How Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila Outsmarted Aristotle: Female Mystics as Philosophers in the Middle Ages

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Abstract
This paper will argue that female mystics, namely, Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Teresa of Avila, were philosophers. Like most women of the medieval era, they had little education and almost no opportunity to rise above the private sphere. Despite these limitations during their lifetimes their achievements were vast and, in our own times, have been recognised as the first female Doctors of the Church. Through their mystical union with God, they demonstrated in both word and deed that Christian mysticism is not solely faith based but that it also needs and uses reason, albeit as an experience derived from and sustained in faith. However, Aristotle's arguments infer that woman lacks the capacity to reason in the way that man can, which, if true, means that women cannot do philosophy. Theological arguments about the first Eve, as expounded by Thomas Aquinas and Augustine of Hippo, maintain this Aristotelian claim. Nonetheless, Catherine and Teresa found a channel to rise above these derogatory views: their mystical writings and life's works are in themselves proof positive of the philosophical ability of woman.
How Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila Outsmarted Aristotle: Female Mystics as Philosophers in the Middle Ages

Deborah Civardi

Introduction

The aim of my paper is to demonstrate the significance of women mystics being able to transcend the historically limited setting of women in medieval times. I will be looking specifically at the mystic experiences of Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Teresa of Avila.

Building on Aristotle’s definition of woman as irrational by nature and so inferior to man, Augustine of Hippo’s characterisation of woman’s purpose as man’s helpmate, in terms of generation, added to this Aristotelian theory. Following this sorry chain of what today is colloquially termed “mansplaining”, aspects of Thomas Aquinas’ writings of the nature of woman are consistent with, and follow from, both Aristotle and Augustine. Such ideas had the adverse consequence of denying education to women, especially with regard to gaining access to texts (or the ability to discern them), having a public voice or exercising authority. It confined women’s lives to the private sphere under the rule of man as a wife or nun.

Despite these handicaps Catherine became a papal advisor and Teresa a Carmelite reformer. How so? As mystics. The essence of mysticism is an infused wisdom of the knowledge of God that could override lowly womanly status without, however, having gone against man’s idea of woman as inferior or be disruptive to his authority over her.

To maintain the claim that mysticism was a means of circumventing the diminutive status of women, putting her on a par with men, I will argue that mysticism makes use of reason and thus is not cut off from the realm of philosophy. To do so I will dispute that the power of reason is fully suspended by mysticism. Notwithstanding that the wisdom of mysticism is infused, the intellect is still the point of contact between the human and divine. Upon establishing the place of reason in mysticism I will compare mysticism to those features of philosophy as the love of wisdom, the articulation of first principles and the application of reason to faith. Mysticism gave women parity with men on the level of reason and so worked to undermine Aristotle’s thesis that woman lacks the capacity necessary to do philosophy.

I will now refer to Saint Catherine of Siena as “Catherine” and Saint Teresa of Avila as “Teresa”. 
I. Aristotle on Woman

For the most part, up until and beyond the medieval era, woman’s nature was considered inferior and man’s superior. From a philosophical perspective the origin for this view is credited to Aristotle. For Aristotle, inequality comes out of male and female being deemed as opposites, based upon the matter and form that comprises a substance. Although we learn from Aristotle that the human person is a substance made up of matter and form, the making of gender depends upon what is received from each parent. Aristotle says, ‘...the body is from the female, it is the soul that is from the male’ (De Generatione Animalium 738b4-739a2). He also says, ‘the female always provides the material, the male that which fashions it... this is what it is for them to be male and female’ (De Generatione Animalium 738b4-739a2). In bringing a human into being, the mother contributes the matter and the form is contributed by the father. So woman is categorised by the body and man by the soul.

