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“And She Learned from Experience”: Motherhood and Womanhood in the Authority of Yvette of
Huy

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Chapter 1: Maternal Metamorphosis: Yvette's Motherhood Before the Anchorhold.....	10
Chapter 2: The Matriarch and <i>Magistra</i> of Huy.....	23
Chapter 3: Sexual Sin and Redemption in Yvette's Miracles.....	37
Conclusion.....	51
Bibliography.....	54

Introduction

In the latter part of the twelfth or the early thirteenth century, a young spiritual daughter of Yvette—a holy woman living in Huy, from around 1158 to her death in 1228—was stolen away by a cleric. Yvette was beside herself with grief. Abduction, though not uncommon in the Middle Ages, had serious social consequences for the abductor, but also for the victim. The scandal had the potential to ruin the girl’s virginal reputation, as well as Yvette’s quasi-saintly image. A lustful clerk had approached the girl with religious pretenses, earning her trust and finally convincing her that in order to achieve the highest religious purity she had to leave the comfort of her home and her spiritual mother, Yvette. “He [was] a wolf preying on the lamb of Christ... polluting the virgin under pretext of the word of God which he spoke outwardly while the fire of illicit love burned within.”¹ Despite the years of Yvette’s teachings to be wary of temptations and scandal, the girl agreed to run away with the clerk. It was only after they had left Huy, that the clerk made his true intentions known. With horror, she realized she had been deceived.

Meanwhile, Yvette believed that the young girl, “whom she loved particularly, instructed and exhorted and adopted as a special daughter in the years of her infancy,”² was dead. Yvette, inconsolable, prayed to God every night enclosed in her cell. Years before, the Holy Spirit revealed to her that “a fall from virtue shortly threatened the girl and [Yvette] would suffer several scandals because of her.”³ Desperate to prevent this, the holy woman had tried to warn her about the dangers which faced her. However, it all seemed to have come to nothing; the girl was gone, likely dead, or at the very least raped. This did not stop Yvette’s prayers. And finally, after many days, “the Lord

¹ Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. tr. Jo Ann McNamara. Toronto: Peregrina Pub., 2000. 91.

² Ibid. 90.

³ Ibid. 90.

revealed to his servant's ear that he would restore the daughter whom she had mourned for dead to her well and unhurt, a virgin intact from men as she had been from the first."⁴

Strengthened by Yvette's teachings and the invisible comfort of Christ, the girl refused the clerk's sexual advances. Despite his promises, threats, and even physical force she remained unmoved and chaste. This continued for six months as the young man dragged her from city to city. Though they often ate together and slept in the same bed, "the Lord conferred so much grace upon the maiden that the youth could never prevail against her; but during all the time they were together he could not even touch her naked flesh."⁵ Physically unable to touch her and unable to corrupt her mind the clerk and the girl wandered around cities in the Low Countries for months until a kind recluse rescued her. He returned the girl to Huy unharmed where "the venerable mother Yvette welcomed her daughter who had been lost with tears and a joyful heart."⁶

This is only one of the many miracle stories that fill the *Life of Yvette of Huy* and demonstrates two of her most interesting and important characteristics, which I will explore over the course of this paper. First, her role as a biological and spiritual mother. And second, her gift of rooting out sexual deviance and educating men and women about everything from religious practice to the dangers of lust and temptation. After Yvette's death in 1228, Hugh, a monk from the abbey of Floreffe, was compelled by his abbot, Yvette's friend and confessor, to write her biography.⁷ Yvette was born to an upper-class merchant family in Huy but ended her life as an anchoress, a religious woman who thousands flocked to come to seek advice from. Anchoresses abandoned lay life in order to live more holy lives in cells, often in parish churches. Unlike nuns and abbesses who took oaths, were cloistered in monasteries, and adhered to a disciplined life, anchoresses were bound by no hierarchy or monastic rule. They occupied liminal spaces in their communities, distinguished

⁴ Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. tr. Jo Ann McNamara. Toronto: Peregrina Pub., 2000. 94.

⁵ Ibid. 93.

⁶ Ibid. 95.

⁷ Jo Ann McNamara. "Introduction" in *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. Toronto: Peregrina Pub., 2000. 10

from the laity by their holiness, but remained separate from the structure of the church. Many were venerated and sought out by disciples, both male and female alike.⁸

The rise of early anchoresses like Yvette coincided with dramatic changes in the landscape of Western Christianity, which are now called the Gregorian reforms.⁹ As part of this reform movement, initiated by and named after Pope Gregory VII (c. 1050-1085), the clergy sought to remedy the cancers they believed were eating away at the Church, such as the proliferation of clerical marriage, corruption, and simony.¹⁰ Central to reform was the foundation of new monastic orders such as the Cistercians and the Premonstratensians, both of which advocated for a strict adherence to the Rule of St. Benedict as well as an increasingly individual and inward-looking spirituality.¹¹ These developments in religious thought were also disseminated outside of clerical circles to the laity, who similarly began interacting with these new ideas of faith and experimenting with new ways to increase their own piety in the secular world.

This circulation of new ideas of individual contemplation, poverty, and good works created a boom in popular piety among the laity.¹² Growing urban centers became hotbeds for religious thought and activity, from wandering preachers to anchoresses, and later, to beguines. Though women too were affected by this boom in lay spirituality and sought religious lives in droves, new expansions of religious opportunities did not extend to them. In fact, two new orders, the Cistercians and the Premonstratensians, both actively tried to limit their connection to, and responsibilities for their female houses, by legally freeing themselves from all protective and

⁸ Barbara Newman, 'Liminalities: literate women in the long twelfth century', in T.F.X. Noble & J. Van Engen (eds.), *European Transformations: The Long Twelfth Century* (2012) 357.

⁹ J. Le Goff, *Intellectuals in the Middle Ages*, tr. T. L. Fagan. Cambridge MA; Blackwell, 1993. 20

¹⁰ Brian Tierney, *The Crisis of Church and State 1050-1300*. University of Toronto Press, 1988. 87.

¹¹ C. H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: forms of religious life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages*. 135. And D. Knowles, 'Cistercians and Cluniacs'. 53.

¹² C. J. Mews, 'Negotiating the boundaries of gender in religious life: Robert of Arbrissel and Hersende, Abelard and Heloise', *Viator* 37 (2006) 113.

economic obligations to them and refusing to send priests and funds from female communities.¹³ It was clear that even in the new orders there was no real place for women.¹⁴ Though many women still desired cloistered lives as nuns and abbesses, increasing numbers actively sought and subsequently found an alternative outside the official structure of the Church. One such category was the anchoresses.

Throughout medieval history, religion, politics, economics, and societal changes were unequivocally linked, necessitating an interdisciplinary historiographical approach. For the purposes of this study, it is important to contextualize the phenomenon of religious women in the middle ages and the rise of anchoresses against the backdrop of changes to the Church and Christian beliefs during 10th to 13th centuries. Because religion during this time was so tied to every aspect of medieval life, it would be impossible to discuss women—let alone religious women—in any way, without discussing Church attitudes toward women and how women themselves navigated their own faith in such a theocratic society. This integration of multiple disciplines has proved integral to past and current scholarship on anchoresses.

Research on anchoresses and religious women, in general, has come far in the last two decades. Until the early 1990s, scholarship was limited largely to an English context. The focus was on analyzing English texts, with particular focus on later sources such as *Ancrene Wisse*, a 13th-century text written, most likely by a man, as a guide book for English anchoresses, and the *Shewings* of the 14th-century anchoress Julian of Norwich. English anchoritic beliefs and practices, though fairly well documented, were not consistent within England nor were they necessarily replicated

¹³ C.H. Berman, 'Were there twelfth-century Cistercian nuns?', in C.H. Berman (ed.), *Medieval Religion: New Approaches*. Routledge; 2005. 201. And Brenda M. Bolton. "Mulieres Sanctae." In *Women in Medieval Society*, edited by Stuard Susan Mosher. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976. 143. In 1213 the Cistercians began to limit the numbers of nunneries. By 1228 they had forbade any future attachments of nunneries to their order.

¹⁴ Brenda M. Bolton. "Mulieres Sanctae." 144. Though the Poor Clares, a female community associated with the Franciscans, did take women they could not single-handedly accommodate the huge influx of women that wanted to pursue religious lives. Additionally, if there were any thoughts of creating a female order, they were shut down in 1215, when the Fourth Lateran council forbid the creation of new orders, shutting the door in the face of hopeful religious women and their male supporters.

throughout all of Europe. Anchoritic traditions varied from region to region as well as from anchorite to anchorite.

In the last two decades, scholarship has expanded to consider other contexts. This process began in the 1980s with Brenda Bolton's comparison of the practices of religious women in England and the Low Countries.¹⁵ The torch has since been passed to scholars such as Anneke Mulder-Bakker and Liz Herbert McAvoy who, starting in the 1990s, but gaining momentum in the early 2000s, began writing about medieval anchoresses located in modern-day Germany, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands.¹⁶ Their scholarship focuses on examining how anchoresses were able to access power as women through their religious roles, as well as their relationships with clergymen, who often acted as their supporters. Both these scholars demonstrate highlighted how these women obtained authority within the inherently sexist context of medieval society. Additionally, Barbara Newman's work on the perceptions of women, gender, and the intersections with religion and spirituality has also been vital.¹⁷

I will be chiefly focusing on primary sources such as *vitae* and guidelines written for anchoresses. Most of my information about Yvette comes from her biography. However, I will also be using the lives of other holy women including those of the mother of Guibert of Nogent (c. 1030-c. 1110) and Marie de Oignies (1177-1213). Examining these women and their lives help reveal how Yvette's role was similar to or differed from her contemporaries. As with most studies of women during the Middle Ages, these accounts are written by men. Hardly ever are medieval women's words and actions transmitted to modern readers unmediated, so modern scholars are at

¹⁵ See her 1981 article "Some Thirteenth Century Women in the Low Countries: A Special Case?"

¹⁶ For Liz Herbert McAvoy see *Anchoritic Traditions of Medieval Europe* and her introduction in *Medieval Anchoritisms: Gender, Space and the Solitary Life*. For Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker see Mulder-Bakker, Anneke B., and Myra Heerspink Scholz. *Lives of the Anchoresses: The Rise of the Urban Recluse in Medieval Europe and Sanctity and motherhood: essays on holy mothers in the Middle Ages*.

¹⁷ See 'Liminalities: literate women in the long twelfth century', in T.F.X. Noble & J. Van Engen (eds.), *European Transformations: The Long Twelfth Century* (2012).

the mercy of the accounts that male clerics wrote about these women.¹⁸ Though like any male hagiographer, Yvette's biographer, Hugh of Floreffe, takes some liberties perhaps in the origin of her unique abilities, multiple scholars today such as Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker and Jo Ann McNamara have claimed that Hugh did not seem to add many of his own agendas into his biography of Yvette's life, using many first person accounts and his own memories of her.¹⁹ However, even male biased texts reveal much about the actual lives of these women as well as contemporary social perceptions of them.

Other than *vitae*, I also rely on contemporary guides written for anchoresses, such as *A Rule of Life for a Recluse*, by Aelred of Rievaulx (1110-1167), who wrote in England; his guide is still helpful in understanding how male clerics thought anchoresses should behave and what their anxieties were. Anchoresses, unlike nuns and monks, lived by no official rule. Though they generally lived by the virtues of humility, piety, self-contemplation, and physical segregation from the outside world, each did this in a slightly different manner. While An anchoress might have been protected by a local bishop, bishops did not have direct oversight over them. Thus there was no way that they could homogenize the lives of anchoresses. This led some clerics to step in and create general guides for these women's lives, these rules can reveal what ideals and virtues clerics thought were appropriate for anchoresses.

Despite her humble beginnings as a merchant's daughter, Yvette became a central religious figure for her community drawing people from all over the Low Countries, France, and Germany to live near her or visit her. She was unique among religious women in that she was both a biological mother and a spiritual mother. In a time when sex was denounced and virginity praised, it would not

¹⁸ See McGuire, Brian Patrick. "Holy Women and Monks in the Thirteenth Century: Friendship or Exploitation?" *Vox Benedictina*; Saskatoon 6: 4, (1989).

