

UCLA

Carte Italiane

Title

Angela da Foligno: The Path to Spiritual Authority and the Severing of Family Bonds

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6gh929kv>

Journal

Carte Italiane, 12(1)

ISSN

0737-9412

Author

Politano, Cristina

Publication Date

2019

DOI

10.5070/C9121039015

Copyright Information

Copyright 2019 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

ARTICLES

Angela da Foligno: The Path to Spiritual Authority and the Severing of Family Bonds

Cristina Politano
Drew University

On October 4, 1291, a young widow named Angela da Foligno (1248–1309), in the company of several companions, stopped in a small chapel on the road between Spello and Assisi, in the heart of Italy's Umbria province. Entering the upper basilica of the chapel, Angela's gaze fell on a stained-glass rendering of Saint Francis of Assisi in Christ's embrace. Struck by a sense of divine presence, she experienced a brief, euphoric sensation of union with God. A moment later, this feeling faded and she fell to the floor, shrieking, "Love Unknown! Why do you leave me? Why? Why? Why?"¹

A member of her company, her relative and confessor the Brother Arnaldo (also known as Frater A.), drew Angela away from the chapel and gently coaxed her out of her trance. When Angela's senses were restored, Brother Arnaldo urged her to leave Assisi and never return. He equated the emotional and bodily affectivity of her experience with demonic possession. Yet he continued to travel with Angela, listened to her description of her experiences, and gradually his position altered. Struck by the clarity of her visions, and by the acts of piety that these visions provoked, Brother Arnaldo became convinced that these were genuine instances of mystic union with the divine. He then began a process of transcription, recording Angela's words in a manuscript that would become known as *The Book of Divine Consolation of the Blessed Angela of Foligno*, which was available in Latin until 1526 when it was translated into Italian and published for the first time.²

In *The Book of Divine Consolation*, Angela traces her spiritual journey from sinner to mystic authority, outlining the twenty-one steps that led her from a state of perdition to one of grace. Angela's words ring clear through Brother Arnaldo's writing and constitute a rare early example of an authoritative female voice in the Italian literary canon.³ Yet the project never reached its aim; she was neither beatified nor canonized among her contemporaries, and her text was virtually ignored as an object of literary study for over six centuries following her death in 1309.⁴ Then, in the twentieth century, critics inspired by the advent of avant-garde theory and writing—in France in particular—revisited the life of Angela, interrogating the emotional and affective language of her mysticism and

appropriating her work to modern intellectual themes.⁵ Despite the Francophone attention that she received during the first half of the twentieth century, her text remained virtually unstudied in Italian literature until the 1990s, when literary scholars seized on her voice as an exceptional instance of female subjectivity in the Middle Ages.⁶

Modern commentators remain fascinated by the intensity of Angela's mystic fervor, yet her ascent to mystic authority is riddled with unique problems that remain unaddressed. In order for Angela to walk the path of sainthood, she needed to divest herself of worldly ties. In one of the most compelling yet under-examined moments of the text, Angela reveals a shocking series of details about her life story: early in her spiritual journey, she prayed to God to rid her of her mother, her husband, and her children. She received an answer to these prayers when her entire family died of undisclosed causes, and she admitted to feeling a sense of great consolation at their deaths. In *The Book of Divine Consolation*, Angela describes the events that caused her to lose her family and embark in earnest on her spiritual journey:

In that time and by God's will there died my mother, who was a great hindrance unto me in following the way of God; my husband died likewise, and in a short time there also died all my children. And because I had commenced to follow the aforesaid way and had prayed God that He would rid me of them, I had great consolation of their deaths, albeit I did also feel some grief.⁷

The severing of these family bonds was a crucial step in the process of attaining the independence necessary to pursue her spiritual vocation. It was, moreover, an established trope of medieval monastic culture, sanctioned by both scriptural and hagiographical precedent, and required by the rite of taking religious vows. By divesting herself of her worldly family, Angela was able to assume a place within a spiritual family, conceiving of herself at once as the mother, daughter, and bride of Christ. However, the language that she uses to repudiate her own earthly family is troublingly violent; it moves the modern reader to question Angela's professed Christian faith and to suspect that she may be harboring more selfish, ulterior motives.