As opposites, Aristotle thought that one is a privation of the other. Privation signifies emptiness and total passivity. Woman is the privation of the male, thus she represents emptiness and passivity; and man as the opposite, activity. Consequently, women were characterized by the physical senses, corporeality, sensuality. As such women are naturally passive and ruled by emotion. Men, however, were associated with rationality, spirit, intellect, and activity. Since man represents rationality, then woman as his opposite must be irrational. As rationality would be superior to sensuality, man must be superior to woman.

In terms of gender differentiation, Aristotle takes this notion of opposites and the inferiority of woman in relation to man further. He says, ‘...that which generates and that from which it generates... must be distinct in form and their essence must be different’ (De Generatione Animalium 729a34-729b20). As man generates he is fertile and has heat. Compared to man’s heat, woman has a greater coldness. She represents infertility in contrast to man’s fertility. Aristotle says, ‘...the woman is as it were an impotent male’ (De Generatione Animalium 728a25-728a30). Hence, woman is not only an inferior type of human being but an imperfect defective deformed male.

This has implications for how women are able to relate to wisdom. Woman’s irrational nature implies that women have an inferior reasoning

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3 Ibid., p.90
4 Rosalynn Voaden, God’s Words, Women’s Voices: The Discernment of Spirits in the Writing of Late-Medieval Women Visionaries, p.7, 8, 19, 34
5 Allen, Op.Cit., 1985, p.97, 103
capacity so that they cannot be capable of higher levels of real knowledge. Rather, woman’s reasoning capacity can only reach the level of true opinion - which is fleeting and without substance. So for Aristotle, women could not become wise in the way that man could. The pursuit and practice of wisdom requires the exercise of the highest reason for which woman simply does not have the capacity. It follows that, as philosophy is the love of wisdom (as the pursuit and attainment of wisdom), women could not be philosophers.

II. Saint Augustine of Hippo and Interpretations of Genesis

The rational nature of woman from creation according to Saint Augustine of Hippo can be interpreted in one of two ways. On the one hand, dialogue with his mother Monica indicates that he considers women able to access wisdom. This ability is rooted in Genesis 1:27, where woman - not just man - was created in the image of God. Since being in God’s image equates with contemplation of supreme and unchangeable truth and is actualised in the rational life, woman’s soul is rationally equal to man so she can be wise like man. Augustine says, ‘...the mind of man does not remain the image of God except in the part which adheres to the eternal ideas to contemplate or consult them: and it is clear that females have this as well as males.’ Since woman’s soul is rationally identical to man it appears Augustine does not collaborate with Aristotle’s view of woman.

On the other hand, the purpose for which woman was created – her bodily existence - as man’s helpmate, cancels out the idea that woman is fully in the image of God. Augustine says, ‘...when she is assigned her function of being an assistant [helpmate] a state which is her concern alone, she is not the image of God.’ Augustine is not contradicting himself insofar as woman being man’s helpmate refers to her corporeality whereas being created in God’s image refers to her soul. Mutatis mutandis this also applies to men in their bodily nature, too, but the upshot is that woman has an inferiority in her nature that a man does not have. So Augustine’s conviction for Monica’s

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6 To say that woman’s reasoning capacity can only reach the level of true opinion highlights the irrational nature of woman as this type of reasoning is a lover level of and inferior to knowledge.
7 Ibid., p.103
8 Ibid., p.228
11 Ibid., Book XII, 3(10)
wisdom could have only been on the basis that she rose above her bodily existence.\textsuperscript{12}

Narrowing woman’s purpose for existence to that of helpmate leads to Augustine’s deduction that woman’s purpose is only, and nothing more than, generation. He says, ‘if it is not to generate children that the woman was given to the man as a helpmate, in what could she be a help for him?’ And, ‘...I do not see for what goal woman would have been given to man as a helpmate if not for generating children’.\textsuperscript{13} This is another way of expressing that women have nothing to offer in terms of mind or spirit.\textsuperscript{14}