¹⁹ See Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, and Myra Heerspink Scholz. *Lives of the Anchoresses: The Rise of the Urban Recluse in Medieval Europe*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. And Jo Ann McNamara "Introduction" from Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. tr. Jo Ann McNamara. Toronto: Peregrina Pub., 2000.

have been unusual for Yvette, a widow and mother, to have been disregarded as a serious religious leader. However, her personal experience with sex, men, and biological motherhood, instead of detracting from her holiness, elevated her. Her cult was centered around her identity as a mother; she was sought out for her maternal wisdom and held in awe for her divinely-aided ability to externalize and bring to light people's sexual sins and illicit desires. Ultimately, Yvette's motherhood did not detract from her religious authority but instead was integral to her influence as an anchoress.

In my first chapter I will be examining Yvette's motherhood before her enclosure as an anchoress, and how she struggled with balancing her responsibilities as a biological mother with her religious inclinations. In my second chapter, I will transition to Yvette's life as an anchoress and how she assumed her role as a religious mother and teacher, focusing on how she utilized the knowledge she had acquired as a lay housewife and mother to inform her instruction of her spiritual children. Finally, in the third I turn to Yvette's miracles; her most common miracle is when the Holy Spirit reveals to her the sexual sins of the men and women in her community. She uses this divinely bestowed information to educate her flock about the dangers of sexual temptation and direct them back onto a chaste and religious path. Yvette's own sexual experience and her own path towards chastity informed the character of her miracles and ultimately defined the redemptive nature of her cult.

Chapter 1

Maternal Metamorphosis: Yvette's Motherhood Before the Anchorhold

Yvette of Huy's life seemed to be planned out for her. She was a daughter, then she would be a wife, then a mother, and if she were lucky she would live long enough perhaps to be a widow. It didn't take long for all of these to come to pass. She was a wife by 13 and a mother and a widow by 18. What more was there to be? There were not many categories that medieval women could inhabit. They were defined by their relationships with men and defined by their sexual experience. These roles generally followed their life-cycle from virgin to wife to mother to widow.²⁰ As a young girl, Yvette did not want to be a wife or a mother. But either way, at 18 she found herself a mother, a widow, and a young woman without a clear roadmap. So she made her own. Not many medieval religious women whose names and stories come down to modern readers were mothers, but Yvette was. After her husband's death, Yvette began to pursue a more religious life outside of the traditional boundaries of the Church. Central to this new religious life and her future identity as a famous and powerful religious woman was her role as a mother. This identity would sometimes limit her and sometimes give her opportunities. Sometimes she distanced herself from it, but eventually, she embraced it. Over the course of Yvette's life, motherhood meant different things and informed her in different ways. In this chapter, I will be investigating Yvette's motherhood before she became an anchoress, and thus before she became a religious mother. Therefore, it will focus more on her and her society's relationship with and perceptions of biological motherhood, and the relating themes of sex and virginity.

Medieval perceptions of motherhood, and women's roles in general, were complex and often contradictory. This complexity is best embodied by the figure of the Virgin Mary. As both a virgin

²⁰ See Ruth Mazo Karras *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto Others*. New York, New York : Routledge, 2017 and Katharina M. Wilson, and Nadia Margolis, eds. *Women in the Middle Ages: An Encyclopedia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004.

and a mother, Mary represented the two conflicting ideals of womanhood during this time. The debate surrounding the role of women goes back to early Christianity. Jesus himself surrounded him with women, such as Mary Magdalene and Martha of Bethany. Despite this, and their active role in the early Church,²¹ Christian desert fathers and scholars were vocal in their rejection of sex and women.²² Medieval attitudes toward women were not completely black and white. Women had their place within Christianity and within the secular world. What medieval clerics and intellectuals were less certain about was what that place should be.

According to most early Christian and medieval intellectuals, the best and most uncorrupted state for a woman (*or* a man) was virginity, the abstinence from sex for one's entire life. According to Ruth Mazo Karras, this belief likely originated from preserved dualist concepts in Christianity, that associated the flesh with corruption and the spirit with purity.²³ However, as Karras points out and as Christian scholars acknowledged in order for society to function not all people could remain virgins. This created problems for early Church fathers. Since sex was necessary, they could neither completely disregard it nor completely condemn it. Eventually, it was conceded that while virginity remained the highest and most pure state for a woman, marital sex was not sinful as long as it was not pleasurable and was only for the purpose of procreation. Though both virginity and marriage were deemed acceptable paths for women there was no question in the eyes of Church fathers which was superior. In his treatise *Against Jovinianus*, St. Jerome was quick to critique the belief held by some contemporaries that virginity and marriage were equal states of being.²⁴ He argues against the belief of the followers of Jovinianus that "a virgin is no better as such than a wife in the sight of God."²⁵ Jerome uses this treatise to disavow the belief held by some during his time that "virginity is

²¹ See *Ordained Women in the Early Church: a documentary history* edited and translated by Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek

²² Ruth Mazo Karras. *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto Others*. New York, New York : Routledge, 2017. 1.

²³ Ibid. 28.

²⁴ Ibid. 34.

²⁵ St. Jerome *Against Jovinianus* tr. Freemantle, M.A. New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1892. 564.

to marriage what fruit is to the tree, or grain to the straw.”²⁶ In his eyes, this sentiment bordered on heresy. Virgins themselves are the true harvest of God. While marriage and sex had its place it was virginity which truly was a mark of faith and was most pleasing to God. Still, church fathers, such as St. Jerome and St. Augustine maintained that marital sexual intercourse was not a sin or obstacle to salvation.²⁷ As Jerome concedes in *Against Jovinianus*, there would be no virgins without marriage and sex. But compared to the virtues of virginity, he dedicates little time to the benefits of marriage. He writes to women uncertain about their path that “it is better to marry than to burn.”²⁸ Assurances to married men and women were therefore undercut by the emphasis Church fathers placed on virginity and their seeming apathy to marriage.

Early Christian debates concerning virginity, marriage, and motherhood continued into the Middle Ages. Women likely struggled with conflicting messages. Sources, such as hagiographies of female saints and church sermons, elevated Christian virgin martyrs. As other sources condemned sex and cited the pain of childbirth as a just punishment for women’s history of duplicity and moral culpability. At the same time, the emerging cults of the Virgin Mary and St. Anne praised mothers and glorified their roles as mothers and protectors, teachers, and benevolent matrons.²⁹ These conflicting ideals must have had an impact on girls and young women who grew up idealizing the Virgin and hearing about the importance of purity for a woman.³⁰ Is it no wonder then that many women hearing about the importance of virginity and the stain of the flesh chose to join the religious life in droves.

The anchoress Mary of Oignies (1177-1213), a near contemporary to Yvette, was one of these women. Like Yvette, she was born to a wealthy family and married young. However, she

²⁶ St. Jerome *Against Jovinianus* 566.

²⁷ Ruth Mazo Karras. *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto Others*. 36.

²⁸ St. Jerome *Against Jovinianus* 573.

²⁹ See Pamela Sheingorn. ““The Wise Mother”: The Image of St. Anne Teaching the Virgin Mary.” *Gesta* 32, no. 1 (1993): 69-80.

³⁰ Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker. “Ivetta of Huy: mater et magistra” in *Sanctity and motherhood : essays on holy mothers in the Middle Ages*. ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker. New York: Garland Pub., 1995. 234.

convinced her husband, once they were married, not to have sex, so she could remain a virgin. She entered into spiritual matrimony without engaging in carnal love.³¹ The marriage satisfied her obligations to her family without necessitating her to compromise her own religious wishes. She and her husband lived together chastely for many years before she asked his permission to become an anchoress.

Virginity was the ideal for anchoresses much like it was for other religious women. Guides for anchoresses, such as *Ancrene Wisse* and Aelred's *A Rule of Life for a Recluse* highlight virginity as a dominant virtue. In both texts, there lies the assumption that the anchoress is a virgin.³² Aelred especially is acutely aware of preserving the virginal state of his audience when giving them advice and warning them about the importance of maintaining their chastity. He bemoans the fact that certain anchoresses enlarged the opening to cells to "allow her to pass through or her amour to enter; what was a cell has now become a brothel."³³ Susanna Greer Fein understands the cell as a manifestation of the anchoress' virginity; it is a private and womb-like space which must not be breached in any way.³⁴ Aelred's worry about the preservation of anchoresses' virginity is made more explicit later when he writes "...let the virgin guard with the utmost care and the utmost trepidation the priceless treasure of virginity which she already possesses to her advantage and which once lost cannot be recovered."³⁵ While Aelred is anxious about anchoresses engaging in sexual intercourse, he prioritizes the morality of virgin anchoresses. He does not seem to imagine that anchoresses who had had sex existed. Though he mentions the importance of continual chastity, this always comes

³¹ James of Vitry. *The Life of Mary of Oignies*. tr. Margot H. King, in *Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation*. ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker. Brepols; 2006. 55

³² Susannah Mary Chewning. "The Paradox of Virginity within the Anchoritic Tradition: The Masculine Gaze and the Feminine Body in the *Wobunge* Group" in *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages*. eds. Angela Jane Weisl, and Cindy L. Carlson. New York: Palgrave, 2011.

³³ Aelred of Rievaulx. "A Rule of Life for a Recluse" in *The Works of Aelred of Rievaulx*. tr. David Knowles. Spencer, Mass. Cistercian Publications, 1971. 47.

³⁴ Susanna Greer Fein. "Maternity in Aelred of Rievaulx's Letter to His Sister" in *Medieval Mothering*. ed. John Carmi Parsons Bonnie Wheeler. New York : Garland Pub., 1996. 145.

³⁵ Aelred of Rievaulx. "A Rule of Life for a Recluse" 63.

second to his primary concern, about protecting one's initial virginity. Despite the preeminence of virginity in Christian tradition, Aelred's text, and the example of Mary of Oignies, not all anchoresses were virgins.

Though Yvette and Mary of Oignies might both have been the daughters of wealthy families and required to marry young, Yvette was not as lucky in her parent's choice of husband. Like Mary, Yvette did not want to marry. Her biographer states that after she turned thirteen, Yvette's parents began looking to find her a husband. He claims that Yvette "shrank from the burden of the womb, the dangers of birth, and the raising of children...she would have declined all marriage. And she insisted upon this any way she could, now begging her mother and now her father that they might permit her to remain without a husband."³⁶ However, as an unmarried girl in a growing merchant family, she had little choice. She was married, but if she tried to convince her husband that they should live chastely, as Mary did, she was clearly unsuccessful since by the time her husband died when she was eighteen she had given birth to three children, two of whom survived past childhood.³⁷ Yvette's biographer does not claim that she objected to the marriage because of religious reasons; more than anything she seemed afraid of the physical strain of pregnancy and the responsibility of motherhood. Neither does Hugh of Floreffe claim that she remained a virgin after she was married, either physically or spiritually. Anneke Baker-Mulder points out that Hugh's depiction of Yvette's marriage does not seem to follow the lead of other hagiographers who often turned their female subjects, even those who had had sex, into virgin martyrs in disguise, secretly married to Christ.³⁸ Thus Yvette's sexual activity as a young wife does not seem to keep her from pursuing a religious life, nor did it detract from her holiness later in life.³⁹ In Hugh's eyes, and likely

³⁶ Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. tr. Jo Ann McNamara. Toronto: Peregrina Pub., 2000. 40-41.

³⁷ Ibid. 43. Hugh states that she lived with her husband for five years. If she was thirteen when they were married, then she would have been about 18 by the time of his death.

³⁸ Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, *Lives of the Anchoresses*. 56.

³⁹ Jo Ann McNamara. "Introduction" in *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. 10.

in the eyes of his patron the Abbot of Floreffe, she had simply done her duty as a daughter and a wife. In fact, this sexual experience and motherhood would become a central tenant to Yvette's later role as an anchoress.

By the time Yvette was 18, she was the mother of two sons and already a widow. Like a traditional urban matron, she was responsible for educating her children, and, after the death of her husband, providing for their present and future welfare.⁴⁰ While as a child, Yvette might have been wary about her ability to raise children, according to Hugh she took on this responsibility without hesitation. Eventually, she sent her eldest son off to a monastery. The other, because of his young age and poor health, stayed at home with her.⁴¹ Yvette clearly cared deeply for her sons. Hugh writes "[Yvette] loved [her sons] tenderly and did not wish to be long without them."⁴² However, her love for her children did not stop her from pursuing other paths.

Though she strove to provide for them as children, Yvette's desire to seek a more holy life began to run into conflict with her maternal obligations. After her husband's death, she began to commit herself to a more religious and humble life, and as part of this, she donated copious amounts of money and goods to the poor. Anxious that his daughter would drive herself into the poor house and squander her sons' inheritance, Yvette's father took away her son, He forced her to invest the remaining money with a moneylender in the city before agreeing to return her son.⁴³ In order to get her sons back, Yvette unwittingly committed the sin of usury, a sin she would repent for later in life. Her duties as a mother and her obligation to her children indirectly caused her to sin. In her early life, there seemed to be a struggle between the spiritual life she wanted and the worldly ties, her role as a mother, that bound her to the secular world.