The present study examines references to family relations within *The Book of Divine Consolation*, arguing that Angela's repudiation of her earthly family allowed her to engage in mysticism and express a version of Franciscan spirituality that was itself deeply imbricated in the logic of family relations. I analyze gendered experience during the earliest moments of Franciscan spirituality, a topic of renewed interest in the field of Italian history and cultural studies as attested by recent scholarship on Francis's female counterpart, Clare of Assisi (1194–1253).⁸ Angela diverged sharply from the example offered by her predecessor Clare; her

desire to establish herself as a public authority on spiritual matters contributes substantially to our contemporary understanding of mysticism as it developed in the thirteenth-century Umbrian countryside. To this end, this study also revisits arguments that evaluate the authenticity of Angela's mysticism, summarizing the positions of her commentators and arriving at a synthesis of these contradictory viewpoints based on the renewed perspective that Angela's repudiation of her family provides. Thus, while engaging with issues central to the contemporary academic inquiry into the phenomenon of medieval mysticism, I elaborate on models of gendered agency that complicate the question of Franciscan identity in thirteenth-century Umbria and the rest of Italy.⁹

Entering into the modern theoretical discourse that attempts to describe, define, and illustrate the phenomenon of medieval mysticism, I adopt Paul Lachance's definition: "a direct and immediate experience of the presence of God."¹⁰ Often, the subjects of this experience exhibited supernatural signs that attested to the authenticity of their contact with the divine. Twentieth-century feminist theorists attribute considerable importance to the phenomenon of mysticism, claiming that the voice of the woman mystic constitutes the earliest instance of female subjectivity in the modern western tradition, and that the supernatural nature of her contact with God effectively allowed her to enter into public speech.¹¹ Historically, within the Catholic Church, theology was the realm of the educated, and therefore remained dominated by men. Mysticism, on the other hand, presupposed direct and unmediated communication with the word of God. By the end of the thirteenth century, it had become an accepted mode of arriving at theological truth. A woman could bypass the normal channels and gain access to public speech if her mysticism operated according to a prescribed model of performativity, one that included supernatural signs, for example, intense bodily and affective elements such as Angela's shrieking in the basilica.¹² By situating the birth of female subjectivity on a horizon that begins within spiritual movements of the Middle Ages, modern feminist theorists trace the ascent of western European women from a position as their husbands' chattel to one of social prominence. In their view, the project of mysticism was historically linked to the restructuring of women's relationships to public and domestic spaces; it was therefore implicated in the unsettling of traditional familial relationships and in affording women greater agency to interact with the world in an active, public way.

Twentieth-century French philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986), figures among the intellectuals who sought to make sense of the phenomenon of medieval mysticism, and in particular its potential as a gendered mode of agency.¹³ While Beauvoir concedes that mysticism may have an empowering function for women who use their divine visions to project positive action onto society, she casts doubt on the authenticity of Angela's intentions, questioning whether or not Angela engaged in mysticism in good faith.¹⁴ Beauvoir identifies elements

of narcissism in *The Book of Divine Consolation*, moments of transparent self-promotion that, set alongside the familicidal wishes that Angela articulates at the beginning of her text, trouble the modern reader. Beauvoir's critique of Angela's life and work offers a portrait of a figure motivated by raw ambition, one who sought the exaltation and aggrandizement of her own personality above all else, beyond Christian charity and the Franciscan values that she claimed to embody. Beauvoir convincingly argues that her bodily affectivity and the visions described in her writing, though presented in the language of family and community, have little aim beyond the confirmation of Angela's own holiness and her instatement among the saints.

Beauvoir's perspective on Angela is a useful heuristic, a point of entry into the text that allows the modern reader to navigate many of the complex and idiosyncratic questions that Angela's spirituality raises. However, Beauvoir adheres to strict definitions of terms that merit revision and greater granularity, given the centuries that separate their historical contexts. Beauvoir relies on strict definitions of the terms "narcissism," "agency," and "eroticism" in order to cast doubt on Angela's spiritual project. The use of these modern terms in a medieval context risks alienating Angela and unjustly vilifying her, particularly considering that these terms are not applied to Angela's male contemporaries. Many medieval and early modern men relied on the same erotically charged language to describe their relationships with Christ, and yet their legacies remained unquestioned.¹⁵ It was, after all, an image of Saint Francis wrapped in Christ's embrace that provoked the onset of Angela's mysticism. The nature of her spiritual project, though couched in erotically charged terms, maintains the potential to radically transform traditionally gendered modes of agency.

Thus, Beauvoir's analysis serves as a compelling point of entry into the complex tensions that lie at the heart of Angela's spiritual project and of medieval mysticism writ large. Beauvoir calls attention to the tensions and contradictions that underlie Angela's spiritual project. Yet, divinely inspired or otherwise, Angela's mystic fervor reveals the radical rejection and upending of traditional familial hierarchies that limited the status of women within the public sphere. She replaces familial hierarchies with spiritual hierarchies that allow women to accede to public positions—dubious as those positions may be—both in life and in the hereafter.