Not only is woman’s purpose for man, but woman was created from man: his rib. Scripture states, ‘For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.’\textsuperscript{15} This gives woman a material dependence on man and an identity which is incomplete on her own.\textsuperscript{16} Also, the image of God for woman can only be in sharing with and in association to man. Augustine confirms this: ‘...the woman with her husband is the image of God in such a way that the whole of that [human] substance forms one image.’\textsuperscript{17} Thus, due to woman’s purpose and the way in which she was created, any concept of woman having the rational intelligence equal to man is overturned.\textsuperscript{18}

Owing to creation woman is placed under man’s authority.\textsuperscript{19} This inevitably reinforces that man is superior in reason. Firstly, Augustine’s analogy of woman complying to man in the way that desires of the flesh should comply with reason shows this by comparing her to flesh and he to reason; as flesh is inferior to reason, woman is inferior in reason and to man.\textsuperscript{20} Secondly, Augustine’s \textit{Quaestiones in Heptateuchum} links man’s authority over woman to her inferior reasoning capacity: ‘there is a natural order... that women should serve men, and children their parents, because... the weaker

\textsuperscript{12} Allen, \textit{Op.Cit.}, 1985, p.228;
\textsuperscript{13} St. Augustine, ‘\textit{The Literal Meaning of Genesis}, in \textit{Op.Cit.}, 1999, Book IX, 10(9)
\textsuperscript{14} Voaden, \textit{Op.Cit.}, p.7, 8, 19, 34
\textsuperscript{15} 1 Cor 11:8-9
\textsuperscript{17} St. Augustine, ‘The Trinity’ in \textit{Op.Cit.}, 1991, Book XII, 3(10)
\textsuperscript{18} Borresen, \textit{Op.Cit.}, p.34
\textsuperscript{19} To this point a further Scriptural assertion is made to the disadvantage of women. Despite Augustine acknowledging rational equality at the level of the soul, he also holds that man is closer to the perfect wisdom of God than woman St. Augustine, ‘A Refutation of the Manichees’, in \textit{Op.Cit.}, 1999, Book II, 16(12) Augustine says, ‘the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband’ \textit{Ibid.}; 1 Cor 11:3 As Christ is the wisdom of God, only man can have such clear and direct access to wisdom. 1 Cor 1:24.
mind should serve the stronger.' This also illustrates that woman’s inferiority and subordination is because man was formed before her, placing him in a superior position to her. So man’s authority over woman simply keeps to the natural order of creation. This concept, actualised, resulted in woman being denied authority in the public sphere and to an extent the private sphere.

Granting that Aristotle preceded Christianity he held that woman needs to be ruled due to a lack of rationality. Aristotle says, ‘…on grounds of both reason and of fact… some should rule and others be ruled… from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule’ (Politics 1254a24-1255a3). In this respect especially, Aristotle and Augustine seem to agree.

III. Saint Thomas Aquinas and the Subjection of Woman

Saint Thomas Aquinas echoes the Augustinian view on woman. He too held that woman was in the image of God, but where Augustine stated that woman has this image in the genderless soul, Thomas considers woman in both her body and soul to always be in God’s image, but this image in woman is less perfect to what the image is in man. Man is more perfect since he was created first. Woman’s imperfection is also due to her purpose as man’s helpmate for generation. The implication of this in terms of wisdom is that man has a direct link to God, whereas woman needs man as the intermediary, since the head of a woman is man. Notwithstanding that, for Thomas, on the level of grace woman is capable of an infused wisdom equal to man but on the level of nature she is weak in reason in comparison to him. Thomas says, ‘…such is the subjection in which woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discretion of reason predominates.’

Although Thomas rejects Augustine’s claim that woman on the bodily level is not the image of God, he states a similar notion upon a hierarchy of perfection. Thomas says, ‘But in a secondary sense the image of God is found in man and not in woman: for man is the beginning and the end of woman…So when the Apostle had said that ‘man is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man…’ it is because woman was created from

22 Voaden, Op.Cit., p. 7, 8, 18, 19, 34
23 Ibid., p. 7, 8, 18, 19, 34
25 Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, I, Q.92, A.1
26 1 Cor 11:3; Borresen, Op.Cit., pp.172-173
28 Aquinas, Op.Cit., I, Q.92, A.1, Reply Obj.2
man and for man. Thus, in a Christian framework both Augustine and Thomas maintain the Aristotelian view of woman which entails that woman is in (and should remain in) a subordinate position to man.