⁴⁰ Shulamith Shahar. *The Fourth Estate: a History of Women in the Middle Ages* .tr. Chaya Galai. London: Methuen, 1983. 181.

⁴¹ Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. 44.

⁴² Ibid. 53.

⁴³ Ibid. 53.

This struggle only seems to change when she petitioned the local bishop to let her remain a widow despite calls from her father to remarry. Though Yvette's father originally asked the bishop for his help in convincing her to remarry, the bishop was quickly won over by Yvette's humility and prayers and agreed to let her remain a widow. Yvette now freed from the burden of another marriage and returning to the role of a wife, "gave thanks to God as her liberator."⁴⁴ This transition into widowhood, by assuming the "issue of the veil," was common during the Middle Ages. It had originated in Carolingian times and remained popular into Yvette's own time. Though it was not a rite recognized legally by the Church, it still consisted of a traditional ceremony in which widows were consecrated to chastity.⁴⁵ According to Church policies, priests, not bishops, were supposed to veil widows. However, as demonstrated with Yvette, this was not always the case. While Hugh's mention of this fact might reflect the fact that most women were actually consecrated as widows by Bishops. This addition might also have been a way to elevate Yvette in particular, elevating her and perhaps foreshadowing that Yvette would be more than just a widow.⁴⁶ The bishop's decision changed her path entirely freeing her from both family and eventually earthly obligations.⁴⁷ She continued to be a mother, but she would never again be an earthly wife.

When her sons were old enough and she herself was about 23, Yvette left Huy for a leper community just outside of the city. Her friends and family were wary of her decision, but none of them had the authority to stop her. Going to a leper community was not an unusual path for men and women with religious aspiration like Yvette. St. Francis of Assisi and Marie of Oignies were both known for their love and care of lepers.⁴⁸ Medieval Christian society had a complicated relationship with leprosy and lepers. On one hand, leprosy was considered, as it is in the Old

⁴⁴ Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. 46.

⁴⁵ Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, and Myra Heerspink Scholz. *Lives of the Anchoresses*. 29.

⁴⁶ Katherine Clark, "Putting on the Garment of Widowhood: Medieval Widows, Monastic Memory, and Historical Writing" *Quidditas* 31:1 (2010) *The Journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association*, 37.

⁴⁷ Angela Jane Weisl, and Cindy L. Carlson, eds. *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages*. New York: Palgrave, 2011. 3.

⁴⁸ Jeffrey Richards. *Sex, Dissidence and Damnation: Minority Groups in the Middle Ages*. London: Routledge, 1990. 157.

Testament, a mark of impurity and even sin. It was an outward sign of an impure soul often associated with sexual sin.⁴⁹ The Third Lateran Council in 1179 decreed that lepers be segregated from the rest of society, with separate places of worship and cemeteries.⁵⁰ Though leprosy was seen as a punishment sent from heaven, it was also a mark of divine favor, since those afflicted with the disease suffered on earth as Christ had suffered.⁵¹ Therefore the role of lepers was incredibly liminal, they lived both within and removed from society. By going to the leper community, she entered into a more liminal space, as well as a more liminal role. In many ways, the state of a leper paralleled her own. Both were entangled in conflicting elements of faith and holiness but also taboos of sexuality.

Her time in the leper community was a transitional period for Yvette. She shed some of her responsibilities to the earthly world, devoting herself instead to the needs of the lepers and to developing her religious life. The readers of her biography do not hear about her biological sons again until she has become a fully established anchoress years later. However, in the first paragraph describing her move to the leper community the reader hears of Yvette's own mother, who absent from the beginning of the *vita*, had at "some time earlier gone to a religious life."⁵² The mention of Yvette's mother just in the moment that Yvette leaves her sons to lead a more religious life is not mere happenstance. It puts Yvette's decision in a social and religious context, reminding the reader that this decision to leave her family and her earthly ties was not unique to her. Like Yvette's mother, many women during this time were eager to join convents.⁵³ Hugh's decision to highlight this family history of women leaving to pursue more religious lives puts Yvette's own decision in context. It also reaffirms Yvette's own role as a mother in this pivotal and liminal moment in her

⁴⁹ Ibid .150. One of Yvette's later miracles, once she has become an anchoress actually involves her vision that a woman who has committed some unspecified sexual sin, will be struck down with leprosy. Yvette's vision comes true when the woman contracts leprosy, because of divine dissatisfaction with her actions. See *Life of Yvette of Huy* 98.

⁵⁰ Y. V. O'Neil, 'Diseases of the Middle Ages', in *The Cambridge World History of Human Disease*, ed. K. Kiple. 273.

⁵¹ Jeffrey Richards. *Sex, Dissidence and Damnation: Minority Groups in the Middle Ages*. 157

⁵² Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. 61.

⁵³ See Shahar, Shulamith. *The Fourth Estate: a History of Women in the Middle Ages* .tr. Chaya Galai. London: Methuen, 1983. and Katharina M. Wilson, and Nadia Margolis, eds. *Women in the Middle Ages: An Encyclopedia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004.

life. Margery Kempe (c. 1373-1438) too, a lay mother and wife left her husband and children to pursue a religious life. Though scholars have noted that there is little mention of her children, after she decides to live chastely and go on pilgrimages, scholars such as Liz Herbert McAvoy notes that this did not mean that she abandoned her role as a mother. Like Yvette, Margery whether she was near her children or not would always be a mother and would always be affected by this role.⁵⁴ Though Yvette left her children back in Huy, she had not abandoned her motherhood completely.

Despite the mention of her mother, Yvette's retreat to the leprosarium marks the beginning of a period of her biography in which she is generally divorced from her femininity and her motherhood. Hugh characterizes this era of her life as centering around the charity of Martha, one of Christ's female follows in the Gospels. Like Martha, she cares for the sick in the leper community. However, other than the comparison to Martha, there is no real feminine gendered language in the description of her charitable deeds. Instead, Hugh employs a more masculine vocabulary. It was common for medieval hagiographers to compare their female subjects to men.⁵⁵ This device is even used in the hagiography of the 3rd century martyr, St. Perpetua, in she claims that in a dream vision "*facta cum masculus*" [I became male].⁵⁶ Religious women were often compared to men in moments of spiritual strength of faith because men's bodies and minds were seen as more perfect since they more closely resembled the image of God and Christ.⁵⁷ In Yvette's biography, this is also the case, when she arrives at the leper community she "girded up her loins with fortitude."⁵⁸ This action of constricting her genitals works on two levels, it might be reminiscent of a practice that lepers and their caretakers practiced.⁵⁹ However, it also has metaphorical significance representing Yvette's dedication to her new life of chastity as well as her temporary abandonment of her

⁵⁴ Liz Herbert McAvoy. "Motherhood: The Book of Margery Kempe" *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* 24 (1997). 25.

⁵⁵ See note 13 in Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. tr. Jo Ann McNamara.

⁵⁶ *Passio Sanctarum: Perpetuae et Felicitatis* ed. Julia Haig Gaisser and James J O'Donnell. Bryn Mawr: 1984. 10.7. 16.

⁵⁷ See Ephesians 4:13 "until we all attain to... perfect manhood, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ."

⁵⁸ Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. 62.

⁵⁹ Jeffrey Richards. *Sex, Dissidence and Damnation: Minority Groups in the Middle Ages*. London: Routledge, 1990. 160.

femininity and motherhood. Additionally, Hugh states that in the leper community she “acted manfully in the eyes of the sick...”⁶⁰ and then states that she encouraged her early followers to “act manfully”⁶¹ in order to find comfort in God. The only other time this term is used is earlier in the narrative after the bishop allows Yvette to remain a widow. She is described as being tried by the devil during this period and despite her womanly body, “she triumphed over the enemy [the devil] in the final contest, by acting manfully.”⁶² In all three examples, the same Latin phrase *viriliter agens* is used.⁶³ Jo Ann McNamara sees the use of this phrase when she takes the widow’s veil as Hugh’s demonstration of Yvette’s spiritual growth. I would extend the reading of this phrase to when its use when Yvette is in the leper community. Both of these moments in Yvette’s life are liminal. In the earlier example, Yvette has just been allowed to remain a widow and thus abstain from sex and live chastely for the rest of her life. As the leader of a religious community in the leprosarium, Yvette has removed herself from her obligations as a biological mother, by leaving Huy, but had not yet become an anchoress and a spiritual mother. She might be the leader of this new community, but she is not yet their *mother*. It is only after she becomes an anchoress that motherhood reemerges as a theme in her *vita*.

Eventually, word about Yvette’s holy life spread throughout the low countries and soon people from Huy as well as those further afield began flocking to her leper community to live near her; “it came about that many from the town as from the surrounding villas, men and women, encouraged by her sweetest familiarity, left the business they had in the world to move to the same place with her and many arranged with her to enjoy her company and be introduced to her discipline.”⁶⁴ The people of the lowlands knew of Yvette and were likely inspired by her story and

⁶⁰ Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. 62.

⁶¹ Ibid. 64.

⁶² Ibid 48.

⁶³ Hugo of Floreffe. *De B. Yvetta vidua reclusa Hui in Belgio*. In *Acta Sanctorum XIII* January, 867.

⁶⁴ Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. 64. For more on the community that surrounded Yvette see: alter Simons’ “The Beguine Movement in the Southern Low Countries: A Reassessment,” Carol Neel’s “Origins of Beguines,” and

the austere way of life she had cultivated for herself without joining a cloistered nunnery. As the leader and protector of an active community of followers, Yvette was quickly emerging as a religious voice to be reckoned with. It was around this time when she had likely reached her late 30s or early 40s, that she decided to be enclosed officially in the church of the leper community she had called home for many years.⁶⁵ This was the age at which many religious and secular women took additional steps to independence and responsibility. This change was often linked with menopause and represented the commencement of a new physical and spiritual stage in a woman's life.⁶⁶ The ceremony of official enclosure to become an anchoress too marked a new stage in the life of a religious woman. She abandoned the earthly world completely to live the rest of her life in a small cell. The official ritual of enclosure, during which she was shut into a cell in the church, included the forgiveness of all a woman's prior sins and a ceremonial burial which marked the beginning of her new life in the anchorhold, beyond the reach of earthly sinfulness.⁶⁷

Yvette's choice to become an anchoress was monumental and completely changed her status in her community, her authority, womanhood, and motherhood. Hugh writes that during the ceremony, she "rejoiced as at a wedding day."⁶⁸ There is no reference to her prior marriage and wifehood, nor reluctance to this spiritual union with Christ as there had been for her earthly marriage years before. She is transformed. She is a new woman, a new wife, and a new mother to her flock. This transformation is made even more explicit by the dream-vision that she has a couple of

Joanne E Ziegler "Secular Canonesses as Antecedents of the Beguines in the Low Countries: an introduction to some older views."

⁶⁵ Yvette seems to have become an anchoress earlier than most. In her Chapter "The Age of Discretion: Women at Forty and Beyond" in *Middle-Aged Women in the Middle Ages* Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, argues that most anchoresses were enclosed in their 40s. However, Hugh states that Yvette left for the leper community when she was 23, and lived as a caretaker for 11 years before becoming an anchoress. Though these dates and ages might not be exact, according to Hugh, Yvette would have been 33 or 34 when she was enclosed. Though Mulder-Bakker concedes that Yvette began having visions at this time, she argues that she did not actually take on a public role until her 40s or 50s. However, I find this unlikely, since Hugh claims that people began flocking to Yvette before she even became an anchoress.

⁶⁶ Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, "The Age of Discretion: Women at Forty and Beyond." In *Middle-Aged Women in the Middle Ages*, edited by Niebrzydowski Sue. Boydell and Brewer, 2011. 23.

⁶⁷ Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, "Yvette of Huy: The Metamorphoses of a Woman" 69.

⁶⁸ Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. 67.

nights after her encloement. Hugh writes that she dreamed she saw Christ sitting in judgment, with the Virgin Mary on his right. Christ is critical of Yvette, he claims that she is “sinful in her heart”⁶⁹ referring back to her sin of usury. However, the Virgin intercedes on her behalf, claiming that Yvette has atoned for this particular sin, that was committed in ignorance.

