

Spiritual Pregnancy and Holy Women - Exploring the Mystical Maternity of St Birgitta (d.1373) and Joanna Southcott (d.1814)

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Abstract

Spiritual or mystical pregnancy is a relatively unexplored phenomenon which occurs repeatedly across time. This thesis examines the meaning of being somatically 'pregnant' with the Holy Spirit through the accounts of St Birgitta and Joanna Southcott. It explores how medieval holy women who claimed to experience direct access to God imitated the Virgin Mary's incarnation of Christ through mystical pregnancy. In mimicking Mary, female mystics like St Birgitta assumed the prophetic wisdom and knowledge that Mary was reported to gain upon the Annunciation of Christ. St Birgitta's spiritual pregnancy legitimated her role as a spiritual mother and female saviour, as well as authorising her to intervene in political and religious disputes. The Virgin Mary is also known as the Second Eve and is central to early modern accounts of spiritual motherhood. Joanna Southcott, a millennial prophetess who self-identified as 'the Woman Clothed with The Sun' from the Book of Revelation, also used the Marian archetype in her spiritual pregnancy to emphasize her sanctity and the divine origin of her prophecies. This thesis argues that spiritual pregnancy is more than an external sign of inward holiness; it is a strategy which holy women used to subvert the patriarchal religious culture, and which enables them to 'mother' or minister to their religious community. Holy women used the Christian concept of salvation through spiritual motherhood across diverging time periods, places, and theologies.

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Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

(Signed)  Date: 03.11.17

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3rd November 2017

Dedicated to all women who misbehave. Thank you for the inspiration.

Introduction

On Christmas night such a great and wonderful feeling of exultation came to the bride of Christ in her heart that she could scarcely contain herself for joy.

The Revelations of St Birgitta, Liber Caelestis, Book VI, Chapter 88 ¹

This year, in the sixty-fifth year of thy age, thou shalt have a SON, by the power of the MOST HIGH, which if they receive as their Prophet, Priest, and King, then I will restore them to their own land, and cast out the heathen for their sakes, as I cast out them when they cast out me, by rejecting me as their Saviour, Prince, and King, for which I said I was born, but not at that time to establish my kingdom.

Joanna Southcott, *The Third Book of Wonders, Announcing the Coming of Shiloh* ²

Spiritual or mystical pregnancy is a mystical occurrence which, until recently, has been relatively unexplored by the academy. While medieval and early modern historians have made great inroads in investigating the relationship between the body, spirituality, and gender, further progress could be made through a closer examination of the function and role of mystical maternity in the lives of holy women.³ This thesis seeks to shed more light on the phenomenon,

¹ Birgitta, *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden Liber Caelestis, Books VI - VII. Introductions and Notes by Bridget Morris*, trans. Denis Searby, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 155.

² Joanna Southcott, *The Third Book of Wonders, Announcing the Coming of Shiloh; with a Call to the Hebrews* (London: W. Marchant, 1814), 4.

³ I refer in particular to the following scholars - Clarissa Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe* (London: Cornell University Press, 1983); Sarah Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993); Frances Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge UK: The Boydell Press, 1992); Nancy Caciola and Moshe Sluhovsky, "Spiritual Physiologies: The Discernment of Spirits in Medieval and Early Modern Europe," *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1-48; Nancy Caciola, "Mystics, Demoniacs, and the Physiology of Spirit Possession in Medieval Europe," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42, no. 2 (2000): 268-306; Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Patricia Crawford, *Women and Religion in England, 1500-1720, Christianity and Society in the Modern World* (London: Routledge, 1993); Dyan Elliott, *Fallen Bodies. Pollution, Sexuality, & Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Jacqueline E. Jung, "Crystalline Wombs and Pregnant Hearts: The Exuberant Bodies of The Katharinenthal Visitation Group," in *History in the Comic Mode, Medieval Communities and the Matter of Person* (Columbia University Press, 2007), 223-37; Susan Juster, "Mystical Pregnancy and Holy Bleeding: Visionary Experience in Early Modern Britain and America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2000): 249-88; Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women. Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2010); Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania

and argues that spiritual pregnancy (divine maternity), has been a strategy employed by holy women through which they exercised agency and authority as bearers of salvation in the world.

St Birgitta of Sweden (1302/3 – 1373) and Joanna Southcott of England (1750 - 1814) were holy women who both reported experiencing spiritual pregnancies.⁴ Using these examples, I will explore how and why these two women encountered the same mystical marvel, despite their vastly different religious theologies and living nearly four centuries apart. This thesis will investigate the meaning of Birgitta and Southcott's mystical pregnancies as well as the underlying connection between their mystical behavior; that is, how they obtained religious authority as the deliverers of salvation through the device of divine maternity.

I will define spiritual pregnancy as a phenomenon which occurs when a person articulates that they have received a holy blessing or visitation and are 'pregnant' with the Holy Spirit through divine intervention.⁵ This description excludes human phantom pregnancy as the spiritually pregnant individual states that they are with child by supernatural contact. The term 'holy women', or female mystic, will denote women who publicly claimed to experience direct and unmediated access to God and display somatic symptoms of their encounter.⁶

Press, 1995); Elizabeth Alvida Petroff, *Body And Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother. Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (California: University of California Press, 1982); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Jennifer Ward, *Women in Medieval Europe 1200-1500*, Second (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016); Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World: Regulating Desire, Reforming Practice*, Christianity and Society in the Modern World (London: Routledge, 2000); Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Gender in History*, New Perspectives on the Past (Malden: Blackwell, 2001); Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Early Modern Europe, 1450-1789*, vol. 2, Cambridge History of Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Ulrike Wiethaus, ed., *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993).

⁴ Southcott, *The Third Book of Wonders, Announcing the Coming of Shiloh; with a Call to the Hebrews*; St Birgitta, *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden Liber Caelestis, Books VI - VII. Introductions and Notes by Bridget Morris*.

⁵ I acknowledge that some men also experienced spiritual pregnancy. This examines the connection between holy women, spiritual pregnancy, and authority.

⁶ For the purposes of clarity and to suit the trans-temporal method of this thesis, 'holy women' will encompass the terms female mystic, visionary, and prophetess. I note the definition and meaning of these terms vary across different time periods and religious sects.

Spiritual pregnancy is a mystical experience, like unexplained tears, levitation, and stigmata, which can be understood through the concept of mysticism. Mysticism is a modern term which originally referred to 'the most intimate and transforming encounter with God as 'contemplation'.⁷ One of the foremost scholars of mysticism, Bernard McGinn, in his seminal series on Western Christian mysticism, the *The Presence of God*, defines the mystical element as;

...that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God.⁸

Mysticism is 'a *process* or way of life' and is therefore a spiritual journey or transformation from sin to salvation.⁹ While McGinn acknowledges the importance of the presence of God through spiritual union with Christ (*unio mystica*) in mysticism, he also stresses that Christian mystics are primarily practitioners of Christianity. Christian mystics operate within the culture and context of Christian theology, that is, 'the systematic presentation of an individual's relationship to the divine'.¹⁰ Thus, while mystical experiences (such as spiritual pregnancy, trances, visions) cover a wide number of devotional activities and ways to experience God, mysticism is also based on the theology of the individual. Another major scholar of mystical theology, Mark A. McIntosh, asserts that the 'texts of mystical writers are themselves features of the mystical, and their theological insights are direct expressions of the mystical'.¹¹ Therefore, this thesis will examine Birgitta and Southcott's theologies through a close reading of their written works to understand the significance of their spiritual pregnancies and mystical behaviour.

⁷ Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1998), 11.

⁸ Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, vol. 1, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), xvii.

⁹ Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism*, vol. 2, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), x–xi.

¹⁰ McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology*, 31; Louise Nelstrop, Kevin Magill, and Bradley B. Onishi, *Christian Mysticism. An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Approaches* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), 4, 31.

¹¹ McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology*, 31.

I will use a trans-temporal approach to investigate the phenomenon of mystical maternity across the medieval and early modern era.¹² This form of analysis removes the breaks in historical time periods and allows me to trace the experiences of holy women over time.¹³ I will examine the accounts of Birgitta and Southcott carefully, reading for similarities and differences in the way spiritual pregnancy and motherhood has been understood and narrated. My thesis will also assess and contrast the theologies used by both women to investigate how changing religious practices and beliefs impacted the behaviour of female visionaries throughout the Middle Ages and early modern period. I will compare the physical symptoms expressed by Birgitta and Southcott, and uncover how these transferred to their claims of prophetic authority and the Christian understanding of salvation.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. The first investigates the world of medieval holy women, sanctity, and authority. This chapter shows how spiritual pregnancy is inextricably connected to the medieval Christian concept of salvation. It explores the links between the imitation of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the changing practices of religious devotion in the later Middle Ages. In mimicking Mary through receiving Christ into their heart, female mystics could cloak themselves with the authority of Mary, who was thought to gain special powers of wisdom and knowledge upon the Incarnation of Christ. This chapter argues that the imitation of Mary, (*imitatio Mariae*), enabled female mystics to enact the role of spiritual mother to the world as the harbinger of universal salvation, both literally and figuratively. The gendered understanding of medieval Christian theology and its relationship to the body and soul is also investigated. This chapter also explains how prophecy was employed by holy women to assume authority in the religious sphere.¹⁴ Moreover, I show that spiritual pregnancy was a phenomenon which allowed female prophets to assert themselves as religious icons.

¹² David Armitage, "What's the Big Idea? Intellectual History and the Longue Durée," *History of European Ideas* 38, no. 4 (December 1, 2012).

¹³ Armitage.

¹⁴ Prophecy is 'the proclamation of divine messages in a state of inspiration'. See H. Ringgren in Thomas W. Overholt, *Channels of Prophecy: The Social Dynamics of Prophetic Activity* (Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 4.

The second chapter documents Birgitta of Sweden's experience of spiritual pregnancy and argues that it was an expression of her Mario-centric theology. Birgitta's *Revelations* show that she venerated the Virgin as the means through which salvation was brought into the world, as the intercessor and mediator to Christ, and as the bearer of wisdom, grace, and humility. Like the Virgin Mary's Incarnation of Christ, Birgitta's spiritual pregnancy appeared as a movement in the heart and was accompanied by feelings of excessive joy. In her *Revelations*, Birgitta's heart, like Mary's, is a vessel to be filled with the word of God. Her theology indicates that she believed she was 'pregnant' with holy knowledge, and therefore was authorized by God to convey the message of salvation to the world. This chapter demonstrates that Birgitta's spiritual pregnancy was a mystical symptom of what she saw as her holy mission to be Christ's messenger and co-redeemer on Earth.

The third chapter investigates early modern holy women and religion, millennialism, and spiritual motherhood in England. The political and religious climate of Post-Reformation England is explored in terms of the social upheaval of the English Civil War, Interregnum, French Revolution, American independence, and severe natural disasters. It argues that English early modern female prophets continued to use the trope of spiritual motherhood through Sophia (Divine Wisdom) and the Book of Revelation's 'Woman Clothed with the Sun'. This female saviour was a second Eve (or Mary), who would destroy Satan through her deliverance of the Shiloh (the Second Coming).¹⁵ This chapter shows how spiritual motherhood was employed as a form of authority in dissenting religious groups through a reading of Jane Lead and Ann Bathurst's theologies. The increasing medicalization of religious enthusiasm and the relationship between body and soul during the Enlightenment will also be examined in terms of female prophecy.¹⁶ This chapter argues that early modern millennialist female visionaries continued to report experiencing mystical

¹⁵ Matthew I. Niblett, *Prophecy and the Politics of Salvation in Late Georgian England: The Theology and Apocalyptic Vision of Joanna Southcott*, IBT Studies in Prophecy, Apocalypse and Millennialism (London: IBTauris, 2015).

¹⁶ Juster, "Mystical Pregnancy and Holy Bleeding."

symptoms, as well as using divine maternity as a platform for salvation and religious authority.

Chapter four examines Joanna Southcott's mystical pregnancy and shows that she articulated two forms of divine maternity according to her distinctive theology. Initially presenting herself as the 'the Woman Clothed with the Sun', and the spiritual mother to her followers (the Elect), at the age of sixty-five, Southcott pronounced that she would give birth to the Second Coming and thus became both a spiritual and temporal mother. Her theology was based on the books of Genesis and Revelation and argued that Eve was falsely accused of the Fall. Eve was owed justice and according to Genesis 3:15 her seed would 'bruise the serpent's head'. Southcott believed that she was this seed. She was the Second Eve/Mary who would crush Satan and bring forth the Shiloh, which heralded the end times. Her metaphorical and literal spiritual pregnancy was based on the concept of the salvation of the Elect through the Second Coming. This chapter argues that Southcott's theology of the redemption of Eve and her spiritual pregnancy were related. In using divine maternity as a tactic of her theology, Southcott became the leader and spiritual mother of the Southcottian movement.

Spiritual pregnancy, as a type of mystical experience, is a tool which holy women employed to demonstrate their elevated spiritual condition and their status as God's intermediaries. Their direct access to God gave them access to holy wisdom and divine knowledge which was to be revealed to the world for the salvation of humanity. As spiritual mothers they were the bearers of God's truth and could give birth to new believers. This ability gave them the authority to be female saviours on Earth. Spiritual pregnancy was thus especially important to holy women, who were denied positions of leadership in the church. This thesis shows that despite changing religious theologies, spiritual pregnancy continued as a phenomenon across time because it grants holy women the authority to act as religious guides.

Chapter 1 - Medieval Holy Women, Sanctity, and Authority

But this is a weak, womanly age, and the Church is neither as truthful nor as kind as it should be. However, God is at work. Like a female warrior, God fights to vanquish every type of unfairness on earth.

Hildegard in a letter to the Prelates at Mainz, 1178 or 1179 ¹⁷

Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries.