Therefore, Thomas continues the view that man must have authority over woman. Women were not to be given the opportunity of speaking out publicly. They were not to have influence, such as permission to teach. On the one hand, prohibiting women from authority is Aristotelian; Thomas says, ‘…as a rule women are not perfected in wisdom, so as to be fit to be intrusted with public teaching’. On the other hand, like Augustine, Thomas’ reasoning is founded on Genesis: ‘…on account of the condition attached to the female sex, whereby woman should be subject to man, as appears from Genesis 3:16’. This refers not only to the order of creation, but he points out that women have the ability to entice men to lust and mislead them by their beauty. Saint Paul says, ‘…I permit no woman to teach or to usurp authority over men; she is to be kept silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve, and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became the transgressor’.

Hence, woman’s subjection to man is also due to the taint of Eve that woman bears. Eve’s actions demonstrated that women are morally and spiritually inferior, lacking the intellect to control the senses. In submitting to the snake’s temptation Eve proved women to be easily seduced and deceived which displays lack of intellect. As Eve went a step further and seduced Adam to follow her in her weakness, Eve proved women to have seductive qualities. This justifies man in maintaining that woman should be under his authority. In short, women should not have authority over men not only because of the natural order of creation but in order to protect them both from woman’s sensual weakness.

The view that woman is inferior in reason coupled with subjection to man’s authority meant that women of the medieval era did not have the opportunity to learn the way that men did or have access to Scriptural or philosophical texts. Universities, where philosophy flourished, were man’s domain. Without the access or education required to read the Latin based texts, if a woman wanted to learn something, she was to ask her male authoritative:

29 Aquinas, Op.Cit., I, Q.93, A.4, Reply Obj.1
30 Ibid., II-II, Q.177, A.2
31 Ibid., II-II, Q.177, A.2
32 Voaden, Op.Cit., p.8
33 I Tim 2:12-14
34 Voaden, Op.cit., p. 7, 8, 18, 19, 34
35 Ibid., p.7, 8, 18, 19, 34, 38
36 Grace M. Jantzen, ‘Feminists, Philosophers, and Mystics’, Hypatia, p.189
father, husband or priest. In addition, as seductress, not just any type of knowledge was to be entrusted in woman’s hands. The seductive qualities of woman’s voice and lack of intellect makes her susceptible to heretical teaching. To avoid this possibility women were to be kept silent. This denied women not only attainment of an education, but even if by chance a woman did have some education she was denied the authority necessary to discern texts or to teach or preach.

IV. The Mysticism of Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Teresa of Avila

Women’s options were practically limited to merely two choices: marry or enter the convent. Both options kept woman under the necessary confines of a man’s authority. Neither Saint Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) nor Saint Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) had the opportunity for formal education. Even though their personal circumstances differed, both their families wanted them to marry yet both they defied them by rejecting the option of marriage. Catherine was eighteen when she chose to devote her life to the lay order of the Dominican Sisters of Penance; Teresa was twenty-one when she became a Carmelite nun. Their consecrated celibate life allowed more biological and spiritual freedom compared to the demands of marriage and motherhood. However, in light of this constricted backdrop, how did Catherine in her lifetime become a papal advisor, and Teresa a Carmelite reformer in hers? And beyond that, how did they achieve the status of being the first female Doctors of the Catholic Church?

