: "When the

[46] *VMO*, 641–42, trans. Mulder-Bakker, 60.

priest received the host after the *Confiteor* [a prayer said during the mass], she saw the Lord in the spirit who remained in the soul of the priest and filled him with a wondrous brightness. If, on the other hand, he received it unworthily, she saw the Lord withdrawing with indignation and the soul of the wretched man remaining empty and shadowy."[47] Likewise, Marie sat by the priests on their deathbeds and watched as the sacrament of extreme unction was administered to them, seeing—as she did here—the devils as they fled from the truly repentant. Like an ever-watchful mother, Marie kept an eye on both the physical and the spiritual health of her "sons," the monks of the priory at Oignies. They addressed her as "mother," and she replaced their real mothers as moral guardian.

In her role as spiritual superior to the monks, Marie also became their advisor. In another reversal of the confessor-penitent power dynamic, Marie was the confidante of the monks' conflicts and desires, offering her advice to them constantly. In this role, too, she inhabited a queer space where hidden desires were no longer secret. She knew the mysteries of their souls without the burden of secrecy-bound confession: "Many of her intimate friends who had frequently had experience of her divine prudence did not dare to do anything important without her counsel, for what she could not know through human reason, divinely inspired, she knew by the prayers she had sent forth."[48] Marie's advice covered all areas: whether or not men should join the priesthood and, if so, which order; whether they should move from one monastery to another; how their sermons could be more inspiring; and how to resist the temptations of the devil. Jacques deflected the enormity of Marie's influence and power by reminding his readers that her advice was not given merely by her own reason but was also divinely inspired.

Jacques himself was not immune to the counsels and criticisms of Marie, and in his typical rhetorical style he managed both to disparage and to praise himself in his recounting. After telling many stories of Marie's advice to the monks and her divine knowledge about their sins, he told his readers that he would not leave himself out: "And lest I tell about the great deeds of the holy woman and omit to mention certain persons, I will not spare myself. Indeed, I will tell a story of my own unhappiness."[49] He went on to tell about how his early sermons were too learned and allusive for his congregation to understand, but, drowning in pride, he could not see their confusion and only heard the praise ("as is the custom," he added). Marie pointed out his failing in the sermons as well as his pride in refusing to see it. This episode also demonstrated the two kinds of knowledge that Jacques claimed Marie possessed and administered to the monks of Oignies—her own reason (in understanding that Jacques' sermons were not good ones) and divine revelation (that pride was barring Jacques'

[47] *VMO*, 655, trans. Mulder-Bakker, 100.

[48] *VMO*, 656, trans. Mulder-Bakker, 103.

[49] *VMO*, 657: "Ut autem sine personaru acceptione magnalia sanctæ mulieris referam, mihi etiam non parcam, scilicet infelicitatis meæ referam historiam" (trans. Mulder-Bakker, 104).

self-improvement). It also showed another aspect of her relationship to Jacques. Where it seems that the power was very often in his hands—as her confessor and, later, as her hagiographer—this moment showed how Marie wielded her own power over Jacques. She was caretaker, confidante, and, perhaps most significantly, advisor.

Jacques ended his story with an address to the dead Marie: "I do not know how to speak of you, O holy mother, with sufficient praises, you who knew the secrets of God. The Lord does not open the thoughts of men in vain, but confers strength for healing to the sick by your prayers."[50] Unlike the mechanisms of individual confession, where men's thoughts were voluntarily opened to the confessor, Marie had the thoughts before her—opened by God. Jacques was here placed in the position of the penitent, the one whose secrets were known to and kept by Marie.