1 Corinthians 14:1-2

The concepts of contemplation, rejection of the body, and union with God in Western Christian mysticism are strongly connected to the function of spiritual pregnancy in the lives of medieval holy women.¹⁸ In the recent past, scholarship on the history of Western medieval piety has focused on the new style of religious devotion, often called affective piety or spirituality, which emerged in Europe during the eleventh and twelfth centuries.¹⁹ Whereas Christians previously reflected on Christ as a king and judge, they now meditated on a more human, suffering Christ, and contemplated aspects of his life and death, such as his birth and crucifixion.²⁰ Affective devotion, or suffering in compassion with Christ and Mary, was part of the reinvigoration of religious, social, and cultural life of the twelfth century and can be seen in both lay and monastic orders in the thirteenth and fourteenth century.²¹ Although they were forbidden by

¹⁷ Hildegard in Avis Clendenen, *Experiencing Hildegard: Jungian Perspectives* (Wilmette: Chiron Publications, 2012), 154.

¹⁸ Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, 88–95. Jantzen explains Origen's theory of the three-fold path to God; purgation of the body, illumination of scripture, and contemplation as a process of knowing and becoming like God through mystical union.

¹⁹ See the canonical work by Richard W. Southern, *The Making of The Middle Ages* (London: Hutchinson, 1965); Stephen J. Shoemaker, "Mary at the Cross, East and West: Maternal Compassion and Affective Piety in the Earliest 'Life of the Virgin' and the High Middle Ages," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 62, no. 2 (October 2011): 571–72.

²⁰ Thomas Bestul argues '...the affective piety of the twelfth century is defined by an ardent love for Christ in his human form, compassion for the sufferings of Christ, and intense longing for union with God.', see Thomas Bestul, *Texts of the Passion: Latin Devotional Literature and Medieval Society* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 35; McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion*, 1–3.

²¹ Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 11–13; For more information on the twelfth century also see Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955) and R. I. Moore, *The First European Revolution, c. 970-1215, The Making of Europe* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

scripture to preach, holy women were able to access authority through prophecy and mystical demonstrations of divinity through their body. Female prophets collaborated with male clerics to have their reported contact with God and somatic mystical experiences tested by the church.²² The phenomenon of spiritual pregnancy was a form of affective expression of the mystical union with God that allowed holy women to assume the role of Christ's messenger on Earth. Through imitating the Virgin Mary and her spiritual maternity, female prophets could become emissaries of salvation, and act as spiritual mothers to a community.

The High Middle Ages saw an explosion of affective devotion to Jesus and the Virgin Mary in the hagiography of holy men and women. However, the majority of those seeking positions of religious authority through accounts of divine inspiration tend to be female.²³ Moreover, during the thirteenth century and fourteenth century, the number of female holy women increased, as did female members of lay communities. This coincided with changes in the religious practices of monastic orders; instead of withdrawal from the world and salvation through prayer, holy men and women sought spiritual growth through evangelical preaching and the renunciation of material wealth.²⁴ This transformation created new opportunities for women seeking a religious life outside of convents or nunneries. These holy women exhibited behaviors and reported experiences that can be attributed to affective spirituality, and which define the 'typical' medieval religious woman.²⁵

Holy medieval women are described as '...deeply ascetic, highly ecstatic, and devoted to meditation upon the events of Jesus' life on earth.'²⁶ The identification with the suffering body of the human Christ and the Virgin Mary was so powerful that it was said to be somatically manifested in the holy woman's body.²⁷ Para-mystical experiences such as immobility, insensible trances, the stigmata, weeping (the 'gift of

²² John W. Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators*, Gender, Theory, and Religion (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

²³ Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages*, 14.

²⁴ Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother. Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, 12–19.

²⁵ Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages*, 15; Caciola, "Mystics, Demoniacs, and the Physiology of Spirit Possession in Medieval Europe," 269.

²⁶ Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages*, 15; Caciola, "Mystics, Demoniacs, and the Physiology of Spirit Possession in Medieval Europe," 269.

²⁷ Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages*, 15; Caciola, "Mystics, Demoniacs, and the Physiology of Spirit Possession in Medieval Europe," 269.

tears'), fits, inexplicable pain and swellings were understood to be the physical expression of their mystical union with Christ and elevated spiritual condition.²⁸ These somatic phenomena occurred more frequently, and with more intensity, in women than men.²⁹ While the meaning and significance of the reception of stigmata and the gift of tears in medieval mysticism has been investigated by the academy, very little attention has been paid to the purpose of spiritual pregnancy in the lives holy women.

To understand mystical pregnancy, we should explore the relationship between the gendered nature of medieval Christian theology, authority, and the body. Female prophets and preachers were always present in the church, and early Christian women (with some exceptions) based their claim to leadership on their reported ability to prophesy and having direct access to God.³⁰ During the tenth to twelfth century women also performed some clerical roles including hearing confession of nuns within their order, preaching, bestowing blessings, and even administering communion to themselves in ceremonies called 'masses without priests'.³¹ However, women performing the duties and prerogatives of ordained male clergy were increasingly condemned by church officials, and by the thirteenth century women were barred from exercising ecclesiastical authority.³² This was based on biblical arguments against

²⁸ Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages*, 15; Caciola, "Mystics, Demoniacs, and the Physiology of Spirit Possession in Medieval Europe," 269.

²⁹ See the large body of work on female mystics and para-mystical occurrences; Petroff, *BODY AND SOUL*; Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings*; Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages*; Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*; Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*; Catherine Mooney, *Gendered Voices Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Rosalynn Voadden, *God's Words, Women's Voices. The Discernment of Spirits in the Writing of Late-Medieval Women Visionaries* (The University of York: York Medieval Press, 1999); Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*; Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother. Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*; Wiethaus, *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*; Caciola, "Mystics, Demoniacs, and the Physiology of Spirit Possession in Medieval Europe"; Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*; Caciola and Sluhovsky, "Spiritual Physiologies: The Discernment of Spirits in Medieval and Early Modern Europe"; D. S. Brewer, *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1984); Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages*.

³⁰ These include Corinthian female prophets such as Philip's daughters, Ammia of Philadelphia, Philumene, the mystic martyr Perpetua, and several holy women from the Montanist movement. See Karen L. King, "Prophetic Power and Women's Authority. The Case of the 'Gospel of Mary' (Magdalene)," in *Women Prophets and Preachers through Two Millennia of Christianity*, ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 21.

³¹ Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, 21.

³² Walker Bynum, 21–22.

female speech and leadership in church caused by original sin through the transgression of Eve, which was displaced on to women;³³

But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.³⁴ (1 Timothy 2:12-14)

Therefore, holy women from the high Middle Ages returned, or rather continued, to prophesy and claimed direct access to God as their source of authority (the 'prophetic alternative') in the church.³⁵

Prophecy has two functions; it seeks both union with the divine (*unio mystica*), as well as legitimacy of teaching and status.³⁶ For women and less privileged groups, prophecy provides access to holy wisdom which in turn sanctions claims to religious authority.³⁷ A prophet who is recognized as possessing unmediated contact with God can challenge religious or political policies which they believe contravene divine will. Questions of power and agency are inherent in mysticism and the affective phenomena of holy women as;

It was crucial to the ecclesiastical establishment that those who claimed knowledge of the mysteries of God should be contained within the structures of the church, since the power of the church would be severely threatened if it should be acknowledged that access to divine authority was possible outside its confines.³⁸

The task of determining who had unmediated contact with God, and how it could be proven, was the province of male clergy, who could be deeply suspicious about such claims by women. To bolster their claims of spiritual mediumship, like their earlier

³³ Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 30.

³⁴ See also 1 Corinthians 14:34 - 35 Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church.

³⁵ Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, 22.

³⁶ King, "Prophetic Power and Women's Authority. The Case of the 'Gospel of Mary' (Magdalene)," 21; See Pseudo-Denys and mystical 'contemplation' in Louise Nelstrop, Kevin Magill, and Bradley B. Onishi, *Christian Mysticism. An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Approaches* (London: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), 1-3.

³⁷ For further information on the relationship between mystics, the ecstatic experience, and social and cultural categories see I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession* (London: Routledge, 2003) and Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*.

³⁸ Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, 2.

prophetic sisters, holy women of the Middle Ages used their bodies as external expressions of their interior sanctity. Mystical pregnancy is an example of how female prophets could demonstrate their immediate connection to the Christ (which authenticated their divinity) and enabled them to transcend traditional gender roles in a way that also supported orthodox Christian doctrines.

In reading spiritual pregnancy as a somatic response to an extreme desire for mystical union with Christ, we should consider the ways in which the body was thought to be the locus of spirituality, particularly for medieval holy women. Mystical union with God (*unio mystica*) could be achieved through the penetration of the soul by the Holy Spirit and is analogous to the concept of demonic possession or invasion.³⁹ There are many examples of the Virgin Mary in medieval literature and art being depicted as the ultimate human (and notably female) holy vessel for Christ. Mary symbolizes the ideal of the fleshly and bounded nature of virginity, and is also the holy bride, mother, and 'container' of Christ. She is a sinless, untainted, and wholesome receptacle of the human manifestation of the Holy Spirit, and is therefore the premier example of *unio mystica*. Images of the life of Mary avoid references to the womb, which was deemed a site of pollution and disorder, and instead show the Annunciation as a virtuous and non-sexual event.⁴⁰ Instead we see the Virgin's chest or head being pierced by rays of light, doves, or even little Christs aiming for her heart, pointing to her spiritual and physiological innocence and the sinless inhabitation of the Holy Spirit.⁴¹ Mary is infused by God as '[i]nto her body, as into the eucharist bread on the altar, poured the inspiration of the spirit and the fullness of the humanity of Christ'.⁴²

In bearing Christ, and in cooperation with him, the Virgin Mary brings forth salvation for humanity, and erases the original sin of Eve. Being somatically and spiritually infiltrated with Christ is an important aspect of affective devotion as well as mystical pregnancy for holy women.

³⁹ Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages*, 15. See also Elliott, *Fallen Bodies. Pollution, Sexuality, & Demonology in the Middle Ages*.

⁴⁰ Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), 343.

⁴¹ Rubin, 343. See also Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Picador Pan Books, 1990).

⁴² Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, 20.

The spiritual pregnancy of Dorothea von Montau, a fourteenth-century Prussian mystic, is an example of the union between Christ (the bridegroom) and the holy woman (the bride/Virgin Mary). Dorothea's spiritual pregnancy also demonstrates how it operated as the means through which a woman could bring forth salvation to the world. Her confessor, Johannes von Marienwerder, wrote her *Vita* and records the incident where Dorothea was told;

At this stage, God was born in her soul and said to her: You shall bear fruit from me.⁴³

The *Vita* also recounts the many ways in which she was blessed by Christ;

29. The twenty-ninth way took the form of a spiritual pregnancy during which the Lord gave birth to himself in her soul. Sometimes he enlarged her womb. Then she felt a lovely child moving about this way and that, kicking merrily as though it enjoyed great affection and delight.

30. In the thirtieth way the Lord granted her the power to deliver herself spiritually into eternal life, to give birth spiritually to Our Lord, or to give birth spiritually to other people or bring forth spiritual fruit on this Earth.⁴⁴

Although Dorothea's union with Christ is described as pleasurable, unlike Birgitta, her spiritual pregnancies occurred in the womb and were physically painful;

When she suffered severe and bitter pain, much like a woman who is in labour, the Lord said to her: Since you are now suffering such severe, bitter pain, like a woman who is about to give birth, the hour is near in which you will enjoy the benefits of eternal life. [...] for you shall give birth to your soul unto eternal life.⁴⁵

In this instance, the birth is related to redemption and the gift of eternal life. Dorothea's labour pains are identical to those suffered by Christ and are a further indication of her affective devotion to Christ.⁴⁶ As was usual for the time, her life and mystical experiences were examined and recorded by her male confessor.

⁴³ Almut Suerbaum, "'O Wie Gar Wundirbar Ist Dis Wibes Sterke!': Discourses of Sex, Gender, and Desire in Johannes Marienwerder's Life of Dorothea von Montau," *Oxford German Studies* 39, no. 2 (2010): 195.

⁴⁴ Johannes Marienwerder, *The Life of Dorothea von Montau, a Fourteenth-Century Recluse*, trans. Ute Stargardt, vol. 39, *Studies in Women and Religion* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 238.

⁴⁵ Suerbaum, "'O Wie Gar Wundirbar Ist Dis Wibes Sterke!,'" 196.

⁴⁶ Suerbaum, 196. On Dorothea's sexual desire for Christ see Annette Volting, "Ever-Growing Desire : Spiritual Pregnancy in Hadewijch and in Middle High German Mystics," in *Desire in Dante and the Middle Ages*, ed. Manuele Gragnolati et al. (New York: Modern Humanities Research Association and Routledge, 2012), 45–58.

Determining whether reported visitations and spiritual possessions were of divine or demonic origin was the responsibility of the clergy who took the testing or discernment of spirits (*discretio spirituum*) seriously as this authenticated sanctity.⁴⁷ Decisions regarding the source of female expressions of spirituality, like mystical pregnancy (whether satanic or holy), were based on church theology as well as readings of the prophet's body and their doctrine.⁴⁸

The church's understanding of the female body and the nature of women influenced how medieval holy women presented themselves and their spiritual experiences. Women were considered inherently inferior and subordinate to men physically, morally, and intellectually.⁴⁹ The thirteenth century Scholastic theologian, Saint Thomas Aquinas, returned to Genesis to explain the headship of men over women and their unsuitability to preach;

Speech can be used in two ways. In one way privately, to one or a few, in familiar conversation. In this way the grace of speech becomes a woman. The other way publicly, addressing oneself to the whole Church. This is not conceded to women. First and principally, because of the condition of the female sex, which must be subject to man, according to Genesis. But to teach and persuade publicly in Church is not the task of subjects, but of prelates. Men, when commissioned, can far better do this work, because their subjection is not from nature and sex as with women, but from something supervening by accident. Secondly, lest men's minds be enticed by lust. Thus Ecclesiasticus, 'Many have been misled by a woman's beauty. By it passion is kindled like a fire.' Thirdly, because generally speaking women are not perfected in wisdom so as to be fit to be entrusted with public teaching ... women, if they have the grace of wisdom or of knowledge, can impart these by teaching privately but not publicly.⁵⁰

This injunction reinforces the view that women are naturally inferior and are under the authority of men, similar to the Pauline belief that women are not only subordinate to men, but to God as well;

⁴⁷ Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages*, 16.