Catherine and Teresa were a part of the classical Christian kataphatic mystical tradition. In this tradition, the term ‘mysticism’ is analogous to ‘contemplation’. It is through contemplative prayer that the mind detaches from the sensible objects and is freed from pre-conceived ideas to transcend all abstract, conceptual, theoretical knowledge. As part of this process the

39 Teresa, whose family came into nobility, did receive some formal education in a school for noble girls; Catherine, though, in her early twenties, had taught herself to read. Dickens, OpCit., p.180
40 Mary E. Giles, ‘The Feminist Mystic’, in The Feminist Mystic And Other Essays on Women and Spirituality, p.8,18
41 Andrea Janelle Dickens, The Female Mystic: Great Women Thinkers of the Middle Ages, p.151
42 Teresa of Avila, The Interior Castle, p.XIV
43 Harvey D. Egan, S.J., Christian Mysticism: The Future of a Tradition, p.303; ‘Mysticism’ is a broad umbrella term for the phenomena of the spiritual experience which is an aspect of the religious life that steps outside of the boundaries of religion. As there are a number of religions, there are various forms of mysticism. This paper, however, focuses only on the Christian Mysticism confined to the medieval era.
44 Ibid., p. 3,304
normal cognitive processes and the senses are suspended. This allows the mystic to arrive at the first principle of all material things since from this position of intuitive infused contemplation, an immediate, direct, ineffable mystical union and oneness with God is experienced. The outcome is an immediate knowledge of God infused into the soul through love. So the essence of mysticism is the experienced union with the Absolute – God - from which comes an infused knowledge of Him. This knowledge is neither from experience of the sensible world nor revealed by Revelation, but it is a transcendental activity derived from love to experience an invisible objective world that reaches beyond human capability.\textsuperscript{45} Teresa explains the mystical experience,

\begin{quote}
‘The soul is completely suspended in such a way that it seems to be completely outside itself. The will loves; the memory… is almost lost; the intellect does not work discursively… but is not lost… it is as though amazed by all it understands because God desires that it understand, with regard to the things His majesty represents to it, that it understands nothing.’\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

This essence - the mystical union with God as an infused contemplation - is the primary phenomena of mysticism. There are also particular forms of mystical phenomena experienced as a result of the infused contemplation. They are physical and or psychological phenomena that affect the mystic. Examples of such phenomena are ecstasy (trance), rapture (sudden trance), sensible visions (apparitions), imaginative visions, intellectual visions, locutions (interiors words or song), automatic writing, or revelations (specific truths about the future). Other radical physical phenomena which usually occur during ecstasy are levitations, which is when the body lifts off the ground in contradiction to laws of gravity, or the stigmata which is the reproduction of Christ’s wounds on the mystic’s body. Mystics may also go through prolonged fasting or absences of sleep. These secondary phenomena may hinder rather than help the mystic.\textsuperscript{47}

Catherine experienced several of the secondary mystical phenomena. For instance, she often underwent ecstasies and raptures. Beginning in prayer with a deliberate attempt to forget everything except God, the ecstasy comes

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., pp.3-5,9
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., p.305; Charles Arnold-Baker, ‘Christian Mysticism’ The Companion to British History
as a loss of consciousness to everything that is not God.\textsuperscript{48} This trance condition represents the experience of God at the mystics’ centre to the exclusion of all else. It is the sense of being outside of, or removed from, the physical self for complete absorption in God.\textsuperscript{49} During ecstasy, there is a suspension of internal and external senses with decreased heart rate, breath and body temperature.\textsuperscript{50} When Catherine was in ecstasy she could not see, hear, smell, taste or feel anything with her hands.\textsuperscript{51} Raptures are merely sudden ecstasies. Where an ecstasy had come from contemplating, raptures interrupted her normal state of consciousness abruptly.\textsuperscript{52}

An example of Teresa’s experience of secondary mystical phenomena were her periods of automatic writing. This phenomenon may be an inspiration to write, but for Teresa it was as if another was using her hand doing the actual writing for her, almost uncontrollably. The words came out from her pen fast and without hesitation. One explanation for this is that it occurs because the mystical consciousness overrides the normal inhibitions of the will and the surface intellect, allowing God’s will and divine mind to directly come through the pen.\textsuperscript{53} This gift, coupled with her intellectual visions, which she says occurred ‘while the soul is heeded of any thought about such a favour being granted to it, and though it never had a thought that it deserved this vision’,\textsuperscript{54} she wrote about the \textit{Mansions of the Soul} and \textit{Stages of Prayer}.