The woman who sat at the right rose from her throne of glory and humbly prostrated herself before her only begotten Son and most affectionately asked for mercy for His handmaid that He would deign to turn the rigour of His justice into mercy... How could the Son deny the mother, the Husband the wife, the Friend His friend, His own flesh and blood? Bone from His bone and flesh of His flesh is she. “Let it be done,” said the Son, “O mother, what you ask. I will remit her sins and commit her to you for her special devotion to your move and worship.” And from that hour the merciful mother took her to herself and softly consoled her sorrows and taking her by the hand brought her again into the hand of her Son who reconciled with her by the kiss of His mouth and restored her to his mother, saying: “Mother, behold your daughter. I commend her to you as your own, your particular handmaid forever...”⁷⁰

The Virgin as an intercessor for penitent sinners was a common trope in medieval hagiography and Christian belief. All saints were believed to have this ability to intercede on behalf of the faithful, but the Virgin Mary was the ultimate saint. As the mother of Christ, she was especially dear to him and thus could encourage him to show mercy.⁷¹ In this passage, Mary’s role as Christ’s mother is especially emphasized. She is powerful and influential *because* of her motherhood. She and He are of the same flesh. However, Christ seems almost to fade into the background here. Mary is the focus. Everything that Christ does he does on her behalf; her mercy, protection, and love are at the forefront of Yvette’s vision. Mary was central to medieval Christian thought. As I stated earlier in the chapter, she embodied every part of ideal womanhood and motherhood; she was touched by the divine and became a mother through God’s grace without the stain of sexual intercourse. She was venerated for this by men and women, lay and clerical alike. This was the ideal with which Yvette associated herself in this vision. While Yvette might once have venerated the Virgin like everyone

⁶⁹ Ibid. 69.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 69-71.

⁷¹ Robert Bartlett. *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?: Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation*. Princeton University Press, 2013. 151-62.

else, by the end of this section, it is clear she is no longer like everyone else. Yvette becomes the Virgin's adopted spiritual daughter and selected handmaiden. She is elevated above her previous state, into a realm closer to the divine. Yvette recognized that she was changed. While she might have been a biological and spiritual mother before, her motherhood and sanctity are now backed by the greatest mother of them all.

Yvette's maternity changed significantly before she became an anchoress; she struggled with her role as a biological mother and her desire to lead a more spiritual life. Then in the leper community, she left her role as a biological mother and entered into a more liminal and masculine stage. However, her enclosure and her dream vision marked the next major stage of her life and the next major stage in her role as a mother. Over the course of her time as an anchoress, the seemingly separate spheres of physical and spiritual motherhood came together and begin to inform each other. Additionally, it was as an anchoress that Yvette experienced most renown, became an important figure in the larger communities of Huy and Liege, as well as when she began performing miracles.

Chapter 2

The Matriarch and *Magistra* of Huy

With the blessing of the bishop and the Virgin Mary herself, Yvette was enclosed as a new woman in a cell in the leprosarium outside Huy. The old Yvette was dead, and she was born anew. Additionally, after years divorced from her biological motherhood, she now took on the role of a spiritual mother, the leader of a band of faithful followers. She became the matriarch not only of her community in the leprosarium but also a motherly figure for the larger lay community.⁷² Her maternal responsibilities quickly became a central tenet to her work as an anchoress. Her influence and authority were rooted in her matriarchal knowledge and experience, which she learned from her previous lay life. Because of her new religious role, she had more independence and authority to fashion her own teachings and shape the spiritual lives of her followers.⁷³ However, instead of concerning herself with theological issues of salvation or praying in isolation, Yvette became a vital spiritual advisor, protector, and moral and spiritual teacher. She counseled and educated followers on matters that she as a mother knew about and treated those who came to her as her spiritual children. As a lay wife and mother, Yvette would have been responsible for the early moral, religious and perhaps literary education of her biological children. She extended this experience and made it available to all, advising her followers on spiritual matters but also on life decisions. Her motherhood was central to her influence, instead of limiting her, her experience gave her special authority to guide and advise her flock.

After Yvette's enclosure as an anchoress, she is once again reunited with her motherhood, as well as with her youngest son. As a young wife and recent widow, Yvette like other merchant-class mothers would have been responsible for the moral and religious lives and inclinations of her

⁷² Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, "Yvette of Huy: The Metamorphoses of a Woman" in *Lives of the Anchoresses: The Rise of the Urban Recluse in Medieval Europe*. Mulder-Bakker, Anneke B., and Myra Heerspink Scholz. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. 72.

⁷³ Liz Herbert McAvoy, ed. *Anchoritic Traditions of Medieval Europe*. Boydell and Brewer, 2010. 16.

children.⁷⁴ However, when her sons were old enough, Yvette left to pursue a religious life in the leper community outside Huy. As aforementioned, She had put her eldest son in a Cistercian monastery and left the youngest with her family. However, from that moment on both sons are temporarily excluded from her narrative. The development of her faith and eventually the development of her community of followers take center stage. It is not a coincidence that the moment Yvette reclaims her femininity and a new spiritual motherhood, her, now wayward, son is reintroduced.

The circumstances of Yvette's reunion with her son were not happy. Hugh recounts that the devil unsuccessful in his corruption of the saintly Yvette turned his eyes instead on her son, "[the Devil hoped] that if [Yvette's] mind were intent on her little boy she might be diverted somewhat from praises of God for what merciful mother could be unmindful of the son of her womb."⁷⁵ Her son egged on by the devil began to give himself "wholly over to his baser instincts," readily won over by lust and vice.⁷⁶ This is a trope that occurs in the biographies of other spiritual women. *The Book of Margery Kempe* records that Margery's son too was tempted into sexual sin by the devil, but thanks to her prayers he amends his ways.⁷⁷ This narrative aligns almost exactly with the course of Yvette's son. In both cases, the devil, making no progress on the spiritual women, targets their children. These similar stories reinforce the medieval idea that a mother, even one who had been separated from her children for a period of time, would always be concerned about the current state and future fate of her children. Motherhood was a lifelong assignment, one which could not be so easily abandoned. Yvette's sons are pinpointed as a potential point of weakness for her, one that can be exploited by the forces of evil.

⁷⁴ Jennifer Carpenter. "Julette of Huy, recluse and mother (1158-1228): children and mothering in the saintly life" in *Power of the weak : studies on medieval women* ed. Jennifer Carpenter and Sally-Beth MacLean. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995. 74.

⁷⁵ Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. tr. Jo Ann McNamara. Toronto: Peregrina Pub., 2000. 76.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 76.

⁷⁷ Cindy Vitto. "Margery Kempe: Medieval Mother and Mystic." *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy* 2, no. 2 (1991): 51.

Initially, the devil's ploy works. Yvette is wracked with worry when she finds out. She confides in friends and visitors and begs them to pray for her son. She herself begins to pray with zeal,

she exerted herself and scourged her spirit and laboured as though pregnant all over again that she might bear for God [the child] whom she had already borne to the world and he might become a child of God through the grace of adoption who had been the slave of sin and son of wrath by merit of his own iniquity.⁷⁸

Her prayers and sorrow take the form of childbirth. This language was often used for religious women when they were in the midst of passionate prayer. When Marie of Oignies prayed she was described as “like a woman in the throes of childbirth.”⁷⁹ This language of childbirth was part of the vocabulary available to women to express their intense ecstatic and visionary experiences. According to the biographies of many religious women in this era, when praying or having visions, their love and pleasure in conversing with God became so violent that the demarcation between pleasure and pain blurred.⁸⁰ This language reoccurs later in Yvette's own biography when, like Marie, she writhes around when praying and having visions, “wailing as powerfully as a woman giving birth.”⁸¹ However, the first time this language is used in the passage above is different. Unlike Marie and in other sections of her own biography, Yvette not only feels the pains of childbirth but is in fact spiritually going through the entire process of birth. Her labor, she hopes, will result in the spiritual rebirth of her son. The imagery of labor and birth remind the reader that this was not imagined pain for Yvette, as it would have been for Marie. She had already gone through such pain before when bringing this same child physically into the world years before. Since it was her job as a mother to steer her son to a holy path, his divergence from this path reflects badly on her. Thus because of his sins, and her own, she must go through this suffering again as a kind of penance.

⁷⁸ Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. tr. Jo Ann McNamara. Toronto: Peregrina Pub., 2000. 77.

⁷⁹ James of Vitry. *The Life of Mary of Oignies*. tr. Margot H. King. in *Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation*. ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker. Brepols; 2006. 58.

⁸⁰ Ulrike Wiethaus. "Sexuality, Gender, and the Body in Late Medieval Women's Spirituality: Cases from Germany and the Netherlands." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7, no. 1 (1991): 41 and 44.

⁸¹ Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. tr. Jo Ann McNamara. Toronto: Peregrina Pub., 2000. 89.

Despite its personal nature, Yvette's struggle with her son did not remain private and among her friends and close visitors. Hugh writes that rumors spread, "the neighbors flocked and encircled her, in turns to comfort her and to urge, admonish, and beg that she would temper her sorrow, [and] stem her tears."⁸² In addition to her supporters, Yvette was also plagued by critical voices. It is not hard to imagine what their admonishments might have included: how could Yvette possibly be a favorite of God and a true spiritual mother and leader if she could not even keep her own biological son from vice and temptation? Her own son seemed aware of his role in the defamation of his mother. She called him to her and pleaded with him to give up his evil way of life. Initially, he promised to change because "he feared that if his mother, whose sanctity was well known to him, had been afflicted with sorrow for a long time because of him, the judgement of divine vengeance would fall on him in that place where she was."⁸³ Though he is mainly concerned with saving his own skin, his fear to stay at her cell centers around his awareness that his actions are morally wrong and might spark divine retribution. He does not want to challenge Yvette's or her reputation publicly.⁸⁴ He assumes that God might be angry if he aids in Yvette's spiritual degradation and humiliation.

However, Yvette's sanctity is eventually proved without a doubt. After several false starts and his expulsion from the city of Huy, Yvette's son has a vision sent by God in which he sees himself being dragged down to Hell for eternal torment. At this point, a mysterious cloaked woman tells him to go back to his mother. Once back in Huy, he repents for all his sins and is convinced by Yvette to join a Cistercian monastery.⁸⁵ This personal story about Yvette's own son plays an important narrative role in framing the beginning of her time as an anchoress. It is not a coincidence

⁸² Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. tr. Jo Ann McNamara. Toronto: Peregrina Pub., 2000. 78.

⁸³ Ibid. 78.

⁸⁴ Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, . "Ivetta of Huy: mater et magistra" in *Sanctity and motherhood : essays on holy mothers in the Middle Ages*. ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker. New York: Garland Pub., 1995. 225.

⁸⁵ Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. tr. Jo Ann McNamara. Toronto: Peregrina Pub., 2000. 80-1.

that this is the first story that Hugh tells of her life as an anchoress, he chooses it to prioritize her motherhood and set up the theme for the rest of her biography. By saving her son, she proves that she is worthy of being trusted as the spiritual mother of many and demonstrates that she is blessed with divine favor. Her labor which once produced her biological children has been repurposed in order to produce her new spiritual children. Her own biological son acts, symbolically, as her first spiritual child who she births into the world. Though Her biological motherhood, which could have undermined her, ultimately served to strengthen and reinforce her spiritual motherhood and truly set her apart from other anchoresses.

The idea of spiritual motherhood was not unique to Yvette. Other contemporary anchoresses, such as Mary of Oignies, and other religious women, such as abbesses and nuns also presented themselves as advisors and spiritual mothers.⁸⁶ However, none of these largely influential anchoresses had biological children. The only exception is the mother of Guibert of Nogent (c. 1030- c. 1110), who became an anchoress after her husband's death, not far from where her son Guibert was starting his career as a monk.⁸⁷ Guibert wrote about his biological mother's life in his own autobiography, *De Vita Sua*. She gave birth to at least four children including Guibert and also fostered a newborn baby after she retreated to anchoritic life.⁸⁸ However, the important difference between Guibert's mother and Yvette and Marie is that with the exception of the fostered baby, an old nun who served as her maid, and occasional noble visitors,⁸⁹ Guibert's mother did not have a large following. So though she was a physical mother she did not have a large enough following to be considered a spiritual mother for a large number of followers. Though they might not all be

⁸⁶ Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, and Myra Heerspink Scholz. *Lives of the Anchoresses* 52. and Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker "General Introduction" in *Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation*. ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker. Brepols; 2006. 26.