⁴⁸ For further information on the relationships between holy women and their male confessors see Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power*.

⁴⁹ Voadden, *God's Words, Women's Voices. The Discernment of Spirits in the Writing of Late-Medieval Women Visionaries*, 19.

⁵⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia 2a2ae, 171 - 178*, ed. and trans. Roland Potter, vol. 45 Prophecy and other Charisms (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 133–35.

But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of every woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God ... the man indeed ought not to cover his head, for he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man. (1 Corinthians 11:3 & 7)

Eve was the first to be deceived by the Devil and it was her actions which caused the Fall of Man. Through the bloodline of Eve all women are polluted with desire, seduction, gluttony, and are easily misled;

Yes indeed: they are all weak and frivolous ... For we are told here, not that Eve alone suffered from deception, but that 'Woman' was deceived. The word 'Woman' is not to be applied to one but to every woman. All feminine nature has thus fallen into error...⁵¹

According to the teachings of Saint Augustine of Hippo, the flesh represents 'all that led the self to prefer its own will to that of God'.⁵² The Fall of Man is the outward sign of the deterioration of flesh and soul brought about by the loss of focus on God's will.⁵³ The ruptured or fissured flesh (meaning the broken connection to God) is the result of concupiscence which could be controlled through mortification of the body. The twelfth century Cistercian and Saint, Bernard of Clairvaux, defined 'will' as woman, and the 'flesh' as female;

Check the wild motions of the will and take care to tame the wild horse. You are in bonds. Strive to untie what you can never break. The will is your Eve...⁵⁴

The inextricable connection between the body and soul is thus explained. Medieval theology understood the female body in conjunction with medieval science which constructs difference in terms of activity/passivity and exteriority/interiority.⁵⁵ Women who were virginal and chaste could become like men through spiritual growth and union

⁵¹ John Chrysostom, cited in *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present*, ed. Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith Zinsser, vol. 1 (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 79.

⁵² Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 19.

⁵³ Lochrie, 19.

⁵⁴ Bernard of Clairvaux as cited in Lochrie, 20.

⁵⁵ Lochrie, 17.

with Christ.⁵⁶ While women were considered the weaker vessel by the church, their flesh also made them more susceptible to divine and demonic possession, and thus spiritual pregnancy. Through becoming bearers of Christ and salvation, female prophets gained authority as spiritual guides in the religious realm.

Salvation through a woman is demonstrated in *The Confession of Na Prous Boneta*.⁵⁷ Na Prous Boneta, a fourteenth-century French beguine who was burnt at the stake for heresy, claimed to be Christ's chosen mouthpiece and the bearer of the Holy Spirit on Earth. In her recorded *Confession*, Boneta reported that God frequently said to her, "I go away and I return, for I have chosen and made my chamber in you (her heart)".⁵⁸ Moreover, the record states that she was told by God that as "...The Blessed Virgin Mary was the donatrix (female bearer) of the Son of God and you shall be the donatrix of the Holy Spirit".⁵⁹ The interdependent relationship between Christ and Mary is evident in her theology where Boneta maintains that although Mary and Christ were two separate corporeal bodies, they shared the one Holy Spirit.⁶⁰ Her *Confession* recounts that Christ was incarnated from the flesh of a poor virgin "...so that poor people and rich would not fear to find fault with him and finally to crucify him", and that she, another poor virgin, was to be another channel for Christ;

... for just as much as Christ was vituperated in the body which he took in the Virgin, so it is necessary that he be so much vituperated in that body of the words of her speaking, that is, in spirit".⁶¹

The deliberate choice of a woman as the bearer of salvation argues that without Mary, humanity cannot be redeemed.

In the Middle Ages spiritual pregnancy is coupled to the role of Mary in salvation history and her relationship with Christ. It is a somatic phenomenon that holy women experienced mostly in the heart, which was considered the site of the soul by medieval

⁵⁶ Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, 49–56; Jacqueline Murray, "One Flesh, Two Sexes, Three Genders?," in *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe : New Perspectives*, ed. Lisa M. Bitel and Felice Lifshitz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 34–51.

⁵⁷ Prous Boneta, "The Confession of Na Prous Boneta, Heretic and Heresiarch, Carcassonne, France 6 August 1325," in *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, trans. Elizabeth Alivilda Petroff (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 284–90.

⁵⁸ Boneta, 268.

⁵⁹ Boneta, 286.

⁶⁰ Boneta, 289.

⁶¹ Boneta, 290.

theologians. Mystical pregnancy is related to both the body and soul, whereby women, more so than men, were more vulnerable to spiritual penetration. The veneration and imitation of Christ and the Virgin Mary can be seen in the examples of the mystical pregnancies of both Na Prous Boneta and Dorothea von Montau. Their mystical union with Christ enabled them to redeem themselves, and bring salvation to the world. This allowed them the authority to act as female saviours on Earth.

Chapter 2 – St Birgitta and Spiritual Pregnancy

This fire (the Holy Spirit) enters Mary's heart when she considers that serving God is a reasonable thing to do... When she finds hearts for receiving God's words, she should there settle down to advise and persuade as best she can.

Christ explains Mary's active role to St Birgitta in *Liber Caelestis*, Book VI, Chapter 65 ⁶²

As my Son has called you his new bride, so I call you now my daughter-in-law who belongs to my Son. When a father and mother grow old and inactive, they give their daughter-in-law work to do and tell her what has to be done in the house. Similarly, now that God and I have grown old in human hearts and their charity is cold towards us, we want to indicate our intentions to our friends and to the world through you.

The Virgin Mary to St Birgitta in *Liber Caelestis*, Book VI, Chapter 88 ⁶³

One Christmas Eve in the Cistercian monastery of Alvastra, sometime in the 1340s, Birgitta Birgersdotter of Sweden (1302/3 – 1373) reported experiencing 'a great and wonderful feeling of exultation in heart to her spiritual advisors, Magister Mathias and Prior Peter.'⁶⁴ This chapter will explore the significance of her reported mystical pregnancy in her role as God's ambassador on Earth, as well as her Mario-centric theology. Birgitta was a wealthy, highly connected aristocratic medieval woman; she was also a wife and mother of eight children, one of the first female saints to create her own religious order, a counsellor to kings and queens, and visionary known for her extensive writing.⁶⁵ The corpus of her work (written in collaboration with her confessors) includes twelve books; seven books called the *Revelations*, Books I – VII (the *Liber caelistis*), followed by Book VIII (*the Liber caelistis Imperatoris ad reges*), and four additional manuscripts known as the *Regula Salvatoris*, *Sermo angelicus*, *Quattuor orations*, and *Revelationes extravagantes*.⁶⁶ Her identification with the Virgin Mary and imitation of her life dominates the *Revelations* and is the foundation of her claims to prophetic authority. Birgitta's spiritual pregnancy follows a pattern of medieval devotion to the imitation of Christ and his mother in which she achieved and experienced *unio*

⁶² St Birgitta, *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden Liber Caelestis, Books VI - VII. Introductions and Notes by Bridget Morris*, 3:131–32. This is Mary from Luke 10:38 – 42, not the Virgin Mary.

⁶³ St Birgitta, 3:155–56.

⁶⁴ St Birgitta, 3:155; Paivi Salmesvuori, *Power and Sainthood. The Case of Birgitta of Sweden* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 93–105; Claire L. Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy*, vol. 3, *Studies in Medieval Mysticism* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2001), 109–35.

⁶⁵ She was canonized as a saint by Pope Boniface IX on 7th October 1391.

⁶⁶ St Birgitta, *The Revelations of Birgitta of Sweden Liber Caelestis, Books I - III. Introductions and Notes by Bridget Morris*, trans. Denis Searby, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), VI.

mystica. Her theology expresses her belief that as the bride and mother of Christ she was endowed with the ability to spiritually nurture others, and thus bring them to salvation through her role as a holy intercessor. Just as Mary's heart was a vessel for the Holy Spirit made flesh, so Birgitta believed that her heart also leapt to perform the work of the Lord. The Virgin Mary's role in salvation history as the instrument through which redemption was born is pivotal to understanding Birgitta's spiritual maternity.

Birgitta's *Revelations* contain biographical information as well as the mystical advice she received from Christ and the Virgin Mary.⁶⁷ They are designed to be divine messages for others and Birgitta's role is that of holy intercessor and mediator.⁶⁸ What is key to her theology is her situation of the Virgin Mary as the Holy Queen of Heaven and the interdependent relationship she shares with Christ in salvation.⁶⁹ The *Revelations* show that Birgitta modelled herself on the Virgin Mary and she was instructed to imitate Mary's role on Earth through her actions, devotion, and incarnating Christ.⁷⁰

The Virgin Mary's motherhood provides universal salvation in Birgitta's *Revelations*. In one of her numerous conversations with Christ, he explains to her that he created both the body and soul of humans so that they have free will to choose '...the freedom to do good and the freedom to avoid evil'.⁷¹ However, since his goodness and justice has been forgotten and scorned since the Fall, he will remedy this through the promise of the birth of Christ and by appointing prophets such as Moses '...to whom he

⁶⁷ St Birgitta, *Life and Selected Revelations*, ed. Marguerite Tjader Harris, trans. Albert Ryle Kezel (New York: Paulist Press, 1990); Johannes Jorgensen, *Saint Bridget of Sweden*, trans. Ingeborg Lund, vol. 1 (1303-1349) (London: Longmans, 1954); Johannes Jorgensen, *Saint Bridget of Sweden*, trans. Ingeborg Lund, vol. 2 (1349-1373) (London: Longmans, 1954).

⁶⁸ Salmesvuori, *Power and Sainthood. The Case of Birgitta of Sweden*, 17; St Birgitta, *Life and Selected Revelations*, 9-12.

⁶⁹ Claire L. Sahlin, "Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy: A Study of Gender and Religious Authority in the Later Middle Ages" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1996), 122-27; Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy*; Claire L. Sahlin, "His Heart Was My Heart: Birgitta of Sweden's Devotion to the Heart of Mary," in *Heliga Birgitta – Budskapet Och Förebilden*, ed. Härdelin & Lindgren, 1993, 213-27; St Birgitta, *Life and Selected Revelations*, 27-30; Kirsi Stjerna, "Birgitta of Sweden and the Divine Mysteries of Motherhood," *Medieval Feminist Newsletter*, no. 20 (1997): 31-37.

⁷⁰ Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy*, 3:82.

⁷¹ Birgitta, *The Revelations of Birgitta of Sweden Liber Caelestis, Books I - III. Introductions and Notes by Bridget Morris*, 1:218.

revealed the manner of redemption'.⁷² The devil then countered his mercy by creating further doubt and sin, so another solution was required, and this is the reason for Birgitta's calling and the reason why a 'weak woman was chosen' to be a female saviour.⁷³ Christ reveals to Birgitta she has been led to the Holy Spirit for two reasons;

The first is in order to reveal God's mercy, so that people might learn to recall the memory of God's love and suffering. The second is to remind them of God's justice and to make them fear the severity of my judgement.⁷⁴

While His will on Earth is revealed to Birgitta, she is to imitate Christ and remain humble. In this revelation, Christ emphasizes that it is only through his strength and will alone that she is able to fulfil his wishes. Her frailty as a female is what enables her to bring salvation to the world. However, the *Revelations* emphasize that it is Mary who brings forth Christ's greatest glory. In Book 1, Chapter 43, the Virgin Mary explains to Birgitta how the glory of God shines through her;

First, I was given more honor than angels and men, so that there is no virtue in God that does not shine in me, although he is the source and Creator of all things. 3 But I am the creature to whom he has granted the most grace in comparison with others. 4 Second, in return for my obedience I acquired such power that there is no sinner, however unclean, who will not receive pardon if he turns to me with a purpose of amendment and a contrite heart.⁷⁵

For God has clasped me in soul and body to himself and has filled me with every virtue, so that there is no virtue in God that does not shine in me, although God is the Father and giver of all virtues. 7 As with two conjoined bodies – the one receives whatever the other receives – so God has done with me. No sweetness exists that is not in me.⁷⁶

Christ and the Virgin Mary are one in spirit and she can intercede with Christ for mercy and forgiveness on the behalf of others through the miracle of the Incarnation.

Birgitta's imitation of the Virgin Mary's motherhood is seen Book 6, Chapter 88 of the *Revelations* 6:88. Birgitta reports experiencing;

⁷² St Birgitta, 1:219.

⁷³ St Birgitta, 1:219; Sahlin, "Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy: A Study of Gender and Religious Authority in the Later Middle Ages," 9.

⁷⁴ St Birgitta, 1:219–20.

⁷⁵ St Birgitta, 1:125.

⁷⁶ St Birgitta, 1:125.