THE INSUFFICIENCY OF THE FAMILY

In *The Book of Divine Consolation*, Angela reveals that she embarked on a spiritual path before the death of her family, prayed to be rid of her mother, husband, and children, then felt great consolation after they died. In many ways, her desire for independence is in line with the auto-hagiographic aspirations of her text, as well as the ethos of family renunciation in the authoritative texts that precede hers. Indeed, the rejection of family bonds is modeled in the Scriptures as well

as in twelfth- and thirteenth-century vernacular hagiography. The phenomenon is exemplified in Christ's exhortation to his Apostles in the Gospel. Christ renounces his own biological family in order to establish a spiritual community among his followers.¹⁶ In the Scriptures, Christ indicates that the rejection of biological family is essential to the creation of a new community, one that is destined to constitute a new family founded on Christian faith. In addition, foundational Christian saints like Saints Alexis, Catherine, and Margaret eschew marriage and reject their own parents in order to follow their spiritual vocations.

Angela takes this trope a step further by actively praying to be rid of her loved ones, by explicitly referring to them as a hindrance, and by expressing relief when their deaths came to pass. She was neither a biblical nor a legendary figure, but an historical woman who, in vying for a position among the spiritual elite, repudiated the very real family that the ethos of Christian charity and her social role as a wife and mother required that she love and protect. Though she admits to feeling "some grief" over the death of her family, she ultimately views their passing as a necessary step in her own self-actualization. She justifies this through reference to Christ's rejection of his family. Indeed, throughout *The Book of Divine Consolation*, she sanctions her own aversion to family bonds as spiritually necessary, writing, "there is neither father, nor mother, nor son, nor any other person whatsoever who can embrace the object beloved with so great a love as that wherewith God embraced the soul."¹⁷ Divine love outweighs family love, rendering the latter unimportant in Angela's moral universe. She regarded earthly family bonds as a form of wealth that needed to be abandoned in the name of *imitatio Christi*, and in the name of the radical commitment to poverty that Saint Francis had preached:

The second degree of Christ's poverty was greater than the first, seeing that He did desire to be poor in friends and *in kindred* and in all familiarity with the great and powerful, and finally in all worldly friendship. Wherefore he did not possess, nor desire to possess, any friend whatsoever of His own, *nor yet of His mother or His putative father Joseph*, or His disciples. For this reason did none hesitate to kick Him, strike Him, and scourge him, and to speak hurtful words unto Him. And he deigned to be born of a poor and humble mother and to be brought up subject unto a poor carpenter, His putative father [. . .] *so that neither for His mother's sake, nor for any other person, would He leave undone aught which could be pleasing unto His Almighty Father or according unto His will.*¹⁸

In this excerpt, Angela expands on Christ's radical commitment to poverty, theorizing that the "second degree" of Christ's poverty required that he renounce his kindred—in other words, his mother and his earthly father Joseph—in order to

follow the path of the Almighty Father and observe the will of God. Similarly, in a later section of *The Book of Divine Consolation* entitled “Of the Signs of Love,” Angela insists that the spiritual path fundamentally requires the radical refusal of family ties: “The second [sign of love] is that he forsaketh all other friendship which might be contrary unto his love. He likewise forsaketh father and mother, brother and sister, and all other affection which is contrary unto the will of the beloved.”¹⁹ These instructions echo Angela’s own refusal of family ties, and the feeling of consolation she experienced at the death of her family. In fact, she warns the follower of the spiritual path off of any type of love that is not love of the divine: “Because of evil love, therefore, do I fear good love betwixt one person and another, for good love oft turneth into evil in the aforesaid manner.”²⁰ She who walks the path of sainthood must remain suspicious of all forms of love between individuals, lest she be led astray from the path of the divine.