Unlike Teresa’s experience of automatic writing, Catherine could not write while in a trance of ecstasy or rapture. Despite not having her senses about her during these occasions, she could coherently communicate her ideas. Her biographer, Raymond of Capua, states that she instructed her secretaries to record every word she spoke while in ecstasy. These words, the result of inspirations of the Holy Spirit, were a conversation between a soul who asked God questions and God who answered directly. The conversation which imparted enlightening truths and knowledge of God formed Catherine of Siena’s book: \textit{The Dialogue}.\textsuperscript{55}
Without university education, neither Catherine nor Teresa had an academic discipline or learnt the logical sequence of academic prose. The limitations that one would expect from this did not lessen the quality of what they expressed. Instead, lacking the formal academic training and skills that man had was even to their advantage, easily fitting the conditions for mysticism. To achieve infused contemplation the mind must be free from perceptions, judgements, and pre-conceived ideas. Disengagement from intellectual perceptions includes setting aside all aspects of academia so the mystic can pass through the sensible realm to reach the presence of the divine where the infused knowledge of God is received. Other conditions are humility and passivity. This is so one’s human will does not interfere with God’s will and the messages he imparts. Hence, the absence of academia for these two uneducated women was a liberating aspect. For instance, they did not need to overcome the formal learned style of writing to document the infused knowledge they received through mysticism. This is evident in Catherine’s impassioned dialogues where she uses elaborate imagery and metaphor to impart God’s truths with clarity; and in the very natural style of Teresa’s writings which reflected the way she spoke.

V. The Phenomena of Mysticism: God or the devil?

The authentic mystical experience does not guarantee that the particular phenomena are of God. Rather it is this channel that allows for deception from the devil in disguise or from the self. For example, automatic writing may be potentially guided by evil spirits; or ecstasy could be pathological and diabolical, fixating the mystic on ideas or desires which lead to psychological, moral or physical deterioration. Moreover, as secondary phenomena are the inferior form of the transcendental union with God, they allow the mystic potentially to misinterpret divine wisdom either by intentionally manipulating it or unintentionally misunderstanding it. What criteria are there then to distinguish if the source of the phenomena is of God or not? And, is mysticism not merely a channel allowing woman to live the taint of Eve more easily?

Since mysticism is the channel to God as well as the devil it is vital that the events of the mystical process be subjected to an intense discernment.

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56 Giles, Ibid., p.29
58 Giles, Op.Cit., p.29
60 Teresa of Avila, Op.Cit., 1979, p.10
62 Egan, Ibid., p.311
63 Ibid., p.307
64 Voaden, Op.Cit, p.71

https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/solidarity/vol4/iss1/5
process. One way to tell apart a genuine from a false mystical phenomenon is that the genuine mystic will display personal goodness, piety and outward ministry. And the words expressed will not be inconsistent with Biblical truths. Teresa not only wrote about mysticism but her mystical experience provided the impetus for her to change her ways which she displayed before her conversion and encouraged others to do the same. Formerly, Teresa’s natural intelligence fed with a deficient education was expressed by an unbalanced temperament, neurosis, hysteria and even psychological derangement. But this dissipated and her mischievous ways transformed into extraordinary missionary activity. Further, what Catherine experienced in contemplation compelled her to action and what she was affected by in her activity was present in her prayer. Catherine’s writings on Christ for the salvation of the world, nursing the sick and lame, correcting Church practices and trying to reconcile the papal schism articulated her deep contemplation in the lived form, in the interplay between prayer and active ministry. Both women proved, through word and deed, that the source of their mysticism was God.