... such a great and wonderful feeling of exultation came to the bride of Christ in her heart that she could scarcely contain herself for joy. At that very moment she felt a wonderful sensible movement in her heart like that of a living child turning and turning around.⁷⁷

Birgitta was unsure of the origin of the mystical pregnancy and whether it manifested from Satan or God, and she sought clarification from her male confessors. Both Magister Mathias and Prior Peter examined her, and “by sight and touch they marvelled at the truth of it”.⁷⁸ Her encounter is pronounced to be holy, and later at high mass the Virgin appears to Birgitta who explains to her:

Daughter, you are marveling at the movement you feel in your heart. Be assured that it is no illusion but shows a similarity to my own delight and to the mercy done to me. 4 Just as you do not know how this feeling of exultation came so suddenly to your heart, so too my Son’s coming to me was wonderful and swift. 5 As soon as I gave my consent to the angel who announced to me the conception of God’s Son, I immediately felt something wonderful and alive in me. When he was born from me, he came forth from my untouched virginal womb with an indescribable feeling of exultation and a wonderful swiftness. 6 Therefore, my daughter, do not fear that it is an illusion. Instead be thankful that this movement that you feel is a sign of the coming of my Son into your heart. As my Son has called you his new bride, so I call you now my daughter-in-law who belongs to my Son.⁷⁹

Mary’s message to Birgitta, as she understands it, is that the joyous feeling and turning in heart is proof that Christ, her son, has entered her heart and soul. In sharing the same experience of the Annunciation as the Virgin Mary, Birgitta is transformed into both mother and bride of the Holy Spirit. To understand the significance of the imitation of the incarnation of Christ in Mary, we must first further explore the role and meaning of Mary in Birgitta’s theology.

Birgitta’s *Revelations* show that she venerated the Virgin Mary as the means through which salvation was brought into the world, as the central intercessor and mediator to Christ, and as the bearer of wisdom, grace, and humility. Mary features

⁷⁷ St Birgitta, *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden Liber Caelestis, Books VI - VII. Introductions and Notes by Bridget Morris*, 3:155–56.

⁷⁸ St Birgitta, 3:155–256.

⁷⁹ St Birgitta, 3:155.

prominently as Birgitta's divine and motherly guide and is present in one third of the approximate 700 *Revelations*. The Virgin Mary is more than a vessel for Christ and his holy wisdom; like many other medieval Christians, Birgitta believed that upon the Annunciation Mary received the ability to prophesy, (to speak inspired words), as well as the divine knowledge and mercy of Christ.⁸⁰ In Book 1, Chapter 5.8 in the *Revelations*, Christ praises his mother and tells her that through his incarnation she obtained more divine wisdom than any other person;

You outshine the heavens; your light and your serenity surpass all the angels. By your serenity you attracted to yourself the true sun, that is, my divine nature, so much so that the sun of my divinity came to you and settled on you. *By its warmth you were you were warmed in my love beyond all others and by its splendor you were enlightened in my wisdom more than all others.*⁸¹ (italics mine)

The Virgin Mary goes on to enlighten Birgitta on how she received the wisdom of Christ and knows more than biblical scholars;

In the fervor of his love he sent his messenger and gave me to understand his decision that I should become the Mother of God. When I understood what the will of God was, then, through the fire of love that I bore in my heart towards God, a word of true obedience at once left my lips, and I gave this answer to the messenger, saying: 6 'May it be done to me according to your word.' At that very instant the Word was made flesh in me. The Son of God became my son. The two of us had one son who is both God and man, as I am both Mother and Virgin. 7 As my Son Jesus Christ, true God and wisest of men, lay in my womb, I received such great wisdom through him that I not only could understand the learning of scholars, I could even discern whether their hearts were true, whether their words proceeded from love for God or from scholarly cleverness.⁸²

The exultation, or excessive rejoicing, that Birgitta experienced upon conceiving Christ in her heart mirrors that of the Annunciation as described to her by Mary. Birgitta linked the leaping in her heart to both Christ's incarnation and the conception of John the Baptist by Elizabeth as described in her *Revelations*, where she recounts Mary's visit to Elizabeth in the same words as Luke 1.41-2. She records that 'when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy

⁸⁰ Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy*, 3:96.

⁸¹ St Birgitta, *The Revelations of Birgitta of Sweden Liber Caelestis, Books I - III. Introductions and Notes by Bridget Morris*, 1:141.

⁸² St Birgitta, 1:273.

Ghost'.⁸³ Being replete with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth is given the gift of prophesy and states in a loud voice 'Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb', assuring Mary that all that has been promised her will be fulfilled (Luke 1.42).⁸⁴ Mary responds 'My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed'. (Luke 1.46 - 8)

Therefore, to Birgitta a spiritual pregnancy indicates that she is also replete with divine wisdom and holy knowledge which needs to be conveyed to the world. Birgitta's heart, like Mary's, is a vessel to be filled with the word of God.⁸⁵ Birgitta's *Revelations* and what she claimed was her divine mission are connected through her concept of Mary as Christ's messenger and co-redeemer on Earth. Mary teaches and explains her role as intercessor to Birgitta by explicating on her visions and spiritual occupation. She also soothes and reassures Birgitta when she is concerned about deception by the Devil and protects her as Christ's mouthpiece and bride on Earth.⁸⁶ The *Revelations* depict Mary as a loving mother who obtains the gift of prophecy for Birgitta so that she can dispense Christ's mercy and compassion to the world.⁸⁷ Mary's compassion and intercession for sinners allows Christ to dispense merciful justice on Earth. The Virgin requests revelations for Birgitta from Christ so that sinners can repent and receive the forgiveness they require.⁸⁸ Christ will not refuse Mary's requests of mercy or prayers on her behalf, and Birgitta's role as his Holy channel (*canale*) is to proclaim the revelations transmitted to her to the world. Through her imitation of the Virgin Mary and her conception, Birgitta adopted the role of divine messenger, heavenly mediator, and spiritual mother on Earth.

The purpose of the mystical pregnancy and her new vocation is later revealed to her:

When a father and mother grow old and inactive, they give their daughter-in-law work to do and tell her what has to be done in the house. Similarly, now that God and I have grown old in human hearts and their charity is cold towards us, we

⁸³ St Birgitta, *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden Liber Caelestis, Books VI - VII. Introductions and Notes by Bridget Morris*, 3:122.

⁸⁴ St Birgitta, 3:122.

⁸⁵ Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy*, 3:101.

⁸⁶ Sahlin, 3:78-107.

⁸⁷ Sahlin, 3:80.

⁸⁸ Sahlin, 3:81.

want to indicate our intentions to our friends and to the world through you. 8 This movement in your heart will continue in you and to grow according to the capacity of your heart.⁸⁹

Through her mystical pregnancy, Birgitta is called to be Christ and Mary's messenger to the world. She 'is like a pipe of the Holy Spirit through which he makes lovely music in the world for his own glory and for the benefit of people'.⁹⁰ Birgitta continued to experience mystical union and movement within her heart throughout her life, which increased during periods of ecstasy.⁹¹ She has also been given a holy task – to be a *Revelatrix* on behalf of Christ. The motion in her heart serves as a sign of Birgitta's spiritual elevation and authorizes her to reveal Christ's wisdom and justice. Birgitta's mystical pregnancy represents a holy communication that she was to devote her life to the spiritual welfare of the world.⁹² Once Birgitta is united in spiritual marriage with her Son, Mary reveals that her role as her daughter-in-law is to reignite love for Christ and Mary in the world; to engender salvation on Earth.

The location of the pregnancy in Birgitta's heart indicates that she believed it was a divine and holy experience which united her with Christ. The heart was the central location of human interactions with God as well as all "desire, affection, and thought".⁹³ In an earlier revelation Christ tells Birgitta that '...I myself want to dwell in your heart. I love you so very much! ... Whom could you fear when you have within you God almighty...'.⁹⁴ Birgitta understood that the location was important as a sign of divinity. Moreover, in another revelation, Birgitta is shown another type of pregnancy which was not holy. Christ tells Birgitta about a woman whose womb swelled up because she was being plagued by a demon and offers her his advice;

Since this woman is under the control of a demon due to her lack of faithfulness and continence, and because she approached the sacrament of the altar without

⁸⁹ Birgitta, *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden Liber Caelestis, Books VI - VII. Introductions and Notes by Bridget Morris*, 3:155–56.

⁹⁰ St Birgitta, *The Revelations of St Birgitta of Sweden Liber Caelestis, Books IV - V. Introductions and Notes by Bridget Morris*, trans. Denis Searby, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 178–79.

⁹¹ Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy*, 3:83.

⁹² Sahlin, 3:92.

⁹³ Sahlin, 3:91.

⁹⁴ St Birgitta, *The Revelations of Birgitta of Sweden Liber Caelestis, Books I - III. Introductions and Notes by Bridget Morris*, 1:103.

having confessed due to shame, therefore she must confess her long concealed sin and God's friends must pray for her. 6 Then she should receive my body from the hands of a priest, for it pleases me to cure her through my friends' prayers and the tears they shed for her.⁹⁵

The woman's enlarged womb deflated once the woman had confessed and repented. Therefore, the timing and location of Birgitta's mystical pregnancy - on Christmas Eve, in her heart, was a sign that it was a holy experience, and not demonic via the womb, unlike the example above. It is also the most compelling example of her imitation of the Virgin Mary, as well as being the strongest connection between Mary's maternity and her vocation as the channel of Christ.

Birgitta's spiritual pregnancy is about her mission of salvation and being a messenger of Christ. In Book 6, Chapter 67 of the *Revelations*, Christ tells Birgitta that the world has three ages and that because of the increasing impiety and pride of men that she is living in the third age. Additionally, a 'monstrous Antichrist will be born from an accursed woman and man' which indicates the end times.⁹⁶ Birgitta is given to understand that she is living in the end times. Her spiritual pregnancy and calling of salvation in the world is even more significant with the forthcoming apocalypse.

Birgitta's Mario-centric theology shows that she believed the relationship between Christ and the Virgin Mary was interdependent. While Christ was the Redeemer, the Virgin Mary was the means through which he was born. Mary can perform work on behalf of Christ and petition him for blessings. Birgitta's imitation of the Incarnation indicates that she believed she also received the gift of prophecy when she experienced her spiritual pregnancy. She was then exhorted to go forth and perform the work of Christ and his mother in the world. Birgitta's spiritual pregnancy gave her the authority to act as a spiritual guide and female saviour due to her reported divine connection to Christ.

Chapter 3 - Early Modern Holy Women and Religion, Millennialism, and Spiritual Motherhood

⁹⁵ St Birgitta, *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden Liber Caelestis, Books VI - VII. Introductions and Notes by Bridget Morris*, 3:150–51.

⁹⁶ St Birgitta, 3:139–40.

Behold I am God's eternal Virgin-Wisdom ... I am to unseal the Treasures of God's deep Wisdom; ... for out of my Womb thou shalt be brought forth after the manner of a spirit, conceived and Born again: this thou shalt know by a New Motion of Life, stirring and giving restlessness, till Wisdom be born within the inward parts of thy Soul.

Jane Lead, *A Fountain of Gardens Watered by the Rivers of Divine Pleasure* 1697 ⁹⁷

I see a woman clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet and on her head a crown of twelve stars, and she being in travail cried out being with child, I feel a travail for visions to be brought forth. O the birth of the Holy Ghost, that man-child that must rule all nations, and though the dragon may seek to destroy this man-child the male power of the Spirit, but it shall be caught up.

Ann Bathurst 1685 ⁹⁸

The women of the early modern period continued to exert authority through the archetype of spiritual motherhood. The Protestant Reformation directly challenged the belief that personal salvation could only be achieved through the church and its clerics, and protestant leaders such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli argued that redemption came through faith and God alone.⁹⁹ The Bible was translated from Latin to the vernacular and scripture became more readily available to men and women of all classes.¹⁰⁰ The English Reformation was constructed on the belief that all men and women (the 'priesthood of all believers') could have a personal relationship with God. Religious wars, political dissent, and natural disasters stoked protestant fears that the Second Coming was imminent and reformers returned to the Books of Daniel and Revelation for support.¹⁰¹ The Virgin Mary ceased to be revered as a powerful *mediatrix* and *co-salvatrix* and became the example of virginity and motherly devotion that women

⁹⁷ Jane Lead, *A Fountain of Gardens Watered by the Rivers of Divine Pleasure, and Springing up in All the Variety of Spiritual Plants, Blown up by the Pure Breath into a Paradise : To Which Is Prefixed a Poem, Introductory to the Philadelphian Age, Called Solomons Porch, or The Beautiful Gate to Wisdoms Temple*, Early English Books, 1641-1700 (London: Early English Books Online, 1697), 18.

⁹⁸ Ann Bathurst as quoted in Elizabeth Bouldin, *Women Prophets and Radical Protestantism in the British Atlantic World, 1640-1730* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 111.

⁹⁹ Merry E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 186.

¹⁰⁰ Wiesner, 186.

¹⁰¹ Lionel Laborie, *Enlightening Enthusiasm. Prophecy and Religious Experience in Eighteenth-Century England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 3.

could model in the home.¹⁰² However, the concept of the Virgin Mary was also restored through the millennial reinvention of her as the Second Eve or, Sophia, the Virgin Wisdom.¹⁰³ While early modern religious customs and beliefs still reflected the typical understanding of male and female sexual difference, the social and political unrest of the Civil War and Interregnum both challenged and reinforced traditional gender roles in Britain.¹⁰⁴ In the same way that changes in religious practices created opportunities for some women in the Middle Ages, the Protestant Reformation also offered holy women similar gateways to a new religious and public sphere.¹⁰⁵ While standard Pauline arguments against female preaching and writing were upheld, many women ignored the prohibition and sought to justify their position through prophecy.¹⁰⁶ The prolific seventeenth century female theological writer, known only as M. Marsin, refuted Pauline strictures on women preaching on the basis that ‘no Man’s Words are of force, as to what they speak in contradiction to the Word of God’.¹⁰⁷ Many female prophets, like the Quaker Margaret Fell in her 1666 publication, *Women’s Speaking Justified*, used scripture to support her conviction that divine revelation through unmediated contact with God had more authority than man-made Biblical laws which prohibited women from preaching.¹⁰⁸ The tradition of female religious authorization through prophecy continued, though changed, through the early modern era, and is particularly evident in millennial and radical sects.¹⁰⁹ This chapter will explore the realm of early modern female visionaries in England to understand how they used spiritual motherhood as a strategy for assuming prophetic and religious authority.