⁸⁷ Guibert of Nogent. "A monk's confession : the memoirs of Guibert of Nogent". tr. Paul J. Archambault. University Park, Pa. : Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996. 45

⁸⁸ Guibert of Nogent. "A monk's confession : the memoirs of Guibert of Nogent". 68-69. The child that she fostered does not seem to have been related to her or any of her followers. She took the child after having a vision that her dead husband was suffering in purgatory because he had sired a child with a sex-worker while still married to Guibert's mother. She took responsibility of child to help diminish the suffering of her husband in purgatory.

⁸⁹ Guibert of Nogent. "A monk's confession : the memoirs of Guibert of Nogent". 46-7.

mothers in the same way, education in some form or another was all central to their motherhood, whether spiritual or biological. For Yvette, education was central to both her spiritual *and* biological motherhood.

Education was not an unusual role for women in the middle ages. Lay women were the preliminary educators of their children and mothers as educators were a fairly common trope in art and literature. St. Anne was the prime example of a mother acting as a teacher. During the Middle Ages, there were thousands of sculptures and painting depicting St. Anne teaching Mary. Pamela Sheingorn argues that these depictions as well as others not of Anne of women wielding books do not just indicate female piety, but also suggests a culture in which some women were literate and responsible for teaching their children as well.⁹⁰ Though women preaching or teaching large groups of men was illegal for women, and could result in imprisonment or even death, there was little controversy about women teaching other women or children especially when it was done in private.⁹¹ The Lollard trial of Walter Brut in 1391, encapsulates this distinction well. When disavowing the Lollard practice of women teaching in public, the refutation concedes that “women may teach women and children in private, and that abbesses may teach nuns in the cloisters.” Additionally “women should... [teach] ignorant women, and girls and boys, but not men.”⁹² In medieval culture, the mother’s role as her children’s first teacher on matters of literacy, morality, and religion, was seen as important even crucial.⁹³ They led their children and their households in matters of faith.⁹⁴ Some religious women too performed the role of the female educator, such as abbesses. They too raised young girls educating them until they were old enough to take on a role in their

⁹⁰ Pamela Sheingorn. ""The Wise Mother": The Image of St. Anne Teaching the Virgin Mary." *Gesta* 32, no. 1 (1993): 121.

⁹¹ Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker. *Sanctity and motherhood: essays on holy mothers in the Middle Ages*. 217.

⁹² Alcuin Blamires, Karen Pratt, and C. William. Marx, eds. *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010. 254-255.

⁹³ Pamela Sheingorn. ""The Wise Mother": The Image of St. Anne Teaching the Virgin Mary." 128.

⁹⁴ Brian Patrick McGuire. "In Search of the Good Mother: Twelfth-century Celibacy and Affectivity." in *In Motherhood, Religion, and Society in Medieval Europe, 400-1400: Essays Presented to Henrietta Leyser*. Ed. Conrad Leyser and Lesley Smith. Ashgate, 2011. 90.

convent. This education was primarily religious, in which mothers instilled in their biological and spiritual children virtue and discipline.⁹⁵

Though mothers were established educators throughout the Middle Ages, some male clerics, such as Aelred of Rievaulx, thought that teaching, especially the instruction of children should be off-limits for anchoresses, who they believed engaged too often with the affairs of the worldly community. On children and teaching, Aelred wrote that an anchoress should “never allow [them] access to [her] cell. It is not unknown for a recluse to take up teaching and turn her cell into a school.”⁹⁶ He believed that though women’s nature was nurturing, it was also too unpredictable to be an effective instructor; they would be “angry one minute and smiling the next.”⁹⁷ In England at least, Aelred believed that too many anchoresses were taking on the roles of community advisors and teachers. Instead of taking on worldly responsibilities he thought it better for anchoresses to be fully enclosed and cut off from the earthly world. They should devote themselves to mental exercises about good-works and motherly affection instead of acting it out in their own lives.⁹⁸

However, interestingly some of the mental exercises that Aelred encourages anchoresses to try center around envisioning themselves as the Virgin Mary. He asks them to imagine her maternal love for her child, Jesus, asking them to “be present and help her as she gives birth,”⁹⁹ to cry with her when Jesus hangs on the cross, and to “join [the Virgin] Mother in looking for [Jesus when he goes to the temple without her],” continuing “What a flood of tears will you not shed when you hear his Mother scolding her Son with the gentle reproach.”¹⁰⁰ In these moments, he seems to prize the feelings of maternal love and instruction that Mary exhibits. He *wants* anchoresses to contemplate these feelings of maternal love, fear, and sadness. He even includes the Virgin chastising and

⁹⁵ Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker. “Ivetta of Huy: mater et magistra” 283.

⁹⁶ Aelred of Rievaulx. “A Rule of Life for a Recluse” in *The Works of Aelred of Rievaulx*.tr. David Knowles. Spencer, Mass. Cistercian Publications, 1971. 49.

⁹⁷ Aelred of Rievaulx. “A Rule of Life for a Recluse” 49.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 90.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 81.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* 82.

instructing her son on his behavior as something that his female anchoritic audience should mentally participate in as well. Though Aelred does not think that religious women, particularly anchoresses, should interact with or educate children, in these meditations, maternal instincts are portrayed as spiritually productive for anchoresses to cultivate. These meditations are beneficial in theory but should not be acted upon in actuality. Therefore, Aelred's fear of anchoresses as teachers was not because he did not think these maternal instances were not beneficial, but more because of the power associated with such a role.

Though Yvette was not alone in her status as a spiritual mother and educator, the ways that women expressed and acted on their spiritual motherhood and incorporated it into their teachings could differ greatly. There were no official rules for anchoresses; therefore there was no true oversight on the natures of their religious lives. This allowed them a larger degree of independence than other religious women to fashion their own teachings and shape the spiritual lives of her followers.¹⁰¹ The mother of Guibert of Nogent, for instance, did not have a great many followers. Her visitors were generally those she knew before she became an anchoress. Her son writes that they “enjoyed her conversation immensely and found her playful and restrained at the same time — if after their departure she found that something untrue, futile, or trivial had slipped into their conversation, one cannot imagine what torment she felt in her soul.”¹⁰² Her conversations with her visitors clearly were not always instructional or religiously minded. Though she might not have had a particularly large following to which she gave advice and acted as a spiritual mother. She did do so for her biological son Guibert. In his autobiography, he discusses his mother, whose name he does not record. She educated him and when he was ready she hired a tutor whose instruction she kept a close eye on. Even once she had retired to a semi-monastic life she continued to summon him to her when she sensed he had a problem, was behaving poorly, or needed advice. He heaps praise on

¹⁰¹ Liz Herbert McAvoy, ed. *Anchoritic Traditions of Medieval Europe*. Boydell and Brewer, 2010. 32.

¹⁰² Guibert of Nogent. “A monk's confession : the memoirs of Guibert of Nogent”. 47.

her for the entirety of his narrative, elevating her above all other women who he saw as worldly, impious, and seductive.¹⁰³ Though her visits with guests could be interpreted as frivolous, he states that when *he* talked with her about other religious matter “you would have thought her a mellifluous bishop rather than the illiterate woman she was.”¹⁰⁴ Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker has asserted that Guibert’s statement that his mother was illiterate was most likely false. She, like many other noble and merchant women of her era, was probably responsible for the education of Guibert and his siblings until they were old enough to be given education by tutors or trained for professions. Guibert undercuts her education to better integrate her into his preconceived notion of an ideal God-fearing woman.¹⁰⁵ However, she was clearly educated and a source of spiritual wisdom. Still, this wisdom seems like it was primarily directed at her own biological son, for whom she acted an effective and concerned advisor. Though, like Yvette, Guibert’s mother was a biological mother, this did not immediately translate into being a good spiritual mother and advisor to a large and diverse flock.

Marie of Oignies, on the other hand, had followers from all walks of life; like Yvette, she has been cited as having one of the earliest beguine communities in Europe.¹⁰⁶ Though Marie was closely associated with a circle of religious women, including the highly respected mother of prior Giles of Walcourt.¹⁰⁷ Her relationships with women and her other lay followers are not highlighted particularly in her biography. This is likely due to the fact that the goal of her biographer, James of Vitry, a notable theological scholar and one of Marie’s followers,¹⁰⁸ was to fashion her into a modern

¹⁰³ Nancy F. Partner. “The Family Romance of Guibert of Nogent: His Story/ Her Story” in *Medieval Mothering*. Ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler. 374.

¹⁰⁴ Guibert of Nogent. “A monk’s confession : the memoirs of Guibert of Nogent”. 73.

¹⁰⁵ Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, and Myra Heerspink Scholz. *Lives of the Anchoresses* 31.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 52. See also Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker “General Introduction” in *Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation*. ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker. Brepols; 2006. 4.

¹⁰⁷ Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker. “General Introduction” in *Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation*. 8.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 6.

living saint and into a new model for secular sainthood.¹⁰⁹ Biographers like James who were imbued in Church politics often eliminated or downplayed elements of their subjects life that did not fit with their idea of sainthood.¹¹⁰ Thus because women's friendships were generally devalued during the Middle Ages, James knew he would have more critical success if he excluded these relationships from her biography.¹¹¹ Instead, he emphasized her relationships with learned men focusing on her teaching and guidance. Marie was surrounded by some of the notable scholars of her time. James records how with them she debated pressing theological topics; she sought to understand the Trinity, the significance of the incarnation, and the miracle of the Eucharist.¹¹² Like other contemporary religious women, she is depicted as being divinely given knowledge of these topics, as opposed to her male friends who got their insights into these topics through research and debate.¹¹³ Still, she instructed them on purgatory and even helped James make his preaching more accessible to lay audience, though she did not preach herself. She was their 'master' (*magistra*) and spiritual mother. Though she did not teach or raise any of these male followers from childhood, she guided them in their studies and supported them. However, she is called a mother only three times in James' biography. Once by a penitent soldier whom she advises¹¹⁴ and once by James after she gives him advice on how to improve his sermons; "O holy mother, with sufficient praises, you who knew the secrets of God."¹¹⁵ Though she clearly acted as a spiritual mother, these limited mentions in her

¹⁰⁹ Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker. "General Introduction" in *Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation*. 4.

¹¹⁰ Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker. "Ivetta of Huy: mater et magistra". 230.

¹¹¹ Anna Roberts. "Helpful Widows, Virgins in Distress: Women's Friendship in French Romance of the 13th and 14th centuries" in Weisl, Angela Jane, and Cindy L. Carlson, eds. *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages*. New York: Palgrave, 2011. 43.

¹¹² Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker. "General Introduction" in *Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation*. 17.

¹¹³ Barbara Newman. 'Liminalities: literate women in the long twelfth century', in T.F.X. Noble & J. Van Engen (eds.), *European Transformations: The Long Twelfth Century* (2012) 387. Because of movements towards reason and logic during the 12th century "renaissance" women were increasingly excluded from discussions about religion. In a new scholastic movement which praised men as beacons of reason, it was not a far stretch to define women as inherently unreasonable and thus unworthy of accessing information through debate and study. Thus prophecy and mysticism were some of the only channels left for them. See also F.J. Griffiths, 'Women and reform in the central middle ages', in J.M. Bennett & R. Mazo Karras(eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe* (2013)

¹¹⁴ James of Vitry. *The Life of Mary of Oignies*. tr. Margot H. King. in *Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation*. 93.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 105.

biography force the question of how central this motherhood was to her religious life and teaching when references to it by James are so sparing. Additionally, James never refers to her followers as her sons or daughters.¹¹⁶ While Marie was a religious mother, the language and depictions of her are less concerned with emphasizing her motherhood, and more concerned with showing her divinely gifted knowledge and abilities.

Like James of Vitry, Hugh often mentions his subject, Yvette's, large group of male and female followers; the rest of the biography after her rescue of her son is devoted to her advising of her spiritual sons and daughters. Though similar to Marie's program of salvation, Yvette goes about her duties as an anchoress differently. Her authority to give advice is thoroughly rooted in her motherhood. Women and men who wanted to live spiritual lives flocked to Yvette. She found space and time to tutor them and give them instruction. She even welcomed young children. Two of her followers, one boy and one girl, are described as coming to her as infants, something Aelred would not have approved of. She educated them all and advised them throughout her life. A sense of her type of tuition can be seen from a passage from the end of her life, when Hugh writes that Yvette became more zealous in her daughters instruction,

the venerable woman began to be anxious and solicitous for her daughters whom she had made rich in Christ and nourished in the Lord's discipline so benignly: often she summoned them and gave them advice for their improvement... Sometimes she was even seen to cut short her psalms and prayers in order to speak with them together and further instruct them in the discipline of Christ. Sometimes privately and sometimes publically, now one in particular and now all together, she castigated, admonished, comforted, exhorted them so that nothing should be lacking to them in the consummation of virtue and after her passing they would know how to behave and always persevere in love of Christ. Thus like a mother with her daughters, a teacher [*magistra*] with her pupils [*discipulis*], she approached the long awaited glorious Nativity of Christ.¹¹⁷

Yvette felt great responsibility for the moral and religious education of her children. She prepared them for after her death so that they knew how to fortify themselves against sin and could praise

¹¹⁶ Just because motherhood is not often mentioned by James does not mean that during her life Marie was did not cultivate this image. However, as her biographer, James had the power to shape Marie's image and legacy after her death.