In her dismissive attitude towards the biological family, Angela is certainly an anomaly in thirteenth-century literature. As mentioned, these complicated sentiments regarding the family are not in line with the expectations and the lived experiences of thirteenth-century wives and mothers. The dynamics of high and late medieval family life remain a subject of academic debate, and many scholars disagree over the extent to which the role of mothering during the thirteenth century might have differed from modern notions of maternity.²¹ Nonetheless, images of maternal life have been gleaned from medieval literature, especially from the *chanson de geste*, and combine to suggest a conservative view of the mothering role.²² Some scholars and theorists argue that the modern cult of motherhood—the complex series of words and images that sentimentalize the maternal role—developed from Marian worship that caught its stride in western Europe during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Marina Warner, for example, traces the roots of modern notions of motherhood to medieval conceptions of the Virgin Mary.²³ Similarly, a series of essays published in the mid- to late seventies by the French psychoanalytic theorist Julia Kristeva attempt to describe and account for modern notions of motherhood by referencing the evolution of the image of Virgin Mary with its roots in medieval art and literature.²⁴ According to thinkers like Warner and Kristeva, prevailing thirteenth-century notions about the sanctity of motherhood borrowed from representations of the life of the Virgin Mary and captured a sentimentalized version of the relationship between mother and child. The vision of family life, and in particular of the maternal role, that Warner and Kristeva illustrate stands in stark contrast to Angela’s own familicidal wishes. Angela had no desire to reproduce the passive and nurturing role that the image of the Virgin Mary offered her. Instead, she sought to travel, to preach, and to devise her own brand of spirituality through the transcription and circulation of her manuscript.

Indeed, had Angela been searching for a passive model of female sanctity along the lines of the Virgin Mary, she would have found one in Saint Clare of

Assisi, contemporary of Saint Francis and founder of the Lesser Sisters of the Order of San Damiano.²⁵ Clare was a participant in the *vita apostolica*, renewed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which emphasized a life of material poverty, penance, and service to others. Hagiographic embellishment obscures the early stories of her life, but many historians agree that Clare's family's strong resistance to her religious vocation represented a serious obstacle for the aspiring young follower of Francis.²⁶ Unlike Angela, Clare realized her religious vocation early enough in life to refuse marriage, to avoid childbearing, and to preserve her virginity. She eventually recruited her sisters, cousins, and even her mother Ortulana to join her cloistered life at San Damiano, where they remained for their lives and reconstituted themselves as a religious community. She provided a model for young women in search of a point of entry into the apostolic life, both in the Umbrian countryside and across western Europe where word of her religious vocation reached.

Angela diverged markedly from Clare's example—perhaps by necessity, since she had already lost her virginity and entered into the economy of carnal relations that married life and motherhood entail. Angela patterned her life instead on the life of Francis and, like Francis before her, on the life of Christ, emphasizing not only the rejection of possessions and the commitment to poverty that had become an indispensable feature of Franciscan spirituality, but also the itinerant preaching and visionary spirituality that constituted a much more active and engaged form of monasticism than the example that Clare offered. Furthermore, in contradistinction to Clare, Angela did not merely aspire to follow Francis' example as a student and apostle. Rather, in her commitment to extreme poverty, she aspired to outdo Francis and show him up as inferior by emphasizing her privileged relationship with Christ. Indeed, much of the hyperbolic language that she uses throughout the text to describe her relationship with Christ reflects her desire to mark all the saints as inferior and to establish herself as the singular recipient of divine attention and grace.

This desire to emphasize her privileged relationship with Christ is echoed throughout the course of her manuscript, particularly in the absolute terms of her commitment to poverty, which involved the rejection not only of material possessions, but also of sentimental bonds, particularly those bonds that tied individuals to their families. Throughout *The Book of Divine Consolation*, Angela takes pains to impress on her audience that the earthly family is spiritually insufficient and that the severing of family bonds is a necessary step on the path to spiritual perfection. The web of kindred relations and the carnal and domestic duties that kinship entails serve as an obstacle to following the true will of God, which is the only true purpose of the soul. She borrows heavily from the Scriptures, from contemporaneous hagiographical accounts, and especially from the life of Francis, with which she is in some sense competing. Ultimately, she aspires to surpass

Saint Clare, Saint Francis, and the rest of the saints by imagining herself in an erotic relationship with God.

ANGELA AS BRIDE OF CHRIST

As demonstrated in passages cited above, Angela prayed for the death of her husband and was relieved when God delivered her from the inconvenience that conjugal life posed for her saintly ambitions. Yet she never fully renounced the role of wife. Throughout *The Book of Divine Consolation*, Angela develops the *sponsa Christi* theme, casting herself as the bride of Christ, the bride of God, and the bride of the Eternal Word.²⁷ She imagines God addressing her, selected among all of her contemporaries, saying, "Bride and daughter, sweet are thou unto Me, I love thee better than any other who is in the valley of Spoleto."²⁸ The mystic as the bride of Christ has resonances in earlier Northern European tradition, as well as later in the Italian tradition.²⁹ The late medieval and early modern periods are replete with female saints and mystics who articulate their relationship to Christ in terms of marriage. In *The Second Sex* (1949), a landmark philosophical study of women in western culture, Beauvoir argues that such mystics are motivated primarily by narcissism and by the desire to achieve transcendence through the amorous conquest of God.³⁰ Beauvoir addresses Angela's case specifically, arguing that she incorporates this narcissistic complex most completely through the bodily affectivity and the visions of God described in the course of her writings.³¹ Beauvoir's objections to Angela's brand of spirituality are valid, but they rely on strict and historically-limited terms and ultimately downplay or ignore the power of eroticism to shape the very agency that Beauvoir views as mysticism's ultimate goal.