¹⁰² Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 184.

¹⁰³ Laborie, *Enlightening Enthusiasm. Prophecy and Religious Experience in Eighteenth-Century England*, 59.

¹⁰⁴ Crawford, *Women and Religion in England, 1500-1720*, 9.

¹⁰⁵ Crawford, 5. See also Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 21.

¹⁰⁶ Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 186.

¹⁰⁷ M. Marsin as quoted in Sarah Apetrei, “A ‘Remarkable Female of Womankind’: Gender, Scripture, and Knowledge in the Writings of M. Marsin,” in *Women, Gender and Radical Religion in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Sylvia Brown, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 150.

¹⁰⁸ Margaret Askew Fell Fox, *Womens Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed of by the Scriptures, All Such as Speak by the Spirit and Power of the Lord Jesus: And How Women Were the First That Preached the Tidings of the Resurrection of Jesus, and Were Sent by Christ’s Own Command, before He Ascended to the Father, John 20:17.*, Early English Books Online (London: Early English Books Online, 1666), 8–9; Apetrei, “A ‘Remarkable Female of Womankind’: Gender, Scripture, and Knowledge in the Writings of M. Marsin,” 151.

¹⁰⁹ Bouldin, *Women Prophets and Radical Protestantism in the British Atlantic World, 1640-1730*; Sylvia Brown, *Women, Gender, and Radical Religion in Early Modern Europe*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

In the sixteenth and seventeenth century Protestant theologians taught that the natural role for women was to be a wife and mother, dutifully obedient in the home, and under the protection and authority of a husband.¹¹⁰ Men were expected to attend to the business of politics and trade while women nurtured children at home; 'The office of the husbände is to go abroad in matters of profite, of the wife, to tarry at home'.¹¹¹ The household was a miniature representative of society (a little Commonwealth) and an extension of the church; therefore disorder in the home and congregation could lead to greater conflict in the state.¹¹² The church was also a metaphor for family and sometimes was described as the Bride of Christ, while protestant ministers saw themselves as husbands and fathers, their 'parishioners being children begotten in God'.¹¹³ Although women were 'not admitted to any publicke function in in church or commonwealth', they still had a public duty and calling in that 'a conscionable performance of household duties, in regard to the end and fruit thereof, may be accounted a publicke worke'.¹¹⁴ However, the family and household was not an isolated sphere but was also a 'meeting point between the public and private'.¹¹⁵ Work was conducted at home and so the government had a stake in the household, religious practices, and public behavior.¹¹⁶ Therefore, the issue of authority in post-reformation England was problematic; while questions arose over the duty of obedience owed to princes and the clergy, so did concerns about the limits of wifely subservience and female self-governance.¹¹⁷

Although submission to a husband was expected by society, literature on the subject of wifely obedience and female competence demonstrate that some individuals debated the parameters of female compliance. One anonymous tract stated that a wife

¹¹⁰ Crawford, *Women and Religion in England, 1500-1720*, 38–42; Julie Hirst, "'Mother of Love': Spiritual Maternity in the Works of Jane Lead (1624 - 1704)," in *Women, Gender and Radical Religion in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Sylvia Brown, *Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 161.

¹¹¹ Edmund Tilney as quoted in Crawford, *Women and Religion in England, 1500-1720*, 8.

¹¹² Crawford, 48–52.

¹¹³ Crawford, 51.

¹¹⁴ William Gouge as quoted in Crawford, 49–50.

¹¹⁵ Crawford, 49.

¹¹⁶ Deborah M. Valenze argues that home cottage industries dissolved some of the sexual division of labor and that the household was essential for both economic and reproductive survival. Plebeian women, 'empowered by pressing necessity' responded by expressing themselves through the public arena of religion. See Deborah M. Valenze, *Prophetic Sons and Daughters: Female Preaching and Popular Religion in Industrial England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 34–35.

¹¹⁷ Crawford, *Women and Religion in England, 1500-1720*, 49.

should govern her household 'taking all her light (as the Moone is said from the Sunne, so she) from her husband' and be his chief Lieutenant.¹¹⁸ The author points out that there are degrees in all things; a subject who obeys their prince is not a slave, and neither is a dutiful wife.¹¹⁹ A husband's rule should not be oppressive and although a wife was subordinate to him, this did not require from the woman a 'servile or subjection or dutie, but dutie with a kind of equalitie, and equalitie with reverance'.¹²⁰ The ability to be an effective 'lieutenant' in the home was linked to female education and their piety. Protestant homes were to produce pious and godly children, with husbands and fathers as spiritual leaders, mothers having a subordinate, yet collaborating role in promoting godly virtues by instructing their children in Christianity.¹²¹ In an argument for the instruction of women, school teacher Bathsua Makin's *Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen in Religion* (1673) disclaimed against the 'under-breeding of Women' in learning and advocated that it was the work of the Reformation to correct the practice.¹²² Moreover, English women were the instigators of religious reform, and continued to promote its growth, which benefitted the nation.¹²³ Early Enlightenment women could serve God through religious devotion, however ultimate salvation was still achieved through the appropriate role of motherhood, which still held special spiritual significance for holy women as according to Timothy 12.15 '... she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety'. Religion, wifehood, and motherhood remained central to the public and private world of women.

While the religious discourse of female prophets has not always been public, the disruption to social and government hierarchies caused by the English Civil War created a space where dissenting women could prophesy.¹²⁴ Early modern religious historians

¹¹⁸ Ste. B, *Counsel to the Husband: To the Wife Instruction : A Short and Pithy Treatise of Seuerall and loynt Duties, Belonging Vnto Man and Wife, as Counsels to the One, and Instructions to the Other; for Their More Perfect Happinesse in This Present Life, and Their Eternall Glorie in the Life to Come.*, Early English Books Online (London: Imprinted by Felix Kyngston, for Richard Boyle, 1608), 48–49.

¹¹⁹ Ste. B, 48–49.

¹²⁰ Ste. B, 78–79.

¹²¹ Crawford, *Women and Religion in England, 1500-1720*, 87.

¹²² Sarah Apetrei, *Women, Feminism and Religion in Early Enlightenment England*, Cambridge Studies in Early Modern British History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 63.

¹²³ Bathsua Makin, *An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen in Religion, Manners, Arts & Tongues: With an Answer to the Objections against This Way of Education.*, Early English Books Online (London: Printed by JD, to be sold by T. Parkhurst, 1673), 28.

¹²⁴ Bouldin, *Women Prophets and Radical Protestantism in the British Atlantic World, 1640-1730*, 2. Thomas Overholt's model of prophetic activity shows the interrelationship between the supernatural, prophet and audience. An audience is part of the authentication process of a prophetic revelation or message. See Overholt,

such as Phyllis Mack, Susan Juster, and Elizabeth Bouldin, explored the explosion of radical Protestant groups in this period, which produced the ‘first great wave’ of female prophets and prophetic literature in the British Atlantic.¹²⁵ Mack estimates that nearly three hundred visionary women prophesied and wrote during the early period of the Civil War, 200 of whom belonged to the Quakers (the Society of Friends).¹²⁶ Although Quakers were only one of the many protestant groups which proliferated in Britain following the Reformation, they were the most accepting and receptive sect to female prophets and prophecy.¹²⁷

During the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the concept of being ‘chosen’, or being one of God’s Elect, both individually and as part of a community of believers, increased due to the expectation of the Second Coming and the last days.¹²⁸ Natural disasters, the war of American Independence, the French Revolution, industrialization, and the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte were seen as indicators of a forthcoming apocalypse by millennialist believers.¹²⁹ Millennialism, (also sometimes referred to as millenarianism or chiliasm) is the belief that the ‘world would be transformed by the Second Coming of Christ and the establishment of the kingdom of God on Earth’, which would last for 1000 years, after which the last judgement would come.¹³⁰ Millennialist

Channels of Prophecy, 23. See also Max Weber on the social role of the prophet and charisma, Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff (London: Methuen, 1965).

¹²⁵ Sylvia Brown notes that the term ‘radical’ has different meanings based on one’s perspective as an insider or outsider to a particular religious movement and their doctrine. See Brown, *Women, Gender, and Radical Religion in Early Modern Europe*, 1. For further information on the growth in the number of female prophets and their activity during the seventeenth and eighteenth century see Bouldin, *Women Prophets and Radical Protestantism in the British Atlantic World, 1640-1730*; Mack, *Visionary Women. Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England*; Phyllis Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment: Gender and Emotion in Early Methodism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Susan Juster, *Doomsayers: Anglo-American Prophecy in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

¹²⁶ Mack, *Visionary Women. Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England*, 1.

¹²⁷ Mack, 1. Later seventeenth century Quakerism saw the introduction of institutional structures including separate meetings for female congregants (although men and women still worshipped together) and a censorship system which altered the more outspoken approach of its early female prophets. Mack argues that while female Quakers still had considerable influence in the group, later members sought to become more socially and politically mainstream, and so ‘women prophets retired behind the closed doors of the meeting house’. See Mack, 1.

¹²⁸ Bouldin, *Women Prophets and Radical Protestantism in the British Atlantic World, 1640-1730*, 17.

¹²⁹ Gordon Allan, “Joanna Southcott: Enacting the Woman Clothed with the Sun,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, ed. Michael Lieb et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4; Anna Clark, “The Sexual Crisis and Popular Religion in London, 1770-1820,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 34 Religion and The Working Class (1988): 56.

¹³⁰ J.F.C Harrison, *The Second Coming. Popular Millenarianism 1780 - 1850* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 4. For explanation of these terms, including pre and post millennialism, see Catherine Wessinger, “Millennial Glossary,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*, ed. Catherine Wessinger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 717–24. Wessinger provides a functional definition of millennialism as a ‘belief in an imminent

groups included Quakers, Behemists, Fifth Monarchists, Philadelphians, French Prophets, and Pietists, to name a few.¹³¹ Many of these groups sought interactions with each other, transcending sectarian ideologies, coming together in recognition of the impending apocalypse and the expectation of the dawn of a new age.¹³² Women prophets were particularly active in communicating and exchanging letters, printed tracts, testimonies, and prophecies with other sects across many cultural, economic, political, social, and regional boundaries.¹³³ Operating within these networks, female prophets established their authority on the basis of divine election and through a divine connection to God.

The concept of personal election and the coming of the end times were deeply connected through a return to Old Testament biblical language and eschatology. This gave female visionaries a platform to stage themselves as representatives of the Second Coming.¹³⁴

And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy ... And on my

transition to a collective salvation, in which the faithful will experience well-being, and the unpleasant limitations of the human condition will be eliminated. The collective salvation is often considered to be earthly, but it can also be heavenly. The collective salvation will be accomplished either by a divine or superhuman agent alone, or with the assistance of humans working according to the divine or superhuman will and plan'. Wessinger, "Millennialism in Cross-Cultural Perspective," in *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*, ed. Catherine Wessinger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4 – 5.

¹³¹ Quakers, or the Society of Friends, was founded by George Fox in mid-seventeenth century England. Behemists were followers of Jacob Boehme. Fifth Monarchists were a radical Civil War sect which gave apocalyptic interpretations to mid-seventeenth century political struggles. Philadelphians (or the Philadelphia Society) was founded in England in the late seventeenth-century by John Pordage and later taken up by Jane Lead. The French Prophets arrived in England from South France in the early eighteenth-century and attracted a large millenarian following. Pietists originated in the German Lutheran community in the seventeenth-century and stressed personal piety over religious formality, as well as intensity of religious devotion or feeling. See Bouldin, *Women Prophets and Radical Protestantism in the British Atlantic World, 1640-1730*, 2. See also Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); Harrison, *The Second Coming. Popular Millenarianism 1780 - 1850*; Clarke Garrett, *Respectable Folly: Millenarians and the French Revolution in France and England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975); Catherine Wessinger, "Millennialism in Cross-Cultural Perspective," in *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*, ed. Catherine Wessinger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3–26; Juster, *Doomsayers*; W. H. Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists: The Uses of Biblical Prophecy in England from the 1790s to the 1840s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

¹³² Bouldin, *Women Prophets and Radical Protestantism in the British Atlantic World, 1640-1730*, 154–59.

¹³³ Bouldin, *Women Prophets and Radical Protestantism in the British Atlantic World, 1640-1730*, .3; It should be noted that Susan Juster argues that seventeenth and eighteenth-century female visionaries often used illiteracy and lack of education as 'proof' that their revelations came from divine inspiration rather than religious instruction, Juster, *Doomsayers*, 95.