Jacques told another story that, like the *Noli tangere me* incident, seemed to point to him as the participant, although he was again unnamed. It clearly showed how Marie functioned as a kind of confessor for Jacques, albeit one who simply "knew" and did not "hear" a confession, and underscored the delicate balance they needed to maintain between themselves. She sang to the Lord in prayer about her concerns for a "certain preacher," and a prior overheard her prayers: "In a wondrous manner, she described all the temptations her preacher had suffered and almost all the sins he had committed at some time or other, and she begged the Lord that he vouchsafe to keep him from such things. Our prior (who knew the conscience of this man) heard her and since he heard this preacher's confession, he went to him and said, 'Have you ever told lady Mary your sins? While she was singing she told your sins as if she had seen them written plainly in a book.'"[51] Like the prior, who had heard the preacher's confession, the audience was privy to his secret thoughts and the knowledge that Marie could see them. This incident, of course, returns us to the moment of *Noli tangere me*. There, Jacques attested that Marie did not understand the lustful desires of men or why she was compelled to repel the priest with Jesus's words to Mary Magdalene. However, the multilayering of the text reveals that Marie did indeed know Jacques' deepest secrets, desires, and sins. Just as Jacques needed to situate himself in Marie's erotic and sexualized space in order to understand her ascetic practice and self-denial, Jacques imagined that Marie, too, placed herself in his own desires.

Marie's death, at least in Jacques' description, brought many of these disparate elements—Marie's sexuality and her chastity, her body and her will, her devotion and her asceticism, her symbolic maternity and her spiritual bridehood—back into sharp focus. Choosing to fast for nearly two months before her death, Marie survived only on the consecrated host. When Jacques and the brothers chose to test her by giving her an

[50] *VMO*, 657, trans. Mulder-Bakker, 105.
[51] *VMO*, 663, trans. Mulder-Bakker, 121.

unconsecrated Eucharist, Marie was overcome with nausea, gasping and retching in her attempt to remove the crumbs from her tongue. Jacques again reminded the reader of Marie's naked body and once more betrayed his intimate knowledge of it, but the image he described to the reader also called to mind her ascetic practice: "When her tiny holy body was washed after death, it was found to be so small and shriveled by her illness and fasting that her spine touched her belly and the bones of her back seemed to lie under the skin of her stomach as if under a thin linen cloth."[52] The image certainly recalls an emaciated Christ, whose garments hung on him like Marie's very skin. She was ultimately desexualized here, returned to her most elemental, skeletal state.

Marie's deathbed expression of exultation and serenity shows her fervid and rapturous union with the celestial spouse for whom she longed. She met her bridegroom, Jacques wrote, where "a torrent of the divine will fills and satiates everything with the spirit of full liberty."[53] Referring to this passage, Baldwin points out that Jacques transformed the very vocabulary of desire: "*Voluptas*, the pejorative rendering of sexual pleasure in Latin, now was made fit for spiritual ecstasy. Concluding Marie's *Vita*, Jacques expostulated on her repose in heaven where, aflame with divine voluptuousness, . . . she fulfills and satisfies all in the spirit of full liberty."[54] Surrounded by her spiritual sons, Marie was transformed before them from caring mother into rapturous bride.

After her death, Marie, like many medieval saints, was dismembered as part of the construction of her memory.[55] Her body parts became relics, miracle workers in their own rights. Her teeth, her hair, her fingers were attributed with spiritual powers that attested to her truly saintly status. We are told in a supplement to Marie's *vita* that after her death Jacques wore one of her fingers in a silver case around his neck. But it was Marie's relationship with Christ, not Jacques, that remained as her real legacy. The final words of the liturgical mass said at Oignies (which survives in a manuscript dating to the late seventeenth century and attests to the longevity of local devotion to her) are "God dried every tear from the eyes of his daughter and filled her heart with exultation and her lips with melody."[56] Marie was forever preserved as the ecstasy-filled bride of Christ.

[52] *VMO*, 665, trans. Mulder-Bakker, 126. Bruce Holsinger points out that this depiction of Marie's sagging skin is in contrast to the image of the taut drumhead that Jacques uses to describe Marie earlier (217).

[53] *VMO*, 666: "ubi torrens divinæ voluptatis omnia implet et satiat spiritu pelenariæ libertatis" (trans. Mulder-Bakker, 127).

[54] Baldwin, *The Language of Sex*, 172.

[55] Brenda Bolton argues that relic veneration and the particularly "brutal treatment of corpses" was occurring "in Brabant in general and at Oignies in particular" at the time of Marie's death ("Marie of Oignies," 209).

[56] "The Liturgical Office of Marie of Oignies by Goswin of Bossut," in Mulder-Bakker, *Mary of Oignies*, 175–98.