Commentators on Angela's text have consistently noted that her mysticism expresses an emotional and bodily affectivity that blurs the line between spirituality and eroticism. These erotic elements are not as explicit as they are in the nuptial mysticism of the northern European Franciscan laywomen, known as the Beguines, whose writings explicitly stage weddings and involve the exchange of symbolic tokens such as rings with Christ.³² Still, the erotic elements of Angela's mysticism in several passages become too salient a feature to ignore. The mystical marriage topos draws its imagery from the Song of Songs and pictures the mystic as Christ's bride.³³ When Angela is explicitly named the bride of Christ, of God, and of the Eternal Word, the echoes of worldly love begin to pervade the text. Consider, for example, the moment when Angela, driven by the notion that she needs to "strip" herself completely, literally disrobes. Later, she has an ecstatic vision that she is in the tomb with Christ. Brother Arnaldo writes: "She said that she first kissed Christ's chest and saw that He lay there with His eyes closed, as He did in death; she then kissed His mouth from which she received a wonderful and indescribably delightful odor breathing forth from his mouth."³⁴ The unmistakable erotic overtones of the vision are reinforced when she begins

to suck the blood from the wound in Christ's side. In this way, Angela emphasizes the intimacy of her privileged relationship with Christ using images that the modern reader apprehends as overtly sexual.

Angela's mysticism had occupied the attention of several preeminent twentieth-century writers prior to the publication of *The Second Sex*, but Simone de Beauvoir was the first woman to target the phenomenon critically. In a chapter on the female mystic in *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir devotes considerable attention to Angela, interrogating the objectives and results of her claim to direct knowledge of the divine.³⁵ This chapter follows "The Narcissist" and "The Woman in Love," offering a synthesis of these two themes. According to Beauvoir, the mystic acts out a denied or thwarted love affair with God: "Love has been assigned to woman as her supreme vocation, and when she directs it toward a man, she is seeking God in him; but if human love is denied to her by circumstances, if she is disappointed or over particular, she may choose to adore divinity in the person of God himself."³⁶ She assigns this project of adoration a motive that ultimately refers back to the woman in question: "Woman seeks in divine love first of all what the *amoureuse* seeks in that of man: the exaltation of her narcissism; this sovereign gaze fixed attentively, amorously upon her is a miraculous godsend."³⁷ This passage, though well observed, does not specify the ways in which the mysticism of medieval women differs from the mysticism of medieval and early modern men, who often resorted to the same tropes and the same type of erotic imagery in order to assert their visionary experiences and privileged relationship with Christ. The passage does not specify, moreover, the difference between love and eroticism, and the potential that the latter term holds to disrupt and challenge traditional gendered hierarchies.

Later in the text, Beauvoir offers some insight into the ways in which Angela's desire to be rid of her family reflects on the authenticity of her mysticism, and in particular into the way in which the eroticism of her descriptions of her relationship with Christ further undermine that authenticity. Beauvoir divides mystics into two essential categories. On the one hand, there are women of action like Joan of Arc (1412–1431) and Teresa of Avila (1515–1582), whose visions offer images of the vocational paths that they have mapped out. They pursue these in a logical order, and the fruits of their labor justify their claims to its divine origin. Then, on the other hand, there are women who seek to effect a "thrilling multiplication of their personalities" through vague and uncertain methods.³⁸ They found sects, and they preach doctrines in order to confirm themselves in their divinely-inspired roles, but they rarely produce results beyond their own self-aggrandizement. For this second type of mystic, mystical fervor is an attempt at individual salvation, and one that is fated to fail. The liberty of the woman in question becomes frustrated, and she remains disempowered until she can access this liberty, which can only be authentically employed by positive agency, which Beauvoir defines as projecting positive action onto human society.³⁹ Foligno's

erotic mysticism is false because she seeks man in God; ultimately, her mysticism has no object beyond the confirmation of her own holiness and likeness to Christ. She has prayed to be rid of her husband in order to live in celibacy and repent for her own carnality, and yet she continues to seek satisfaction of her narcissism through amorous conquest of God.