¹³⁴ Brown, *Women, Gender, and Radical Religion in Early Modern Europe*, 6; Bouldin, *Women Prophets and Radical Protestantism in the British Atlantic World, 1640-1730*, 15.

servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. (Acts 2:17 – 18)¹³⁵

Female religious figures could imitate the prophet Isaiah and call on the community, city, or nation to repent over sinful moral failings, or lament the woes which had befallen them.¹³⁶ Conversely, they were also able to promote themselves as the bearers of salvation by identifying themselves as the 'Woman Clothed with the Sun' from Chapter 12 of Revelation.¹³⁷ Their prophecies often invoked gendered images of conjugal unity with Christ the Bridegroom, in addition to other feminine bodily concerns such as gestation, childbirth, and lactation. For example, Jane Lead, a seventeenth-century millenarian visionary, referred to herself as 'Mother', and described God as a combination of both Holy Father and Sophia (Divine Wisdom).¹³⁸ Sophia was a Marian-like source of divine sustenance and wisdom from which Lead wrote;

...my Spirit still attended eagerly longing to lay my Mouth to Wisdom's Breast,
from which the Word of Life so sweetly did flow.¹³⁹

According to Lead, the Virgin Mary was a representative of Sophia and a 'Type of the Eternal Virgin Mother', in human form, who gave birth to Jesus.¹⁴⁰ Sophia, eternal wisdom, was an intercessor between herself and God, through which Lead could achieve union with Christ and give birth to spiritual children.¹⁴¹

Mothering spiritual children is also depicted in the writing of Ann Bathurst, a seventeenth-century Philadelphian member and prophet, who combined Sophia with 'the Woman Clothed with the Sun'.¹⁴² Bathurst not only labored over writing but also in

¹³⁵ Acts repeats the Old Testament words from the Book of Joel; "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions. And also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my spirit." (Joel 2:28 – 29).

¹³⁶ Bouldin, *Women Prophets and Radical Protestantism in the British Atlantic World, 1640-1730*, 15.

¹³⁷ The Woman in Revelation 12 has been variously identified as Eve, the mother of all the living, Israel, as the People of God, the Church, in the form of the Heavenly Jerusalem, and Mary, mother of the Messiah – see Marwil Llasos, "Who Is She? The Woman Clothed With the Sun," *Www.Academia.Edu*, 1–2, accessed July 26, 2017, http://www.academia.edu/4141146/Who_Is_She_The_Woman_Clothed_With_the_Sun.

¹³⁸ Hirst, "'Mother of Love': Spiritual Maternity in the Works of Jane Lead (1624 - 1704)," 166.

¹³⁹ Jane Lead in Hirst, 166.

¹⁴⁰ Hirst, 173.

¹⁴¹ Julie Hirst, "Mysticism, Millenarianism and the Visions of Sophia in the Works of Jane Lead (1624-1704)" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2002), <http://search.proquest.com/docview/301649483/>.

¹⁴² Bouldin, *Women Prophets and Radical Protestantism in the British Atlantic World, 1640-1730*, 92.

giving birth to the 'man-child'.¹⁴³ This was the Holy Spirit from which a new church would be created, and she described her soul as big 'like one impregnated with the Holy Ghost'.¹⁴⁴ She also sought a mystical union with Christ and her visions of being cleansed and anointed by him had spiritual significance. As a spiritual mother she could take part in the salvation of humanity in the end times.¹⁴⁵

Holy women of the early modern period continued to embody their mysticism by associating the body and spirit, the corporeal and incorporeal, in their religious behavior and written work through spiritual motherhood.¹⁴⁶ The porous, unbounded body of the female visionary (reminiscent of female medieval holy women), was conceived of as an empty vessel overflowing with the Holy Spirit, which could experience both the pain and joy of Christ.¹⁴⁷ A second model of mysticism involved the 'clogged' vessel, rather than the open one, where bones and muscles were channels of transmission of spiritual energy and wisdom.¹⁴⁸ Spiritual power, like electricity and fire, pulsed and jerked the ligaments, and the visionary was 'invaded' by God, and emptied of themselves. Shaking, quaking, verbal tics, speaking in tongues, and fits dominate the accounts of many eighteenth-century prophets. The growing influence of Romanticism in the nineteenth-century led to another form, (or re-imagining) of mystical embodiment – that of the transcendent.¹⁴⁹ In death or trance-like states, prophets left the temporal world and travelled to spiritual dimensions where they encountered the supernatural or Holy Spirit. Despite the increasing presence of printed materials and literacy in early modern and modern times, female prophets still turned to their bodies (more so than men), to demonstrate their spiritual condition and holiness.¹⁵⁰

Early modern English female visionaries used prophecy and spiritual motherhood to access leadership roles in the religious sphere. In positioning themselves as spiritual mothers of religious groups, Marian-like maternal bearers of the Second Coming, or

¹⁴³ Bouldin, 111.

¹⁴⁴ Bouldin, 111.

¹⁴⁵ Bouldin, 100–111.

¹⁴⁶ Susan Juster, "Demagogues or Mystagogues? Gender and the Language of Prophecy in the Age of Democratic Revolutions," *American Historical Review* 104, no. 5 (1999): 1560–81; Juster, "Mystical Pregnancy and Holy Bleeding"; Juster, *Doomsayers*; Mack, *Visionary Women. Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England*.

¹⁴⁷ Juster, *Doomsayers*, 102–3.

¹⁴⁸ Juster, 102–3.

¹⁴⁹ Juster, 102–3.

¹⁵⁰ Juster, "Mystical Pregnancy and Holy Bleeding"; Juster, *Doomsayers*.

vessels of Divine Wisdom (Sophia), they assumed divine authority in ways that were reminiscent of their medieval counterparts.¹⁵¹ The apocalyptic figure of the 'Woman Clothed with the Sun' allowed female prophets to construct a public identity as an elect and divine intercessor who would bring forth salvation in the new millennium on Earth.¹⁵² Salvation could be achieved through a mystical union with Christ and spiritual motherhood to a religious community.

¹⁵¹ Bouldin, *Women Prophets and Radical Protestantism in the British Atlantic World, 1640-1730*, 92. On Sophia as Divine Wisdom and connections to Mary and Christ see Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1994).

¹⁵² For further information on opportunities for female participation in public religious discourse and gender differentiation in religious literature see Paula McDowell, *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics, and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace, 1678-1730* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Apetrei, *Women, Feminism and Religion in Early Enlightenment England*; Crawford, *Women and Religion in England, 1500-1720*; Mack, *Visionary Women. Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England*.

Chapter 4 – Joanna Southcott and Spiritual Pregnancy

And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars. And she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered.

Revelation 12:1-2

As at the first, the same is burst,
The WOMAN did appear
To warn you of your Saviour's birth,
And that the time drew near
To bring a SON, not born by MAN,
But of the HOLY GHOST

Joanna Southcott, *Prophecies Announcing the Birth of the Prince of Peace*¹⁵³

Joanna Southcott (1750 - 1814) was a Devonshire domestic servant and upholsterer turned prophetess who founded the Southcottian movement and produced sixty-five manuscripts containing a combination of prophecies, biblical verses, and poetry. As a millennial proselytizer, Southcott features as of one many English messianic prophets who believed the second coming of Christ was imminent. What distinguishes her as a unique cultural and religious sensation is her singular theology concerning the role of woman in the Fall, and in the redemption of humanity through the coming of the Shiloh, the Second Coming. Joanna's identification as 'The Woman Clothed with the Sun' from the Book of Revelation led to her 'travailing in childbirth' for spiritual children (her 'friends' – Southcottian supporters), and later with a miraculous mystical pregnancy at the age of sixty-five in 1814. To understand how Joanna Southcott progressed from spiritual motherhood to spiritual pregnancy, we should explore the context of her apocalyptic theology in conjunction with the tumultuous and politically fraught era in which she lived. While Southcott's spiritual pregnancy has been investigated by the academy, it has not fully considered her imitation of Mary as a function of her role as a salvific maternal figure in the early modern period. Another way to understand her use of the archetype of the Virgin Mary in connection to her spiritual pregnancy is to investigate how the gendered societal expectations of the times led her

¹⁵³ Joanna Southcott, *Prophecies Announcing the Birth of the Prince of Peace / Extracted from the Works of Joanna Southcott; To Which Are Added a Few Remarks Thereon, Made by Herself*. (London: W. Marchant, 1814), 18.

to use the incarnation of Christ as a model. This chapter will explore her reading of the 'Woman' as promised in Revelation, and consider why her assumption of this role, as a Marian-like Second Eve, is fundamental to both her experience of mystical maternity and her prophetic mission.

In an experience analogous to Birgitta, Southcott received a powerful Visitation from the Holy Spirit, telling her that, like with Abraham, he would make a covenant with her and grant her 'everlasting salvation'.¹⁵⁴ Southcott reported that her first visitation occurred in 1792 and her account mirrors the confusion of the Virgin Mary in Luke 1:26 - 38 upon receiving the news that she would bear the son of God;

When these words came to me, my soul was troubled in the dust before God, and I began to cry out, 'What am I, or what is my father's house, that thou hast honoured me, unworthy wretch as I am? ...'¹⁵⁵

The Lord then answers her;

I will reward thy obedience; and in blessing I will bless thee: And as I kept nothing from Abraham, I will keep nothing from thee. Thou shalt prophesy in my name; and I will bear thee witness. What I put in thy mouth, that will I do on the earth.¹⁵⁶

Southcott's visitation immediately grants her the ability to receive divine knowledge and the authority to prophesy. Just as Birgitta was told that her mission was to inflame the hearts of the unfaithful to bring them to salvation, Southcott also believed that she was Christ's instrument on Earth. As Christ's 'little Bird' on Earth, she was assured that the last judgement was near and that she was chosen especially as his messenger to forewarn the people of the Second Coming.¹⁵⁷ Her divinity and 'perfect union' with Christ was heralded by a comet in 1811, and the Holy Spirit told her that the Angels rejoiced at her birth, and that '... thy Saviour embraced thee'.¹⁵⁸ Joanna's ability to receive heavenly communications was explained as part of her duty to prophesy and to reveal the coming of the Shiloh to the nation. She wrote that 'in the last days, when the Lord intends to do as he spoke in the Prophet Joel, pouring his Spirit upon all flesh, and upon

¹⁵⁴ Joanna Southcott, *The Strange Effects of Faith; with Remarkable Prophecies (Made in 1792 &C.) of Things Which Are to Come: Also, Some Account of My Life*, 2nd ed. (London: Re-Printed by A. Seale, 1801), 27.

¹⁵⁵ Southcott, 27.

¹⁵⁶ Southcott, 27.

¹⁵⁷ Southcott, 2-34.

¹⁵⁸ Southcott, 32.

his handmaids, that they shall prophesy'.¹⁵⁹ Southcott insisted that the wisdom of the Bible and Gospels were obscured and that;

... neither the learned nor the unlearned can read (that is to say, understand) it: for it was sealed up in the bosom of the Father, till he thought proper to break the seals, and reveal it to a Woman, as it is written in the Revelation.¹⁶⁰

Only Joanna, the 'Woman Clothed with the Sun', could reveal the truth of the Bible, which had been concealed from mankind through the wisdom of God and she was commanded, despite her reluctance to become a public figure, to make His Will known to the world;

I shall go on, till I have made public all the mysteries of the Bible-the times which are to come-and what shall happen till Christ's Kingdom be established; sometimes from parables, sometimes from types and shadows, sometimes from dreams and visions, and also from the Bible, which showeth, by the account of the tree of knowledge, that knowledge must come to man *from the woman*. As *she at first plucked the fruit, and brought the knowledge of the evil fruit, so at last she must bring the knowledge of the good fruit*.¹⁶¹

Southcott's treatment of herself as a simple, uneducated woman mirrors that other contemporary female prophets such as Jemima Wilkinson and Susan Labrousse.¹⁶² She reiterates her humble birth, and is careful to project the image of an innocent and untrained believer, despite evidence of her literacy and understanding of theology and eschatological arguments.¹⁶³ Much like Birgitta, Southcott confronted and confounded the Devil in disputes to show the superiority of plain faith over clerical education. By mirroring both the Virgin Mary and Birgitta, Southcott presents herself as a vessel of Holy Wisdom whose prophecies must originate from a divine source, as she is an untrained and unsophisticated woman. In *A Warning to the World* Southcott writes that the Spirit infused her brain with supernatural knowledge and that 'with the Spirit I am nothing, without the Spirit I know nothing, and without the Spirit I can do nothing'.¹⁶⁴ Learned clerics were not able to decipher the true meaning of the Bible, while the

¹⁵⁹ Southcott, 3.

¹⁶⁰ Southcott, 3.

¹⁶¹ Southcott, 4.

¹⁶² Niblett, *Prophecy and the Politics of Salvation in Late Georgian England*, 19.

¹⁶³ Niblett, 19–20.

¹⁶⁴ Joanna Southcott, *A Warning to the World* (London: S. Rousseau, 1804), 57.

untutored Joanna, through her belief, was shown by the Spirit the real meaning of its lessons and what was to come;

But if that the wisdom was hid in my God,
To make them keep silence, till the truth was all know'd,
then now to their MAKER thy all must submit,
And say 'twas his wisdom to bring all to light;
To prove to the world, that my calling is clear.
And now let the learned men answer me here:
The way that this knowledge was given to me ...¹⁶⁵

Southcott's ability to receive divine knowledge is central to her understanding of herself as the 'Woman Clothed with the Sun' - the Bride, pursued by the Devil, who would fulfill the promise of redemption in Genesis 3:15 (the protoevangelium);

And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.

Her gendered interpretation of the Fall places woman at the center of redemption and salvation history.¹⁶⁶ As the Woman of Revelation Chapter 12, Southcott created a dual role for herself. She was not only to defeat Satan and fulfill the promise of Woman's revenge for the Fall; according to her interpretation of the scriptures, she was required to be the maternal bearer of the Shiloh, which initially referred to her followers.¹⁶⁷ Until her later somatic conception of the Shiloh, Southcott's divine power rested not in personal power or miracles. She relied upon the revelations she received through divine intervention and espoused orthodox biblical Scripture, particularly from Genesis and Revelation 12. It was through these pronouncements that Southcott established her eschatology, and challenged her detractors to disprove her interpretation of the Bible, as well attract support for her holy mission.