¹¹⁷ Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. tr. Jo Ann McNamara. Toronto: Peregrina Pub., 2000. 118-119

God. This was so vital to her that at least at the end of her life, she prioritized it before prayer and her own internal contemplation. While this instruction was primarily directed at her intimate circle of daughters, such structured instruction was also available to male followers and the larger public. She taught about the more basic aspects of Christian devotion, such as love and virtue, and helped her followers with other secular or bureaucratic issues that faced them. Unlike Marie, she did not seek to uncover the secrets of the Eucharist of the Trinity for her male clerical friends. Hugh writes that when “asked about the essence of one God in three persons, she answered humbly that she was unworthy to contemplate such things as that and painfully inadequate.”¹¹⁸ Unraveling theological secrets was not important to Yvette.¹¹⁹ Her primary focus was on pastoral care and making Christian teachings and aspects of the ascetic life accessible for her lay followers and instructing individuals in how best to lead their life.

Yvette’s teaching and motherly affection was not just an invention of Hugh. According to his biography, Abundus of Villers (c. 1189- c. 1239), a native of Huy, went to Yvette as a young man to ask her advice on which monastery he should join. She responded,

My son... I propose to you two monasteries: the first Trois Fontaines and the other Orval. Choose either of the two and I promise you in charity unfeigned to arrange your case successfully with one whose goodwill I can rely upon, the abbot of Trois Fontaines. And then there are my own sons, one of them a monk at Trois Fontaines and the other at Orval: these too ought surely to add their support to mine on your behalf.¹²⁰

Though Abundus eventually decided to join the monastery of Villers, not Orval or Trois Fontaines, this sections reaffirms that Yvette’s motherhood and maternal experiences were known by many and she truly was sought out for advice. The monasteries she recommended to Abundus were the ones at which her two biological sons resided. Her ties with her biological sons did not end when she becomes an anchoress, as is clear in Hugh’s tale about her youngest son’s salvation. Rather her sons

¹¹⁸ Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. tr. Jo Ann McNamara. Toronto: Peregrina Pub., 2000. 88.

¹¹⁹ Jo Ann McNamara. “Introduction” in *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. 18.

¹²⁰ Goswin of Bossut. “Life of Abundus, monk of Villers” in *Send me God: the lives of Ida the Compassionate of Nivelles, nun of La Ramée, Arnulf, lay brother of Villers, and Abundus, monk of Villers*. tr. Martinus Cawley. Turnhout : Brepols, 2003. 214-215.

become part of her expanding network of her new spiritual family. As the mother of this growing group, it was Yvette's responsibility to lead the way in matters of faith.¹²¹ It is remarkable to see this merging of Yvette's biological and spiritual motherhood outside of Hugh's biography. She used her connections as a mother, biological mother in this case, to help her advice Abundus, her spiritual son, on his religious journey.¹²²

Throughout her life, Yvette had an evolving relationship with her motherhood. As a young woman it was a burden keeping her from her dream of a religious life, as an outcast in the leper community it was an identity she shed, and finally as an anchoress she reclaimed her motherhood, accepting the new title of a spiritual mother and adopting her followers and the larger community as Huy as her spiritual children. Yvette's time as an anchoress was characterized by her ability to merge the two roles of mater and magistra, mother and teacher.¹²³ In her hands, these two roles became completely intertwined. Her experience as a mother came from both her biological motherhood, her experience raising and advising her own sons, as well as from the spiritual guidance of the ultimate mother, the Virgin Mary. She fused together her past as a biological mother and her present as a spiritual mother; her maternal advice, love, and comfort became accessible to anyone. She became the matriarch of her entire community responsible for their salvation. Her maternal instructions took on a divine dimension in her miracles too. However, like any good religious figure. Yvette provided not only advice and guidance, but a direct channel to the divine. Her community believed that Christ and the Virgin worked directly through her to make a change in the earthly world. Yvette's miracles didn't involve the devil, demons, or miraculous healings like her contemporaries.

¹²¹ Brian Patrick McGuire. "In Search of the Good Mother: Twelfth-century Celibacy and Affectivity." in *In Motherhood, Religion, and Society in Medieval Europe, 400-1400: Essays Presented to Henrietta Leyser*. Ed. Conrad Leyser and Lesley Smith. Ashgate, 2011. 90.

¹²² Jennifer Carpenter. "Juette of Huy, recluse and mother (1158-1228): children and mothering in the saintly life" 73.

¹²³ *Ibid.* 74.

Her miracles too, like her role as an anchoress, were unique closely aligned with her motherhood, as well as her relationship with womanhood, men, and sex.

Chapter 3

Sexual Sin and Redemption in Yvette's Miracles

Yvette had a complicated relationship with sex, chastity, and redemption. As a wife, she had satisfied her sexual obligations and provided her husband with two children. After his death, she decided to remain a widow, living chastely and fulfilling her dream of pursuing a religious life. At this point in her life, while was no longer a virgin, Yvette made the active choice to preserve her chastity. However, all her plans for sexual abstinence were put into peril one night. After an evening spent visiting with relatives, they convinced her to sleep over at their house along with some of their other guests. Yvette agreed but was troubled to learn that a certain young man who was infatuated with her had also been invited to stay the night. Worried about her safety and “thinking about all that might happen”¹²⁴ she chose to share a room with another woman. Despite her precautions, the young man “rose secretly from his bed wishing to try to prevail as a man against the woman. And he went padding about the house, wandering like a crazy person or a drunk.”¹²⁵ Yvette, too frightened to sleep, could hear his nearing footsteps. She was powerless. Her mind flitted between all of her options, each one worse than the next, “If she wished to flee, there was no place to take refuge. If she resisted, the man would be stronger. If she cried out she must fear infamy and perpetual confusion if this were noised abroad. And in this anguish she did not know at first how to behave.”¹²⁶ At the very moment the man entered the doorway, the Virgin Mary, answering Yvette's prayers, appeared in all her glory. Mary was visible to Yvette, “but though the man heard the sound of her steps, he could not see her for he had rendered himself unworthy of that beatitude... fearing to be caught in his furtive act, he fled... to his bed for refuge...”¹²⁷ The Virgin Mary responded to

¹²⁴ Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. tr. Jo Ann McNamara. Toronto: Peregrina Pub., 2000. 51.

¹²⁵ Ibid. 51.

¹²⁶ Ibid. 51-52.

¹²⁷ Ibid. 52.

Yvette's prayers and powerlessness, facing down the threat of male sexual violence and lust as the powerful maternal protector.

This moment, from early on in Yvette's life and biography, is vital in understanding Yvette's life as an anchoress, particularly her miracles. The majority of Yvette's miracles involve divinely uncovering secret internal sexual desire or deviant sexual actions. Upon discovering these things she then aimed to instruct both her female *and* male followers on the temptations that faced them. For women, this involved strengthening and protecting them against male sexual violence and abduction. Her approach was different than many of her contemporaries instead of seeing these women as Eve-like seductresses, she saw them as victims of male fantasies and coercion. Informed by her experiences, Yvette places blame on the men who she depicts as seducing these women and corrupting their souls. However, she does not demonize all male clerics in her biography. She instructs them as well, encouraging them to repent if they have committed sexual sins in action or thought. She also intervenes when the Holy Spirit reveals to her that they are suffering with sexual temptation of their own and counsels them before these latent thoughts can lead to terrible actions.

Ultimately, Yvette acted as an advisor, protector, and comforter to these fallen men and women of her flock. Her miracles, as well as the lessons which these miracles espoused, shows a degree of sympathy and forgiveness for those women who were victims of other's lusts as well as male clerics who were victims of their own internal lust. Though virginity and stainless virtue were the highest forms of spiritual expression, they were not the only tenants of holiness; Yvette still made a space for those who had stumbled, as long as they repented and continued their lives in physical and mental chastity. Yvette was not a virgin, thus she knew more than many that the stain of sexual experience did not have to bar the path to spirituality and holiness.

Miracles have always been vital to Christian faith and expression. The Gospels are full of Jesus healing, expelling demons, bringing people back from the dead and providing or transforming

food and drink.¹²⁸ He commanded his disciple too to “heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils” (Matthew 10:8). They demonstrated divine favor or dissatisfaction.¹²⁹ During the early Church, miracles were essential in cultivating faith and winning new converts. They remained a central demonstration of piety and divine grace into Yvette’s own era. During the early Middle Ages, scholars described, elaborated upon, and explored what made a miracle. They decided that a miracle was not simply any wondrous event but one which 1) originated with God, 2) was not the result of human skill, 3) was contrary to nature, 4) which tended to strengthen the faith, and 5) resulted not from the eloquence of one’s pleas, but from the strength of one’s piety.¹³⁰ Yvette’s own contemporaries, such as the German prior Caesarius of Heisterbach (1180-1240), were fascinated with miracles. Caesarius’ masterwork the *Dialogus miraculorum* (ca. 1219-1223) recorded stories of 746 miracle stories arranged according to twelve categories.¹³¹ Though each saint was unique, there were types of miracles that transcended time, location, and person. The most common of these were miracles of healing. Jesus himself was a prolific healer, and medieval saints followed in this tradition, curing everything from leprosy to lameness. Other common miracles included exorcisms, battles with demons, the receiving of the stigmata, miracles of provision, visions, and prophecies.¹³² With the exception of the last two, Yvette did not perform any of these common miracles. She neither healed nor fought demons. Her miracles were not wildly theatrical or performative but resulted from her powerful prayers for divine aid and revelations from the Holy Spirit concerning the secret actions and thoughts of others. These feats were not unique to Yvette—others, such as Marie of Oignies, were also gifted with secret information by the Holy Spirit. However, the nature of the

¹²⁸ For some examples of Jesus’ miracles see, Healing: Mark 8:20-26 and Luke 18:35-43. Exorcism: Mark 1:21-28 and Luke 4:31-37. Resurrection: John: 11:1-44. Miracles of Provision: Luke 5:1-11 and Mark 8:1-9.

¹²⁹ Robert Bartlett. *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?: Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation*. Princeton University Press, 2013. 334.

¹³⁰ Ibid. 335.

¹³¹ Ibid. 337.

¹³² Ibid. 334-405.

information Yvette collected and the manner in which she reacted to this information set her apart from many of her contemporaries.

Yvette's biographer attributes sixteen miracles to her during her life. Over half of these deal with matters of sex and the sexuality of her lay and clerical flock.¹³³ Miracles by which secret temptation and sexual deviance were uncovered, or divinely punished were not uncommon contemporary hagiographies. There are innumerable accounts beginning around 1100 of men and women having sex in a Church, or another sacred space, being joined together by the genitals until found and freed by the prayers of those entering the Church for mass.¹³⁴ Other miracles associated with particular saints such as St. Bertrand Bishop of Comminges, reveal how men, and particularly women, were struck down after being exposed as engaging in "deviant" sexual activity.¹³⁵

It is at this point that I return to the story from the introduction of this paper, in which Yvette ensures the safe return of one of her spiritual daughter through prayer. This young and naive girl is tricked into eloping with a lustful clerk. It is only after they have left Huy that she learns about his true sexual intentions. Hugh narrates that the man "proposed to assault her in an isolated path so that he could strike the immaculate [girl] suddenly in secret."¹³⁶ Much like Yvette's encounter as a young woman with the man in her relative's house, this interaction has explicit tones of sexual violence. In this instance, it is Yvette who acts as the protective mother, a role and the Virgin Mary filled for her, by praying for the safe return of the young girl. It was common for older medieval women such as widows or religious women to act as protectors of young girls and virgins. It was an

¹³³ Hugh also attributes 3-4 miracles to her which occurred after or on the day of her death; these do not have any references to sexuality or lust. Her postmortem miracles include more common tropes that are found in many hagiographies of other saints, such as elemental and weather changes and one miracle in which a woman is cured of her madness. I have to omit these miracles from my study because since they all occurred after her death and thus they reveal less about Yvette and her role as an anchoress when she was alive than about Hugh and her community's reaction to her death.