Beauvoir's suspicion of Angela's mysticism becomes increasingly relevant as Angela develops the holy bride and bridegroom motif at the moment of her death. In her final dictation to Frater A., she claims that the Lord spoke to her, saying: "Oh bride and fair one, oh thou who art beloved of Me with perfect love [. . .] it is seemly that the King should lead home the bride whom He hath loved so long, and clothed with the royal robe."⁴⁰ Her death is described as a marriage with the Eternal Word, replete with a royal robe ("It was neither of purple nor of scarlet, nor of sendal, nor of samite, but it was a certain marvellous light which clothed the soul").⁴¹ In a series of erotically charged images, Angela elaborates on the ways in which the Word touched and embraced her, saying "Come, My love, My bride, beloved of Me with true delight. . ." Frater A. finishes the narration, explaining, "And that most holy soul was set free from the flesh, and being drawn into the abyss of the divine infinitude, it received from Christ, its Bridegroom, the garment of innocence and immortality, in order that it might reign together with Him."⁴² In this way, Angela experiences her death as a mystical marriage with God, a consummation of the affective mysticism with overly erotic undertones that she voiced throughout her life. She dispensed of her worldly husband in exchange for a husband better suited to her saintly ambitions—Jesus Christ. Just as Angela sought to replace her earthly husband with a divine one, she sought to replace her earthly children with a spiritual brood. Throughout the text, Angela adopts a maternal position in relation to her readership, addressing her audience as her sons. This trope has less to do with the fact of biological motherhood, and more to do with her desire to imitate Christ, whose pastoral care for his congregation is often described with maternal imagery.⁴³ Applying Beauvoir's suspicions about Angela's narcissism to this case suggests that the maternal imagery in Angela's text is intimately interwoven with her desire to usurp the Virgin Mary and assume her place as the mother of God, the closest possible version of female divinity that Catholicism allows.

Angela's rhetorical strategies cast her in an amorous position vis-à-vis God, and in a maternal position vis-à-vis her own audience, as well as Christ, God, and the Eternal Word. Her ultimate ambition, Beauvoir claims, is to exercise power over the world around her—over her audience, her peers, and even over her own creator, who is repeatedly cast in a dependent position as both the lover and child of Angela. Beauvoir argues that this ambition is fated to fail because it is founded in the inauthentic mode of eroticism. Yet she fails to specify what about eroticism is inherently inauthentic. What if the term were revisited and invested with a sense of empowerment, as it has been in the decades since Beauvoir's

publication of *The Second Sex*? What if Beauvoir's disparaging use of the term were challenged, redefined, and reinvested with the same sense of agency that she construes as mysticism's goal?

In her introduction to a recent translation of Angela's work, Cristina Mazzoni contends that mystic speech played a role in unsettling ecclesiastic hegemony over women's bodies: "disciplines that were originally designed to regulate and control the body are taken up and manipulated by the woman mystic as a method of self-determination, as a way of inscribing power on her own body."⁴⁴ This stature allowed women the authority to speak, to be heard, to lead, to advise, to heal the sick, and to found convents and hospitals; it afforded them a positive mode of agency beyond mere speech.⁴⁵ Diverging from Beauvoir, Mazzoni insists on affective, ecstatic mysticism as not only incidental in, but crucial to, the medieval woman's access to agency: "Bodily asceticism, paramystical phenomena, and visionary experience are thus necessary in order to legitimate the woman writer and, especially, the woman saint, in the face of her institutional silencing."⁴⁶ Likewise, the death of her family facilitated that mysticism, allowing the young widow to remove herself from the sexual duties of the spousal relationship and the caretaking responsibilities of the maternal relationship in order to overcome institutional silencing and to accede to a position of public authority.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the ways in which *The Book of Divine Consolation* refers to family relationships and instrumentalizes the language of family ties in order to cast aside Angela's earthly bonds and to elevate her to become kindred with the divine. Angela's references to family throughout this text allow her to dispense with her earthly family as a religious imperative, and to devise a space for herself within a new family, founded on the position of spiritual authority to which she aspired. Her re-writing and re-imagining of her role within a spiritual family goes hand-in-hand with her mysticism and echoes many of the key features that modern intellectuals have identified in Angela's life. The severing of these familial bonds was thus a crucial step to attaining the independence necessary to pursue her spiritual vocation along the Franciscan model. And yet Angela did not wish to reproduce the role of the Lesser Sisters, cloistered nuns who committed themselves to lives of radical poverty, enclosure, and prayer. Rather, Angela saw herself in an elevated position, as the elected daughter, spouse, and mother of Christ.