An explanation of Southcott's reading of Genesis and salvation history is crucial to understanding both her prophetic goal and resulting spiritual pregnancy. Southcott justified her role as a female saviour and based her theology of the assurance made by God regarding the bruising of the serpent in Genesis 3:15.¹⁶⁸ God promises that he will

¹⁶⁵ Southcott, 56.

¹⁶⁶ Niblett, *Prophecy and the Politics of Salvation in Late Georgian England*, 34–67.

¹⁶⁷ Niblett, 39. In the early part of her career as a visionary, Shiloh referred to her followers, the Elect. In 1813 the Shiloh became a mystical pregnancy.

¹⁶⁸ Niblett, 35–67.

place enmity between the woman and the serpent, and between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman, which will 'bruise the serpent's head' (Genesis 3:15). This was typically thought to refer to the promise of the final defeat of Satan and salvation through Christ. Southcott's interpretation of Genesis 3:15 placed special emphasis on the woman being locked in battle against Satan, 'bruising' and overthrowing him, and thus being the cause of eternal salvation through her 'seed', or progeny. Her theological battle with Satan, lasting seven days, as recounted in *A Dispute Between the Woman and the Powers of Darkness* mirrors Birgitta's quarrels with Satan in her *Revelations*, and shows that conquest over evil was a mark of divinity for both women. While Genesis and Revelation 12 were popular subjects in the eighteenth-century, it was the more extreme and esoteric religious sects, who advocated a more active prophetic and salvific role for women in religion.

The narrative of the Creation and the Fall is at the heart of Christian faith, and according to the Baptist preacher, John Gill, provides a 'view of the rise, ruin and restoration of the world' on which the first three chapters of Genesis are the foundation for all scriptural questions and commentaries; thus the promise of the bruising of the serpent has particular significance for women, and women in salvation history especially.¹⁶⁹ Gill promoted the conventional protestant doctrinal view of Genesis 3.15, following on from Martin Luther's teaching; that the promise offered by God in Genesis had already been fulfilled in the resurrection of Christ, the 'seed' of woman.¹⁷⁰ During this period there was intense debate about the protoevangelium and whether the woman was Eve or Mary, and if the 'seeds' referred to Christ, children of the Devil, or the faithful elect of the church, as taught by John Calvin.¹⁷¹ Methodist George Whitefield combined a Christological and Calvinist reading of Genesis 3.15 in *The Seed of the Woman, and the Seed of the Serpent*, where he reads the 'seed' of the woman as being both Christ and faithful believers;

¹⁶⁹ John Gill, *The Head of the Serpent Bruised by the Seed of the Woman*. (London: Aaron Ward; and H. Whitridge, 1733), 2; Niblett, *Prophecy and the Politics of Salvation in Late Georgian England*, 40.

¹⁷⁰ Niblett, *Prophecy and the Politics of Salvation in Late Georgian England*, 40–43.

¹⁷¹ Niblett, 41. Southcott interpreted the 'seeds' of woman to be a Second Eve who would bring forth the Shiloh. See Roger Robins, "Anglican Prophetess: Joanna Southcott and the Gospel Story," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 61, no. 3 (1992): 277; Niblett, *Prophecy and the Politics of Salvation in Late Georgian England*.

This promise has been, is, and will be fulfilled in the Elect of God considered collectively, as well as before as after the Coming of Our Lord in the Flesh – For they may be called the *Seed of the Woman*.¹⁷²

In this respect, Southcott flouted conventional protestant teaching of the protoevangelium, yet followed in the footsteps of earlier English female prophets who believed that the Second Coming could only come from a woman in the same way that Mary brought forth Christ.¹⁷³ Instead, Southcott argued against Eve being the cause of the Fall, and placed the blame of original sin onto Satan, the true evil.¹⁷⁴ Eve was weak, yet innocent. She was betrayed by both the serpent and man, and was unfairly blamed for the deception;

Was not the woman simply left alone,
When subtilty the pois'nous serpent come?
And by her weakness she was soon betray'd,
'Tis just in her I shou'd break his head.
Did man refuse to take the fruit she gave,
Or justify her how she was deceiv'd?
No – but upon her he did cast the blame,
Bring forth your arguments, ye sons of men,
As by your wisdom you can never see
Why in the woman ev'ry truth shall be.¹⁷⁵

As the woman was the first to be deceived, God promised that in the last days that she would receive justice for ills that had befallen her as mother to the world and the Messiah;

.... It is just and right, Satan, that thou shouldst feel the weight of the woman's wrath and indignation against thee, who seekedst her ruin from the first. And now thou hast tried, by every art hell can invent, to seek it at last. Now, Satan, look to Calvary, and there behold her dying Lord, and see if justice doth not demand thy

¹⁷² George Whitefield, *Nine Sermons upon the Following Subjects; Viz. I. The Lord Our Righteousness. II. The Seed of the Woman, and the Seed of the Serpent. III. Persecution Every Christian's Lot. IV. Abraham's Offering up His Son Isaac. V. Saul's Conversion. VI. The Pharisee and Publican. Vii. Christ, the Believer's Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification, and Redemption. Viii. The Holy Spirit Convincing the World of Sin, of Righteousness, and of Judgment. IX. The Conversion of Zaccheus.*, The Fifth Edition. (London: Eighteenth Century Collection Online Gale Document CW3323502549, 1750), 46–47.

¹⁷³ Robins, "Anglican Prophetess," 286.

¹⁷⁴ Niblett, *Prophecy and the Politics of Salvation in Late Georgian England*, 46–47; Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem. Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Virago Press, 1983), 164–65.

¹⁷⁵ Southcott, *The Strange Effects of Faith; with Remarkable Prophecies (Made in 1792 &C.) of Things Which Are to Come: Also, Some Account of My Life*, 51.

guilty blood:— and the woman's wrath and indignation on thy head. Thou serpent to the woman, her woes of sorrow must now come on thee.¹⁷⁶

Southcott linked the rehabilitation of Eve in Genesis 3:15 to the prophecy of the 'Woman Clothed with the Sun' in Revelation 12 and the promise that the serpent's head would be bruised through her arrival. As in the beginning, so it would be in the end – it was through a woman that humanity was created, and therefore only a woman could herald the Second Coming and defeat Satan;

A Second Adam must appear,
Ere your Redemption come:
But how can ye so blinded be?
Can Adam now appear,
Without his Eve, do you believe?
Now, see the mysteries clear.
No, I must come, in Adam's form,
For to CREATE all new:
And from ME must the woman come...¹⁷⁷

Through reinterpreting scripture, Southcott prophesied that salvation would come through herself. In stating that she was the 'Woman Clothed with the Sun', Southcott promoted herself as the chosen woman who would bring forth the Shiloh through her position as a Marian-like Second Eve; through his birth she would crush Satan and the prophecies of Genesis and Revelation 12 would be fulfilled.

These parables shew my firm decrees in the Creation—what I said when I created the WOMAN at first—the promise that was made in the Fall—my being born of the VIRGIN—my promising to come again as the BRIDEGROOM, to free the fall of the WOMAN; or how could I bring in the redemption of MAN? ¹⁷⁸

Southcott's salvation theology gave her license to break with orthodox ecclesiastical doctrine to pursue her role as a prophetess.¹⁷⁹ As a charismatic visionary, she identified herself as the chosen holy vessel of her time; her work was to redeem England, and this was to be achieved by establishing justice for both Eve and Christ, who Pilate also

¹⁷⁶ Joanna Southcott, *Dispute Between the Woman and the Powers of Darkness*, Revolution and Romanticism 1789-1834 (New York: Woodstock, 1995), 30–31.

¹⁷⁷ Southcott, 107.

¹⁷⁸ Joanna Southcott, *Prophecies Announcing the Birth of the Prince of Peace / Extracted from the Works of Joanna Southcott; To Which Are Added a Few Remarks Thereon, Made by Herself.*, 29. The identity of the 'Bridegroom' changes over time. Southcott initially believed the 'Bridegroom' was the Reverend Joseph Pomeroy. Later, it is Christ to whom she refers.

¹⁷⁹ Robins, "Anglican Prophetess," 290.

wrongly condemned. This involved public trials in which Eve would be vindicated of the transgression, Satan chastised, and Southcott's prophecies would be proved.¹⁸⁰ When this had been achieved the Second Coming of Christ would occur. Her millennialist eschatology was based on the seven days of creation, in which the history of the world was also divided into seven thousand-year periods. The period in which she lived (the sixth thousand-year period) was reduced for the Elect and would end with the Second Coming of Christ when the world would enter a period of rest.¹⁸¹ Each era had a key redemptive figure represented by the Trinity; 'the Father chose Moses; the Son chose Jesus; the Holy Ghost, Joanna.'¹⁸² As part of the Trinity, the virgin Bride of Christ, and the 'Woman Clothed with the Sun', Southcott could co-opt the maternal role of Mary/Eve in her quest to redeem the nation.

In 1792 Southcott began documenting her journey as a spiritual mother and prophetess with her first book, *The Strange Effects of Faith*, in which she warns readers about the coming end times.¹⁸³ Her predictions about impending disaster and conflict appeared to be substantiated in 1793 when revolutionary France declared war on Britain. Southcott desired validation from the Anglican church that her visitations and prophecies were divinely inspired and that the millennium approached. Although she was briefly attracted to Methodism, Southcott was a staunch member and supporter of the Church of England; her goal was not to challenge the institution but to inform the Bishops and 'professors' of religion about the truth and fulfillment of the prophecies in the Bible.¹⁸⁴ Southcott sought her own 'testing of the spirits' from the Bishops of the Church of England. While she was never to receive acceptance from the church or orthodox clergy, she set out to convene her first trial in Exeter 1801, with the request that her judges be her 'Seven Stars', or true believers.¹⁸⁵ Southcott also invited five other local clergymen to participate, as her 'Spirit' told her that twelve judges were

¹⁸⁰ Robins, 289–91.

¹⁸¹ Robins, "Anglican Prophetess"; Joanna Southcott, *The True Explanation of the Bible* (London: S. Rousseau, 1804).

¹⁸² Robins, "Anglican Prophetess," 290.

¹⁸³ Southcott, *The Strange Effects of Faith; with Remarkable Prophecies (Made in 1792 &C.) of Things Which Are to Come: Also, Some Account of My Life*.

¹⁸⁴ Niblett, *Prophecy and the Politics of Salvation in Late Georgian England*, 91.

¹⁸⁵ Frances Brown, *Joanna Southcott: The Woman Clothed with The Sun* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2002), 102.

These included George Turner, also a reported visionary prophet, Peter Morrison, Thomas Foley, Stanhope Bruce, Thomas Webster, William Sharp and John Wilson.

required to prove her work.¹⁸⁶ They all declined to appear, however, the remaining jury was convinced of her authenticity as a holy visionary. The Holy Spirit also told her to seal her prophecies in a box, and thus the legend of Joanna Southcott's Box was born.¹⁸⁷ In 1803 Southcott arranged a second trial and examination of her prophecies at High House, Paddington. Twelve judges and twelve jurymen were summoned to examine her writings and the source of her prophetic ability. Women (allowed only to wear white), also attended as witnesses, and one-year old Richard Foley, the child of Reverend T.P Foley, was kissed by Joanna 'as the emblem of Christ's Second Birth in the Spirit'.¹⁸⁸ The trial lasted seven days and the fifty-eight people present approved of her declaration that she was 'convinced that my calling is of God, and my writings are indited by his Spirit'.¹⁸⁹ More importantly for Southcott, 'Satan was cast, and the woman was freed'.¹⁹⁰ A third trial took place at Neckinger House, Bermondsey, in 1804. The jury consisted of twelve 'First Believers' (her original supporters), another twelve Southcottians, and the child Richard Foley, making twenty-five 'Witnesses of the Truth'.¹⁹¹ Much like the previous two trials, Anglican Bishops refused to appear and her hopes for a distinguished jury were dashed. Southcott's motive for this final trial appears to be the continued rejection by the Reverend Joseph Pomeroy and the church clergy to acknowledge the divine inspiration of her writing. Her followers spoke of the mystical nature of her prophecies and her blameless life, and once more, Joanna and her prophecies were upheld as divine. More of her revelations were sealed in a box and given in guardianship to William Sharp.¹⁹² Southcott's trials served a double purpose; to give her authority as a prophetess through her unmediated contact with God, and they allowed her to act as divine mother to her followers.

¹⁸⁶ Brown, 102–3.

¹⁸⁷ Brown, 103. The Box was only to be opened at a time of great national emergency by 24 Bishops of the Church of England. The location and contents of the box have been sought (and supposedly held) by the Panacea Society. Requests for it to be opened continued into the twentieth century. See Frances Brown, *Joanna Southcott's Box of Sealed Prophecies* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2003); Allan, "Joanna Southcott: Enacting the Woman Clothed with the Sun."

¹⁸⁸ Brown, *Joanna Southcott*, 125.

¹⁸⁹ Brown, 126.

¹⁹⁰ Brown, 126.

¹⁹¹ Brown, 174.

¹⁹² Brown, 178. Rev. Pomeroy was originally receptive to Southcott's writing. She interpreted this to mean that he was her spiritual 'Bridegroom' and was disappointed when his attitude changed and he ceased to see or receive any communication from her.

Southcott's prophecies and theology can be useful in exploring the function of her mystical pregnancy in her position as a spiritual mother. For most of her career as visionary prophetess, Southcott claimed to be the mother of the Shiloh in a purely spiritual, figurative sense. The 'man-child' referred to her faithful followers, and her approach to spiritual motherhood was analogous to other female spiritual leaders such as Ann Bathurst and Jane Lead. It was not until 1813 that she announced that she was somatically pregnant with the Shiloh.¹⁹³ While Birgitta's spiritual pregnancy occurred in the heart, the growing medicalization of religious enthusiasm meant that the virgin Southcott, at the age of sixty-five, prophesied that she would physically give birth to the Shiloh. At this point Southcott departs from other female prophets of the early modern era and employs religious imagery more familiar to Birgitta and Dorothea von Monteau. Further investigation of Southcott's transformation from a figurative to somatic spiritual pregnancy could shed light on the phenomenon of mystical motherhood by female visionaries in this period.