Although Catherine and Teresa’s mysticism was an authentic union with God, it did not preclude them from oppressing demons. Teresa claimed the devil overtook her understanding to such a degree that at one point she forgot the truths of her Christian faith. Catherine was often plagued by demons but with her skill of discernment she never failed to recognise them. Teresa discussed in length which of the secondary phenomena was more susceptible to demons – the imaginative visions more so than the intellectual ones. Both women were vigilant to the devil’s desire for the mystic. Teresa says, ‘…I have known persons who had ascended high and had reached this union, who were turned back and won over by the devil with his deep cunning and deceit.’ And, ‘…the devil needs nothing more than to see a little door open before the playing a thousand tricks on us.’ Nonetheless, it was not up

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66 False mystical phenomena replace angelic manifestations with demonic illusions. The mystic who has had the experienced union with God could receive demons that are well-disguised as angels to lead them astray for a destructive end. As such, discernment is essential to distinguish between the two forms, to protect the mystic against error and maintain the means of achieving union with God. Voaden, *Op.Cit.*, pp.-50-51
69 Louis Bouyer, *Women Mystics*, p.94
70 Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, p.8
to the women themselves to discern the source and validity of their mystical experience. This discernment was to be carried out by Church authorities.

VI. The Discernment of Spirits

The mystical experience could occur to a woman or man, as it did to Augustine of Hippo for example. Be they man or woman, a mystic needed some form of male ecclesiastical supervision for the discernment of spirits and spiritual direction. Nonetheless, women mystics required a more severe examination to discern if the source was of God since the potential of being deceived in a mystical experience was considered more likely to occur in women. It is not only because woman is intellectually and morally defective, making her more open to deceiving phenomena, but as naturally deceitful she could be a willing participant in deception using mysticism to deceive others. So it was necessary that ecclesiastical authorities lead stringent checks and controls for the discernment of spirits much more severely in the case of women mystics.

Accordingly, women mystics walked a dangerous line as the male authorities could label them a witch if they were deemed not to be a genuine mystic. The latter allowed a platform for free expression whereas the former was punishable by being burnt to death. Even if deemed a prophetess, women mystics needed to live under the continual guidance of a spiritual director to ensure her mystical experiences consistently conformed to Church precepts. For instance, Catherine’s biographer, Raymond of Capua, was also her advisor up until her death. And throughout Teresa’s life, she willingly submitted her mystical writings to Church authorities to satisfy her inquisitors. Whilst there were strict requirements for the mystic which both Catherine and Teresa embraced and upheld, consistent with the idea that women be kept within the confines of male authorities, their personal and direct experience of God led them to exercise an influence in society that far exceeded the role apportioned to women.

Whilst Catherine and Teresa were willingly obedient to their spiritual directors, they surpassed their lowly womanly status to come to have an autonomy and authority of their own. Catherine helped others discern their vocation and make right decisions which gained her the reputation of having

77 Ibid., p.40
78 Ibid., p.151
80 Ibid., p.45: The spiritual director was an ordained Church cleric, specialising in the pastoral care of mystic’s life. Raymond continued his service of Catherine by editing The Dialogue. Ibid., p.59
great foresight and vision. Leaders of cities soon sought Catherine’s counsel, which led her to write a total of 382 letters of advice, many of which were addressed to Popes.\textsuperscript{82} Catherine worked as a charismatic leader in the Church to keep the papacy in Rome and sought to reconcile the schism between rival Popes.\textsuperscript{83} Teresa had the authority to reform the Carmelite order by establishing the Discalced (barefoot) Carmelites in Spain.\textsuperscript{84} Though Pauline texts were interpreted as a ban against having women as teachers or preachers, Catherine and Teresa proved themselves to be great teachers and leaders. These conflicting positions were somehow reconciled on the basis that genuine mystical experiences allow for a woman to be deemed a visionary with the gift of prophecy.\textsuperscript{85}