Ultimately, her rhetorical strategies allowed her to forge a space for herself within a network of divine kinship that complemented her claim to spiritual authority. The familicidal wishes that sit uneasily with the modern reader are crucial to Angela's self-realization as a spiritual leader who actively engaged with the world by traveling, preaching, and recording her visions and experiences in a written manuscript. If Angela prayed for the removal of her family, it is because she was shrewd enough to realize that the theological authorities of

the thirteenth-century Umbrian countryside would look more leniently upon the spiritual aspirations of a widow than they would upon those of a married mother with saintly ambitions. Highly aware that the domestic realm offered little opportunity to realize these ambitions, Angela knew that her best hope was to pattern her claims to spiritual authority on the life of Saint Francis, and even to take them a step further. Throughout the course of her manuscript, she pushes the values that Francis adopted to the extreme, taking liberties with examples from Scripture and hagiographies that preceded her. In the process, she forges her own idiosyncratic brand of mysticism, one that sat uneasily with twentieth-century intellectuals like Beauvoir who saw her as an ineffective champion of no true goal beyond her own personal celebrity and self-aggrandizement. Yet in spite of many of the compelling issues that it raises, Beauvoir's perspective on Angela's mysticism merits revision. This is especially in light of renewed definitions of agency that construe the potential for agency within erotic language and which treat erotically charged mystic language as central to the project of upending oppressive hierarchies in the medieval world. Rather than a project that was only ever anchored in narcissism, her mysticism still fascinates because it offers a prototype for modes of self-expression that are uniquely grounded in the specificity of the female body.

Notes

1. See Angela of Foligno, *The Book of Divine Consolation of the Blessed Angela of Foligno*, trans. Mary G. Steegmann (London: Duffield and Company, 1909), 165–168.

2. Though literate, Angela da Foligno never composed her own text. Rather, she dictated her experiences in her Umbrian dialect to Frater A., who transcribed them in Latin. For the original Latin text, see Angela of Foligno, *Beatae Angelae de Fulginio Visionum et instructionum liber*, ed. J.H. Lammertz (Cologne: Heberle, 1851). For the authoritative Italian version, see Angela da Foligno, *Il Liber della beata Angela da Foligno*, ed. Enrico Menestò (Perugia: Fondazione Centro italiano di studi sull'alto Medioevo, 2009). All quotes in English are from the Steegmann translation.

3. For a detailed discussion about the debate over the inclusion of medieval mystic writings in the Italian literary canon, see Armando Maggi, "The Place of Female Mysticism in the Italian Literary Canon," in *Strong Voices, Weak History*, eds. Pamela Benson Jones and Victoria Kirkham (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 199–215.

4. Angela would be beatified by Pope Clement XI in 1701, and then finally canonized by Pope Francis over 700 years after her death, in 2013. For a discussion of Angela's belated ascension as a subject of literary study, see Tiziana Arcangeli, "Re-Reading a Mis-Known and Mis-Read Mystic: Angela da Foligno," in *Annali d'Italianistica* 13 (1995): 41–78.

5. The term "avant-garde theory and writing" here refers to the experimental ideas in the arts of western Europe that are most commonly associated with the Surrealist and Dadaist movements, which had their heyday in the interwar period. The most prominent

example of avant-garde writing that features Foligno is the work of Georges Bataille, *Le coupable suivie de l'Alleluiah* (Paris: Gallimard, 1944). Simone de Beauvoir's landmark text *Le Deuxième sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949) also considers the life of Angela da Foligno, and will be discussed in detail below.

6. For a discussion of the twentieth-century intellectual's fascination with Angela da Foligno, see Amy Hollywood, "Beautiful as a Wasp': Angela of Foligno and Georges Bataille," *The Harvard Theological Review* 92, no. 2 (1999): 219–236, as well as Cristina Mazzoni, "Feminism, Abjection, Transgression: Angela of Foligno and the Twentieth Century," *Mystics Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (1991): 61–70.

7. Foligno, *The Book of Divine Consolation*, 5.

8. See in particular Catherine M. Mooney, *Clare of Assisi and the Thirteenth-Century Church: Religious Women, Rules, and Resistance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

9. On the question of thirteenth-century Franciscan identity, see Amy Neff, "Lesser Brothers: Franciscan Mission and Identity at Assisi," *The Art Bulletin* 88, no. 4 (2006): pp. 676–706, as well as Isabelle Heullant-Donat, "Martyrdom and Identity in the Franciscan Order (Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries)," *Franciscan Studies* 70 (2012): 429–453.