On 11th October 1813 Southcott wrote to her friend, and fellow prophet, George Turner, that she had experienced a passionate encounter with Christ who appeared in her bedroom.¹⁹⁴ In December, while meditating on the conception of Christ by the Virgin Mary, the Holy Spirit tells her '... thou shall feel how it was possible for life to be created in the womb without a man by the power of the Lord'.¹⁹⁵ She writes that 'after this to my astonishment I not only felt a power to shake my whole body, but felt a sensation it is impossible for me to describe upon my womb'.¹⁹⁶ Although she was greatly alarmed by the experience, Southcott believed that she was to become both a spiritual and temporal mother in the same way as the Virgin Mary. However, Southcott understood that like Mary she must also undertake an earthly marriage to bring forth the Second Messiah in order to fulfill the promises of God. Afraid that her pregnancy would not be thought of as an immaculate conception, Southcott initially banned all men from her presence and had to revise her earlier revelations about the Second Coming. Her 'Spirit' told her that her

¹⁹³ Joanna Southcott, *Prophecies Announcing the Birth of the Prince of Peace / Extracted from the Works of Joanna Southcott; To Which Are Added a Few Remarks Thereon, Made by Herself*.

¹⁹⁴ Brown, *Joanna Southcott*, 180–82; James K. Hopkins, *A Woman to Deliver Her People: Joanna Southcott and English Millenarianism in an Era of Revolution*, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 199–200.

¹⁹⁵ Joanna Southcott, "Divine Communications Given to Joanna Southcott - The Conception Communication" February 25, 1814, 1–15, The Panacea Trust Southcottian Manuscripts PN 124.

¹⁹⁶ Southcott, 1–15.

marriage had been prophesied but the knowledge of it had been concealed from her until now to show the world that she was not a fraud.¹⁹⁷ In her *Fifth Book of Wonders* Southcott said that she waited until her pregnancy was confirmed before announcing her earthly marriage so that the Holy Spirit would be acknowledged as the child's father.¹⁹⁸ In order to conform to social expectations she married, not a Joseph, but John Smith, steward to the Earl of Darnley, on 12 November 1814.¹⁹⁹ Southcott's physical condition began to deteriorate not long after her marriage took place.

Southcott's physical symptoms of pregnancy included a distended abdomen and enlarged breasts.²⁰⁰ She was examined by nine various doctors, six of whom pronounced her to be with child, though she refused all their requests to conduct an internal examination.²⁰¹ Southcott was given a magnificent crib and friends sent her baby clothes, silver spoons, and caudle cups.²⁰² In December she began experiencing pain and feared for her life. She composed a will which requested that should she perish in child birth that an autopsy be performed on her body. Joanna Southcott passed away on 27 December 1814.²⁰³ Her friends were disappointed and expected that the Shiloh would be proven at her autopsy or that Joanna would miraculously reawaken.²⁰⁴ An examination of the body revealed that Southcott was not with child.²⁰⁵ However, this was not the end of her spiritual motherhood. Southcottianism continued through followers who claimed to be her spiritual children. They included George Turner, John Wroe (founder of the international Christian Israelite Church), and Mabel

¹⁹⁷ Southcott, *The Third Book of Wonders, Announcing the Coming of Shiloh; with a Call to the Hebrews*, 59.

¹⁹⁸ Joanna Southcott, *The Fifth Book of Wonders, Announcing the Event Having Taken Place, Which Was Promised in the Fourth Book Should Be in May* (London: W. Marchant, 1814), 39.

¹⁹⁹ Southcott, "The Conception Communication."

²⁰⁰ John Fairburn, *The Life of Joanna Southcott, the Prophetess* (London: John Fairburn, 1814), 35–36; Richard Reece, *A Correct Statement of the Circumstances That Attended the Last Illness and Death of Mrs Southcott : With an Account of the Appearances Exhibited on Dissection : And the Artifices That Were Employed to Deceive Her Medical Attendants* (London, 1815), 8–10.

²⁰¹ Reece, *A Correct Statement of the Circumstances That Attended the Last Illness and Death of Mrs Southcott : With an Account of the Appearances Exhibited on Dissection : And the Artifices That Were Employed to Deceive Her Medical Attendants*, 23. See also Val Lewis, *Satan's Mistress. The Extraordinary Story of the 18th Century Fanatic Joanna Southcott and Her Lifelong Battle with the Devil* (Shepperton: Nauticalia, 1997), 193. Lewis states that Southcott consulted over 30 doctors to confirm her pregnancy.

²⁰² Fairburn, *The Life of Joanna Southcott, the Prophetess*, 16.

²⁰³ Brown, *Joanna Southcott*, 294.

²⁰⁴ Niblett, *Prophecy and the Politics of Salvation in Late Georgian England*, 162.

²⁰⁵ Brown, *Joanna Southcott*, 299.

Barltrop (also known as Octavia), the leader of the Panacea Society.²⁰⁶ The Panacea Society, now a charitable trust, retains many letters and relics of Joanna Southcott and her supporters.

Joanna Southcott was convinced that she was 'the Woman Clothed with the Sun from Revelation. She believed that her mystical connection to Christ gave her divine knowledge about the forthcoming millennium and that she was destined to bring forth the Second Coming through her spiritual motherhood. Her spiritual pregnancy was a physical manifestation of her desire to birth salvation to the world in the form of the Shiloh. Her adoption of the persona of the Second Eve (Mary) allowed her to behave as a spiritual authority in a time when women were denied any religious leadership roles.

²⁰⁶ Brown, *Joanna Southcott*; Val Lewis, *Satan's Mistress*; Alastair Lockhart, "Religious and Spiritual Mobility in Britain: The Panacea Society and Other Movements in the Twentieth Century," *Contemporary British History* 29, no. 2 (April 3, 2015): 155–78; Jane Shaw, *Octavia, Daughter of God: The Story of a Female Messiah and Her Followers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

Conclusion

The Bride was in doubt what the wonderful sensible movement she felt in heart meant whenever anything was about to be revealed to her by divine inspiration God's Mother explains the truth of the mystery to her, declaring to her that God and she want to indicate his will to the world through her.

The Virgin Mary to St Birgitta, *Liber Caelestis*, Book VI, Chapter 88 ²⁰⁷

The MOTHER here they must see clear,
The TRUE MOTHER has come
To claim the SON to be the HEIR
And free the whole for MAN.

Joanna Southcott, *Prophecies Announcing the Birth of the Prince of Peace* ²⁰⁸

St Birgitta and Joanna Southcott were holy women who used the reported gift of prophecy and divine authority to act as spiritual guides in the religious sphere. Their gender prevented them from preaching or assuming leadership roles typically reserved for men. Instead, both women turned to the mystical experience of spiritual pregnancy and accessed religious authority through becoming Marian-like divine mothers. Despite conforming to the socially acceptable feminine roles of wife, mother, and virgin, their detractors condemned their behavior, prophecies, and theologies. The Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, acknowledged the popularity of Birgitta's *Revelations*, yet still dismissed them as devilish illusions, and called her 'crazy'.²⁰⁹ In the twentieth-century, the historian E.P Thompson, described Joanna Southcott as 'a simple and at times self-doubting woman, the victim of her own imbalance, and credulity'.²¹⁰ Birgitta and Southcott used the device of divine maternity to respond to their critics and detractors and to emphasize their elevated spiritual condition.

²⁰⁷ St Birgitta, *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden Liber Caelestis, Books VI - VII. Introductions and Notes by Bridget Morris*, 3:155.

²⁰⁸ Joanna Southcott, *Prophecies Announcing the Birth of the Prince of Peace / Extracted from the Works of Joanna Southcott; To Which Are Added a Few Remarks Thereon, Made by Herself.*, 23–24.

²⁰⁹ Martin Luther in Barbara Obrist, "The Swedish Visionary : Saint Bridget," in *Medieval Women Writers*, ed. Katharina Wilson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 236.

²¹⁰ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Gollancz, 1963), 423.

Birgitta was a fourteenth-century Swedish noble-woman who married at thirteen and had eight children. She travelled on pilgrimages, founded her own religious order, and involved herself in the political disputes of European Kings and Queens.²¹¹ Her spiritual pregnancy is based on her reverence and imitation of the Virgin Mary. The movement in Birgitta's heart is an example of the extreme somatic piety exhibited by medieval female prophets and should be 'understood as an ecstatic moment of spiritual intimacy between her soul as a mother and Christ as a Child'.²¹² In medieval Christianity, a spiritually pure heart could be inhabited by Christ, and therefore a mystical pregnancy was a sign of an elevated spiritual condition.²¹³ Birgitta's Mario-centric theology is central to her experience of spiritual pregnancy. In the *Revelations* the Virgin Mary informs Birgitta that she was filled with divine wisdom upon the Incarnation of Christ. She confirms that the movement in Birgitta's heart is her Son and that she has been called to 'proclaim our will' to the world.²¹⁴ Her spiritual pregnancy endows Birgitta with holy knowledge as well as the authority to convey Christ's and Mary's message to others. Birgitta's spiritual pregnancy was a symptom of her mystical union with God and gave her the ability to bring salvation to the world.

The millenarian prophetess, Joanna Southcott, was the daughter of a poor Devonshire farmer.²¹⁵ She trained as a domestic servant and upholsterer before turning to prophesy during the tumultuous period of the eighteenth-century. Southcott's theology of the 'two seeds', and her belief that Satan could only be defeated by a woman led to her self-identification as 'the Woman Clothed with the Sun'. She connected the Fall in Genesis to the Second Coming in Revelation and prophesied that the end times were near. Her spiritual motherhood concerned the salvation of the Elect, which were her followers, who would be saved from the apocalypse through her intervention. Her somatic pregnancy in 1813 was a defining moment in her prophetic career. After receiving a visitation from Christ, and contemplating the mystery of the Virgin birth, Southcott announced that she would physically give birth to the Shiloh. Just like the Virgin Mary she was pregnant through supernatural means, although she sought

²¹¹ Salmesvuori, *Power and Sainthood. The Case of Birgitta of Sweden*.

²¹² Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy*, 3:91.

²¹³ Sahlin, 3:91.

²¹⁴ St Birgitta, *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden Liber Caelestis, Books VI - VII. Introductions and Notes by Bridget Morris*, 3:156.

²¹⁵ Brown, *Joanna Southcott*.

doctors to confirm her diagnosis. A marriage for propriety's sake was quickly arranged and she wrote her will with instructions for a post-mortem in the event of her death. Although Southcott presented with an enlarged abdomen and distended breasts, she was not with child, and passed away in December 1814. Southcottianism continued into the twentieth-century through followers who believed they were Southcott's spiritual children and who founded organizations such as the Panacea Society and the Christian Israelite Church.

While there are several differences between their respective experiences, Birgitta and Southcott do have share some commonalities. Both women sought the support of male clergy to authenticate their claims of direct contact with God. Birgitta consulted four confessors, while Southcott arranged her own spiritual trials. Each argued for church and clerical reform. Birgitta strongly criticized the clergy for what she perceived as laziness and the lack of pastoral care of their flock. In her *Revelations* several clerics are consigned to purgatory for failing to perform their duties with honesty and zeal.²¹⁶ She also advocated for the return of the Papacy to Rome from Avignon, believing that this would herald a new spiritual age which would reinvigorate Christianity.²¹⁷ Southcott also wrote to the Bishops of England warning them that their failure to consider her prophecies placed Christian souls in danger and stated that England would be a 'happy land' if it reformed its morals.²¹⁸ England would be destroyed, as Jerusalem was, if people continued their immoral practices.²¹⁹ Both held strongly anti-intellectual beliefs towards interpreting the bible. Moreover, both Birgitta and Southcott believed that they lived in the final days. Granting that Southcott's eschatology was more immediate in that she proclaimed herself as the mother of the Second Coming, Birgitta also prophesized that she lived in the third stage of man in which the end times were imminent.²²⁰ Investigating the connection between their spiritual pregnancies and the

²¹⁶ St Birgitta, *The Revelations of St Birgitta of Sweden Liber Caelestis, Books IV - V. Introductions and Notes by Bridget Morris*, 2:10.

²¹⁷ St Birgitta, 2:14–18.

²¹⁸ J.D.M. Derrett, *Prophecy in the Cotswolds 1803-1947: Joanna Southcott and Spiritual Reform* (Shipston-on-Stour: P.I. Drinkwater on behalf of the Blockley Antiquarian Society, 1994), 42.

²¹⁹ Derrett, 42.

²²⁰ St Birgitta, *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden Liber Caelestis, Books VI - VII. Introductions and Notes by Bridget Morris*, 3:139–40.

urgency of their mission of salvation could prove to be a fruitful line of enquiry for historians.

Joanna Southcott and St Birgitta's mystical pregnancies and spiritual motherhood served a purpose in their prophetic work. While their somatic symptoms varied according to the disparate medical conventions of the time, both reported visitations from God in which they became pregnant. Their pregnancies were an outward sign of their mystical union with Christ through which they became his bride. In imitating the spiritual motherhood of the Virgin Mary, both Southcott and Birgitta acted as co-saviours with Christ and gave birth to salvation through their followers. Their example shows that spiritual pregnancy is more than a sign of divinity; it is a self-authorizing spiritual tool which holy women use to become religious leaders. Spiritual pregnancy allows holy women to access to authority, like to male clerics, and this enables them to 'mother' or minister to their spiritual flock.

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