¹³⁴ Dyan Elliott. "Sex in Holy Places: An Exploration of a Medieval Anxiety." In *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages*, 61-80. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999. 61-62.

¹³⁵ Robert Bartlett. *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?* 401-404.

¹³⁶ Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. tr. Jo Ann McNamara. Toronto: Peregrina Pub., 2000. 91.

old idea even espoused by Ambrose, the 4th century bishop of Milan.¹³⁷ This episode repeats all of the same elements of Yvette's near-rape as a young woman; sexual overtones, a lustful and morally compromised man, a young innocent woman, and a divine motherly figure. Yvette saves her spiritual daughter in the same way that the Virgin Mary once saved her, preventing her rape with prayers and thus preserving her reputation. Civil law called for the punishment of a woman who eloped with a suitor, no matter what her motive.¹³⁸ But Yvette protected her daughter from the punishment of the law. Hugh remarks that her daughter is not even required to do simple penance. Thus Yvette continues the sequence of female protectors, both divine and human, while preserving the chastity and purity of her flock.¹³⁹ This miracle occurs early on in Hugh's accounts of Yvette's miracles and presents her as someone with particular divine aid on matters of sexuality and lust. Though not a virgin herself, Yvette felt profound responsibility for preserving the morality and chastity of her own followers. And the major threat she saw to these virtues were the predatory actions of male clerics.

Yvette's occasional mistrust of male clerics was not unique to her. During her life, Church reform was reshaping the nature of faith and practice in Christendom; central to this reform were new ideas about sex and clerical celibacy. Sex was seen as a source of moral defilement, spiritual pollution, and ritual impurity.¹⁴⁰ Sex was earthly whereas the duty of clerics and religious figures was to pursue the divine. The idea that clergy members should abstain from sex was not new to Christianity; the early church and desert father had advocated for sexual renunciation. In fact, the first effort to impose universal clerical celibacy had occurred at the Spanish Council of Elvira in 305,

¹³⁷ Angela Jane Weisl and Cindy L. Carlson, eds. *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages*. New York: Palgrave, 2011. 2.

¹³⁸ Stephen P. Pistorio. "Rape in Medieval Europe" *Atlantis* vol. 14 No. 2. (1989). 41.

¹³⁹ Angela Jane Weisl and Cindy L. Carlson, eds. *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages*. 5. In fact, Hugh even elevates Yvette's abilities as a protector of her flock above the abilities of the 4th century hermit, St. Abraham, who could not prevent the rape of his niece. (Hugh 95).

¹⁴⁰ James A. Brundage. *Law, Sex, and Christian Society In Medieval Europe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1987. 6.

a year before Emperor Constantine came to power.¹⁴¹ The movement never really disappeared but gained new vitality in the 12th century when the First Lateran Council legally prohibited clerical marriage in an effort to start enforcing the ideal of clerical celibacy.¹⁴² Clerics themselves were torn by the debate. Some like Peter Damian (c. 1007-1072) championed the enforcement of the prohibition and the abolishment of sex among the clergy while other critics argued that clerical celibacy was itself a source of sexual immorality and evil.¹⁴³ There is no way of knowing where Yvette fell on this spectrum. However, she was clearly conscious and worried about the sexuality of clerics and how it threatened the lives of her followers. In Yvette's biography, half of her miracles deal with sexual deviance in some way and there are five instances of religious men seducing or having sex with lay and religious women.

Though Yvette might not have been alone in her fears about the sexual temptation of clerics, the way that the lust and temptation of clerics are portrayed in her miracles is unique to her. The point of difference between Yvette and many of her contemporaries was how she viewed blame and temptation. Who tempted who into sin? For most medieval scholars and religious figures, the answer was clear. Women were believed to be weaker in body and mind, and thus more susceptible to act on their baser instincts. So too were they believed to have a greater sexual appetite, thus they were more likely to tempt men into sexual sin than men were to tempt women.¹⁴⁴ This does not mean that there are no instances of men seducing women. Instances of fallen virgins such as the niece of the 4th century hermit St. Abraham who was seduced and raped by a man were, unfortunately, not uncommon.¹⁴⁵ Accounts and miracles that incorporate sexual temptation often

¹⁴¹ E. Claire Cage. "Clerical Celibacy from Early Christianity to the Ancien Régime." In *Unnatural Frenchmen: The Politics of Priestly Celibacy and Marriage, 1720-1815*. 13-15

¹⁴² James A. Brundage. *Law, Sex, and Christian Society In Medieval Europe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1987. 183.

¹⁴³ E. Claire Cage. "Clerical Celibacy from Early Christianity to the Ancien Régime." 19.

¹⁴⁴ Ruth Mazo Karras. "Thomas Aquinas's Chastity Belt: Clerical Masculinity in Medieval Europe" In *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives*, edited by Bitel Lisa M. and Lifshitz Felice, 63. And Stephen P. Pistono. "Rape in Medieval Europe" *Atlantis* vol. 14 No. 2. (1989). 36.

¹⁴⁵ Dyan Elliott. "Sex in Holy Places: An Exploration of a Medieval Anxiety." 65-66.

occur in medieval texts to show the chastity of the holy person in question and their ability, like Yvette, to uncover secret sins and rectify the misdeeds of their flocks.

However, even in similar scenarios, other saints and their biographers often put far more blame and onus on the women involved. Vital's hagiography of St. Bertrand, the bishop of Comminges (c. 1050-1128), tells one miracle story about a local deacon who became infatuated with a beautiful woman. The man recognized his fault, and though guilty of carnal sin, repents and thus is forgiven. But when Bertrand asked the woman why she "ensnared" the deacon she acts indignant, "the evil woman, despising the holy bishop's warning, poured out wicked words, And while she was speaking such foolishness, there came down on her a terrible rod, sent by God, and soon, in the sight of all around, she was gravely troubled by a demon and straightaway died, losing her life and her soul together."¹⁴⁶ The woman is the true sinner. She tempted a servant of God and refused to recognize her misdeed. Though not innocent, the deacon is portrayed as a victim of this sinful woman, and of his own sexual desires, both of which he is able to conquer through Bertrand's aid. This miracle reinforced Bertrand's teachings about proper sexual behavior for both his clerical and lay flock warning them about the dangers of lust and the wrath of God.

Miracles in which women were denounced as temptresses were not unique to male clerics like Bertrand, other female figures, even anchoresses, engaged with and accepted these tropes in their own miracles. In the previous chapter, I discussed Marie of Oignies and her close relationship with male clerics. Though she had close relationships with women too, men, according to her biographer James of Vitry, were her primary followers and religious counselors. Thus, it is not entirely surprising that in James' biography, she seems to have had a similar attitude to women's role as the worldly temptress as Bertrand. In a parallel encounter to that of Bertrand, Marie was

¹⁴⁶ Vital "Life of St. Bertrand of Comminges" in Robert Bartlett. *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?: Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation*. Princeton University Press, 2013. 402. See also: Vitalis, *Vita sancti Bertrandi episcopi Convenensis* 2. 13-14, 17, 24-26, pp 1177-80

approached by a noble friend who intended to live a more holy life. James recalls that “[the man’s] wife, however, was very worldly and vigorously opposed his plan... the man was very frightened lest his evil wife throw him out of his house but [Marie]... said many prayers for the wife.”¹⁴⁷ Eventually, the wife is won over and becomes a supporter of both Marie and her husband’s new way of life. In this episode, the woman does not sexually tempt her husband but tries to tether him to his earthly life. It is not outlandish to assume that part of his decision to abandon an earthly and base living would have also included living chastely. Sex is fleshly *and* earthly, while those pursuing a religious life strove for the heavenly and spiritual.¹⁴⁸ Therefore, the wife in Marie’s account and the woman in Bertrand’s are fundamentally doing the same thing—dragging men seeking a religious life back to the worldly, base, and sexual. Although Marie’s episode is not nearly as dramatic or overtly anti-woman or anti-sex as Bertrand’s it still has the same fundamental message; women tempt men away from the path of holiness.

Like Bertrand and Marie, Yvette’s primary aim is to protect her flock and teach them about the dangers of sex and temptation. While all three interacted with and advised male clerics, Yvette also advised a diverse group of women and men of both the Church and laity.¹⁴⁹ With such prominent female followers, she could not completely demonize women in her portrayal of sexual temptation. Because Bertrand and Marie mainly acted as advisors to men, it makes sense that the trope of women as temptresses occurs more often in their miracles. Women became an easy scapegoat in their lessons, demonstrating the evils of sex and lust to their male clerical audience. This type of reinforcement of sexual education was common in saints’ lives.¹⁵⁰ Since Yvette was directing her lessons on sexuality and lust toward a more mixed audience it makes sense that she did

¹⁴⁷ James of Vitry. *The Life of Mary of Oignies*. tr. Margot H. King. in *Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation*. ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker. Brepols; 2006. 108.

¹⁴⁸ Vern L. Bullough. "Sex Education in Medieval Christianity." *The Journal of Sex Research* 13, no. 3 (1977): 188.

¹⁴⁹ It is clear that Marie’s followers were far more diverse than just male clerics. It seems she was also the leader of an early Beguine community. However, if she did serve as an active advisor to religious and lay women and men, her biographer James does not highlight these other relationships.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 188.

not scapegoat women in the same way. It was her task to educate both male and female followers about the real temptations they would face from external forces as well as from their own internal struggles. What practical benefit could possibly accrue from teaching women that they were temptresses, especially when experience (Yvette's own, in fact) revealed that men were most often the culprits of sexual violence? As a protective mother of her flock, it was Yvette's responsibility to teach her followers what temptations they would face as they pursued their religious lives. She drew on her own personal experiences from her own life as a woman in the laity to inform her spiritual teachings.

Yvette promulgates a counter-message to Bertrand and Marie. Though half of her miracles deal with sexuality, none of them portray women as unrepenting temptresses.¹⁵¹ Not all the women are as resolute in their chastity as Yvette and her previously mentioned spiritual daughter. However, even when women are tempted into having consensual sex with men, women are seen as victims by Yvette. Her miracles follow a standard sequence, the men seduce the women in secret and maintain torrid affairs until Yvette uncovers their secrets. When confronted by Yvette, in every instance the woman confesses immediately, while the man denies wrongdoing and refuses to repent. When the men refuse to repent, they are then punished by God in some way; one is "struck down by sudden illness and died miserably without the communion and sacraments of the Church"¹⁵² another is

¹⁵¹ In looking at Yvette's portrayal of women as victims it is easy to paint her as a proto-feminist in some way. However, it is important that though she defends women against the label of temptresses. She still demarcates the female body as other and lesser than men's. Women taking on the traits of men was a common and positive trope in medieval hagiography. However, men taking on feminine traits was looked down upon. When a priest takes on indicators of a feminine body in her biography it is meant to debase him and show the depth of his sin. Whereas male bodies were equated with power, judgment, discipline, and reason. Women's were the exact opposite, defined by weakness, lust, and unreason. The description of this man is meant to further underscore his weakness in the face of sexual temptation. Though Hugh and Yvette shift the blame of sexual deviance from women to men, there are still undercurrents of the generally misogynistic attitudes of everyone in society, promulgated by men but internalized by women as well. See Ulrike Wiethaus. "Sexuality, Gender, and the Body in Late Medieval Women's Spirituality: Cases from Germany and the Netherlands." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7, no. 1 (1991): 35. And Vern L. Bullough. "Sex Education in Medieval Christianity." *The Journal of Sex Research* 13, no. 3 (1977): 189.

¹⁵² Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. tr. Jo Ann McNamara. Toronto: Peregrina Pub., 2000. 97.

cryptically and “miserably taken from the light.”¹⁵³ If this sequence of events sounds familiar, it is because it’s the exact inverse of Bertrand’s miracle.