10. See Paul Lachance, *The Spiritual Journey of the Blessed Angela da Foligno According to the Memorial of Frater A.* (Rome: Pontificium Athenaeum Antonianum, 1984), 158.

11. This is particularly true in the French tradition. See for example the work of Luce Irigaray, who examines the question of mysticism in "La mystérique," in *Speculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1974).

12. See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Holy Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 25. Bynum observes the difference between male and female religious experiences; men are inclined to tell stories with turning points, use symbols of reversal and inversion, and externalize motives in events, whereas women use ordinary experiences of powerlessness, serving, nurture, and disease to ponder deep, paradoxical meanings.

13. See Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième sexe*. All quotations taken from the English translation, *The Second Sex*, ed. and trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Everyman's Library, 1993).

14. The distinction between good and bad faith, *mauvaise foi*, lies at the heart of Beauvoir's existentialist philosophy. It is outlined in her earlier non-fiction work, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, originally published as *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947).

15. Many thanks to the anonymous reviewer who called this inconsistency to my attention. These male mystics include prominent theologians and church doctors such as Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), Saint John of the Cross (1542–1591), and even Saint Francis (1182–1226) himself.

16. See Mark 3:31–35: "There came then his brethren and his mother, and, standing without, sent unto him, calling him. And the multitude sat about him, and they said unto him, 'Behold, thy mother and thy brethren without seek for thee.' And he answered them, saying, 'Who is my mother, or my brethren? And he looked round about on them which

sat about him, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother.”

17. Foligno, *Book*, 27.
18. Foligno, 55–56, emphasis mine.
19. Foligno, 137.
20. Foligno, 123.
21. For an overview of medieval attitudes towards the family, see David Herlihy, *Medieval Households* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).
22. Much of this scholarship is dedicated to the French tradition but maintains relevance for the vision of motherhood in western Europe more broadly. See Doris Desclais Berkvam, *Enfance et maternité dans la littérature française des XIIIe et XIIIe siècles* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1981), and more recently Finn E. Sinclair, *Milk & Blood: Gender and Genealogy in the ‘Chanson de Geste’* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2003).
23. See *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Random House, 1976).
24. For the English translations of these texts, see Julia Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” in *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 310–333, and “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini” in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 237–270.
25. See Catherine M. Mooney, *Clare of Assisi and the Thirteenth-Century Church*.
26. See Mooney, *Clare of Assisi*, 24.
27. For a fuller development of the *sponsa Christi* theme, see Mary Ann Sagnella, “The Absent Lover in Angela da Foligno’s Liber,” *Mystics Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (1995): 73–79.
28. Foligno, *Book*, 161.
29. For a sixteenth-century example, see the case of Caterina de’Ricci in Anna Scatigno, *Sposa di Cristo: Mistica e comunità nei Ratti di Caterina de’ Ricci* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2011).
30. See Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.
31. For a detailed discussion of the relationship between Simone de Beauvoir and Angela da Foligno, see Amy Hollywood, “Beauvoir, Irigaray, and the Mystical,” *Hypatia* 9, no. 4 (1994): 158–185.
32. See Lachance, 58.
33. See the seminal study by Dyan Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell: Metaphor and Embodiment in the Lives of Pious Women, 200–1500* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011). For an example of Song of Songs imagery in thirteenth-century Assisi, see Marilyn Aronberg Lavin and Sara Teardo, “Cimabue ad Assisi: la Vergine, il ‘Cantico dei Cantici’ e il dono d’amore,” *Lettere Italiane* 57, no. 4 (2005): 514–534.
34. Foligno, *Book*, 60.
35. See Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 701.
36. Beauvoir, 703.
37. Beauvoir, 707.

38. Beauvoir, 709.
39. Beauvoir, 712.
40. Foligno, *Book*, 263–264.
41. Foligno, 263.
42. Foligno, 264–265.
43. See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).
44. See Cristina Mazzoni in Angela da Foligno, *Memorial*, ed. Cristina Mazzoni, trans. John Cirignano (Woodbridge and Rochester: D.S. Brewer, 1999), 8.
45. For a late medieval example of the Italian phenomenon, see the Life of Catherine of Siena, as well as Life of Lucia of Narni, especially in E. Ann Matter and Gabriella Zarri, *Una mistica contestata. La vita di Lucia da Narni (1476–1544) tra agiografia e autobiografia* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2011).
46. See Mazzoni in Foligno, *Memorial*, 9.