Though the women in Yvette’s miracles might be presented as victims of male temptation, this does not mean they are wholly innocent of sin. The most culpable sinner were the priests who lured women into spiritual corruption, yet the women who agree to begin sexual relations too committed sins. There are three examples of women in Yvette’s biography who have sex with men and either break their vows of chastity or lose their virginity. The first is a lay matron who was seduced by a priest. They consummate their union in the church itself, something utterly taboo.¹⁵⁴ When Yvette learns about their sin from the Holy Spirit, she confronts the woman first who is immediately “overcome with shame that she had been caught in her sin and [she] confessed in detail all that they had done. And following [Yvette’s] will and counsel promised freely with a devoted spirit to make satisfaction to the Lord... thus she went home giving thanks to God who had a care for her salvation as she understood from his handmaiden.”¹⁵⁵ Though this woman may have begun as a victim of the priest’s seduction, by agreeing to have sex with him, she becomes complicit; they both commit corporal sins by acting on their lust and engaging in sex outside of marriage purely for pleasure. Despite this, she is absolved after confessing, repenting, and listening to Yvette’s counsel. This seems lenient for such a serious sin. According to the 11th century Third Vallicellian penitential, a man or woman found to have fornicated in a church was to do penance “all the days of his life on bread and water, and should offer compliance to God before the doors of the church, and never should communicate until the time of death.”¹⁵⁶ Though punishments might have been more lenient in reality than the law codes of the time called for, Yvette’s decision to absolve this woman with a confession and an understanding that she had sinned against God seem especially forgiving.

¹⁵³ Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. tr. Jo Ann McNamara. Toronto: Peregrina Pub., 2000. 98.

¹⁵⁴ Dyan Elliott. "Sex in Holy Places: An Exploration of a Medieval Anxiety." 40.

¹⁵⁵ Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. tr. Jo Ann McNamara. Toronto: Peregrina Pub., 2000. 96.

¹⁵⁶ Dyan Elliott. "Sex in Holy Places: An Exploration of a Medieval Anxiety." 65-66.

She used a mixture of mercy, hope, and fear to reform her penitent and give her the opportunity for a second chance.

This mercy and forgiveness was not just for lay women, but was also extended to fallen virgins. In one of the last miracles in her biography, Hugh tell of how the Holy Spirit revealed to Yvette that a certain religious woman she knew (it is unclear whether she was a follower of Yvette), had “fallen from the height of virginity to the depths of fornication”¹⁵⁷ This was a much bigger deal than the lapse in chastity of the aforementioned matron. Presumably, this woman was not a virgin and was just a lay follower of Yvette. As I discussed in my first chapter, virginity was seen as the most illustrious state with the most prestige that a woman could achieve. Hagiographies are full of women during the early Church and the Middle Ages who would sooner die or disfigure themselves than lose their virginity.¹⁵⁸ Despite the degree of this sexual sin and the height of this religious woman’s fall from grace, there is no mention of how she lost her virginity. There is no mention that she was seduced by a cleric or raped, but neither is their mention of any punishment she received or long term consequences as a result of this sexual encounter. Like the matron, she confesses her sins to Yvette and is presumably forgiven, despite the greater magnitude of her sin.

It is likely Yvette’s forgiveness would also have extended to deviant priests had they confessed. However, since none of the accused repented for their sins, none of them were redeemed, and for this, they were punished by God. However, Yvette does give them opportunities. She even sends a messenger to the priest who seduces the matron in the church to admonish him “to do penance through the service of His handmaid... [and] that he should come to her and make satisfaction to God.”¹⁵⁹ She gives him a clear path to salvation and redemption which he ultimately rejects. Though the priests and clerics have thus far been depicted as the sinful seducers, it is clear

¹⁵⁷ Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. tr. Jo Ann McNamara. Toronto: Peregrina Pub., 2000. 110.

¹⁵⁸ Stephen P. Pistono. “Rape in Medieval Europe.” 38. And Angela Jane Weisl, and Cindy L. Carlson, eds. *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages*. New York: Palgrave, 2011. 13.

¹⁵⁹ Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. tr. Jo Ann McNamara. Toronto: Peregrina Pub., 2000. 96-7.

that Yvette also considered them part of her flock and worth saving and forgiving, if they too sought redemption.

Not all clerics in Yvette's biography seduce or abduct women. Yvette's followers and spiritual children included laymen and male clerics. Thus, her *vita* also includes examples of men too being the subjects of her miraculous ability to percept secret thoughts. Hugh records two distinct miracles in which Yvette learns from the Holy Spirit about the lust of two different young clerics. These men don't seduce other women but have been suffering alone and unsure about what to do and who to ask for help. She summons them to her and reveals that she knows about their internal impure thoughts and their shame. Upon seeing one of the monks she tells her female companion that she knows the "pain from the great temptations that beset him"¹⁶⁰ The most cathartic moment for these monks seems to be the moment that she reveals that she knows their secrets; the moment that their internal struggles become external. These internal impure thoughts are not as grievous as the sexual sins of the aforementioned priests and women. However, the ideas of virginity and chastity though physical states also had mental dimensions.¹⁶¹ Thus a virgin who indulged or succumbed to sexual fantasies was deemed inferior to one who was not physically a virgin but fully devoted their mind to God and controlled their sexual desires with reason. Usually, these internal sins could not be detected let alone punished. But Yvette's divine gift let her address these impure thoughts and prevent them from further germinating and corrupting the minds of her followers. She does not punish these crimes either or chastise them harshly. Instead, she prays for the monks and for their salvation as well as "instruct[ing] [them] about the power of love and contempt of vice."¹⁶² These men don't seduce other women but have been suffering alone and unsure about what to do and who to ask for help. Yvette's instruction served to inform male clerics about the consequences

¹⁶⁰ Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. tr. Jo Ann McNamara. Toronto: Peregrina Pub., 2000. 101.

¹⁶¹ John S. Grabowski. "Sex and Chastity." In *Sex and Virtue: An Introduction to Sexual Ethics (Catholic Moral Thought, Volume 2)*, Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003. 80.

¹⁶² Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. tr. Jo Ann McNamara. Toronto: Peregrina Pub., 2000. 100.

of lust and seduction; perhaps with the intention of eliminating clerical sex and abuse before it could begin. Yvette is the only one who can give them advice and comfort on this matter, because of her gift to uncover sexual secrets as well as her own experience with the struggles of maintaining chastity. Only she can identify their secret vices and thoughts and forgivingly restore them onto the proper religious and chaste path.

Instead of inflicting punishment for sexual sins, Yvette shows particular sympathy and forgiveness to both the men and women of her flock. This sympathy likely stemmed from her own experience with divine forgiveness. Hugh reveals, that over the course of her life, Yvette repented for her many sins she had committed as a lay woman, such as her sin of usury, her wish for her husband's death as a young woman, and her own lack of virginity.¹⁶³ Her devoted repentance earned her the forgiveness of both Mary and, through Mary's intercession, Christ, leaving her free of guilt to continue her holy journey. She channels Mary's maternal forgiveness in her own miracles about sexual sins. She is sympathetic to the fallen men and women she exposes in her miracles because she knows what it is like to be a sinner, and she knows what it is like to struggle with sexual desire and maintaining chastity. Yvette, as Hugh is careful to demonstrate, was not infallible. Despite not being a virgin she was still a "handmaid"¹⁶⁴ of Christ, and the Holy Spirit often spoke to her. This must have been a comforting message for the members of her flock and community who struggled with sin, particularly sexual sin, to know that they too could obtain divine forgiveness and acceptance through repentance as well as mental and physical chastity.¹⁶⁵ Though she too propagates the medieval belief that virginity was the highest state for men and women, her miracles also make space for religious expression and holiness that is not wholly based on virginity and incorrupt virtue. She could recognize, perhaps more so than other religious leaders, that sin and sexual experience did not

¹⁶³ Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. tr. Jo Ann McNamara. Toronto: Peregrina Pub., 2000. 105.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 69-71.

¹⁶⁵ Ruth Mazo Karras. *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto Others*. New York, New York : Routledge, 2017. 35.

have to be a barrier to a religious life or to a relationship with God. Yvette's miracles challenged medieval preconceptions about who could access salvation, holiness, and the divine. Her motherhood, femininity, and sexuality did not detract from her holiness and authority but strengthened it and profoundly influenced how she instructed her community.

Conclusion

Over the course of this paper, I have examined how Yvette of Huy's biological motherhood and experience as a laywoman informed her teachings, miracles, and her role as an anchoress. Yvette's path was at many points uncertain. Like with any historical figure, her path to the anchorhold seems inevitable in retrospect, but as a wife by 13, a mother and widow by 18, and finally an anchoress by 34 she must have been familiar with change and insecurity. I have examined in turn how her relationship with her motherhood changed before she was enclosed as an anchoress, how she used her history as a housewife and the educator of her biological children to inform her role as an advisor to her flock of followers, and how her experiences with sex and chastity informed her miracles. It is clear that her womanhood and motherhood were central to her role as an anchoress. It was what made her special and generated the unique cult that grew up around her.

Though most of her story is transmitted to us by Hugh her biographer, unlike many hagiographers of his time he does not try to obscure the unique elements of her life and her miracles.¹⁶⁶ He does not ever paint her as a virgin in disguise nor does he hide her biological sons from her lay and spiritual journey. Yvette was clearly a remarkable woman, whether or not one believes that her abilities originated in the divine or were the result of a truly intelligent, perceptive woman. Throughout his biography, he highlights over and over how integral her womanhood and motherhood were to her moral and charismatic authority.¹⁶⁷

Many today might view Yvette's life as a triumph over the patriarchal structures of her time. In a world dominated by lay and clerical men, she pursued a religious life inspiring others, especially women, to do the same. In a time when women were being actively pushed out of monastic orders, she somehow persevered. Today these narratives of female advancement and authority in spite of

¹⁶⁶ Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, and Myra Heerspink Scholz. *Lives of the Anchoresses: The Rise of the Urban Recluse in Medieval Europe*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. 56.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 73.

remarkable and overwhelming odds dominate discussions of medieval women. They are especially resonant in a time in which women are seeking to rediscover past “proto-feminists” or find examples of female authority in places where it has previously been dismissed. When looking at these women, the vocabulary used by modern scholars often highlights how women were able reach to such great heights in spite of their status as women. Eleanor of Aquitaine advised her sons in their roles as kings *despite* her womanhood. Joan of Arc led an army *despite* her womanhood. Hildegard of Bingen and Cristin de Pizan wrote and composed *despite* their womanhood. Often this evaluation is correct that truly despite patriarchal structures and deep-rooted misogyny, some women were able to take on authority in male dominated spheres.

In religious spheres during this era, Church and civic authorities were waging a war against official channels for female piety and influence. Monastic orders such as the Cistercians and Premonstratensians were actively trying to eliminate the presence of women in their orders while growing cathedral universities also barred the attendance of women.¹⁶⁸ Yet anchoresses, because of their liminality, accessed and channeled influence outside of the usual hierarchy of Church or civil authorities. The development of this female role was directly tied to the Church’s inability and unwillingness to accommodate the boom in female piety during the 12th century. The systematic exclusion of women from the hierarchy of the Church, suprisingly, coincided with the rise of anchoresses as well as a growth in the cults of female saints such as the Virgin Mary and St. Anne. These seemingly contradictory developments, highlight the multifaceted approaches to gender and power during this era.

For the last couple of decades, medieval feminist scholarship has striven to expose instances of female authority. This scholarship tends to focus on women who fought their way up Church and civic hierarchies and obtained authority usually reserved for men. Previous research on anchoresses

¹⁶⁸ C. J. Mews ‘Negotiating the boundaries of gender in religious life: Robert of Arbrissel and Hersende, Abelard and Heloise’, *Viator* 37 (2006) 113.

has also had a similar arc; highlighting women engaging with Church authorities and wielding their influence in male spheres. The narrative of women fighting with patriarchal odds stacked against them is important and worth telling. No one should belittle the odds that these women faced in order to find spiritual meaning and lead religious lives. But even in such a patriarchal society, not all women who finally accessed authority did so through an abandonment of their womanhood or femininity. In my thesis, I have tried to highlight one of the rare moments in which womanhood and motherhood were actively sought out and elevated.

Yvette's life and biography complicates the scholarly narrative of women battling to occupy male spaces and access male authority. As I have sought to prove throughout this paper, Yvette became a respected and influential religious woman not *in spite* of her motherhood and womanhood, but *because* of this. Her role as a biological woman was integral in informing everything from her teachings to her miracles to the spread of her cult. She was "familiar"¹⁶⁹ to her community. Not only did they know her personally, but they knew her past; she was a wife, a mother, and an educator. She was most definitely not a virgin, the highest state of medieval womanhood. She was not the type of woman who usually emerged as a powerful female religious leader and the spiritual mother of hundreds of followers, yet she did. Ultimately, her past sexual and maternal experiences did not diminish her holiness in the eyes of her community but instead elevated her from another member of the public into a living saint.

¹⁶⁹ Hugh, of Floreffe. *The Life of Yvette of Huy*. 64.

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