**VII. The Authority of Prophecy**

Prophecy signifies that the wisdom imparted is of divine origin, so prophets are considered to be nothing more than God’s mouthpiece. This gives a prophet - even if a woman - divine authority. So wisdom imparted by a woman prophet would not be automatically discounted; she would not be silenced as she could expect to be if not a prophetess, but could freely speak or act without hesitation from fear of being reprimanded. Divine authority, consequently, gave Catherine and Teresa not only a voice to publically speak but allowed them the freedom to influence the lives of others. Saint Thomas Aquinas says, “sometimes the gift of prophecy is given to a man both for the good of others, and in order to enlighten his own mind; and such are those whom Divine wisdom “conveying itself” by sanctifying grace to their minds.”\textsuperscript{86}

Women mystics elevated to status of prophetess removes any contradiction between the idea that woman is incapable of the rationality necessary to access wisdom, on the one hand, with woman being able to impart the infused wisdom of God, on the other hand. Thomas’ assessment of prophecy states that a prophet’s mind is a deficient instrument. This notion remains in keeping with the Aristotelian idea that woman is naturally deficient in reason. Thomas also states that prophecy signifies the suspension of the natural order. This means that prophetesses were suspended from their naturally inferior state as woman.\textsuperscript{87} He says, ‘every gift of grace raises man to

\textsuperscript{83} *Ibid.*, p.152; During the Great Schism the original popes were forced out of Rome and lived in Avignon while rival popes took residence in Rome. Catherine’s advice to Pope Gregory XI convinced him to return to Rome, proving to be the catalyst for returning the papacy back to its place of origin. Macquarrie, *Op.Cit.*, p.151
\textsuperscript{84} *Ibid.*, p.179
\textsuperscript{87} *Ibid.*, p.39
something above human nature… [this happens in] the knowledge of the uncertain and hidden things of Divine wisdom. Thomas’ two interpretations of prophecy uphold the view of woman as inferior whilst accepting that woman can, through prophecy, attain to wisdom. Thus, mysticism enabled women to transcend the perceived limitations of their gender, suspending the perceived idea of woman rather than going against it. And, therefore, the concept of prophecy becomes the loophole for a woman to override the constraints of her gender.

From here only a small jump needs to be made to claim that from the status of prophetess women could be philosophers (accessing wisdom) despite Aristotle’s claims that women are not so able. To be able to ascertain that women mystics can truly be considered philosophers I need to show the ways in which mysticism is connected to philosophy and reconcile the problem where, in the mystical experience, particular reasoning powers are temporary suspended.

VIII. Mysticism and Philosophy

The wisdom achieved through mysticism is an infused gift, which means it is divine and not human. From this it cannot be inferred that mysticism does not require or depend upon reasoning powers since the intellect itself is the point of contact between the human and divine. Although parts of reason are suspended for the mystical experience to occur, contemplation is still, nonetheless, an act of the intellect. In having said that for women this suspension may be easier, it is not because they are defective in reason but solely because their lack of education made it easier to free themselves from preconceived ideas, judgements and intellectual desires. So it is incorrect to state that mysticism requires a total suspension of the power of reason. A fine line would be crossed otherwise. To have and maintain one’s rationality in the mystical experience marks the distinction between hallucinations in a state of psychosis versus a genuine religious experience. The latter occurs with a prophet and only certain parts of their reasoning faculty are momentarily suspended during the mystical experience. The former is the complete detachment of reason in mentally disturbed and unintelligible behaviour. Thus, if women were defective in reason as Aristotle had laid down and if Catherine and Teresa’s mystical experiences were completely devoid of reason, or detached from it, then they would have had to have been deemed psychotic, not prophetic.

89 A.N. Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas*, p.111,131
90 Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, p.71
Although the mystics may not be able to demonstrate their conclusions, other of the essential features of philosophy parallel the conditions for mysticism. Primarily, they are connected by the notion of love of wisdom. In philosophy love goes hand in hand with wisdom as the term *philosophy* literally means the love of wisdom. This goes back to Aristotle who says, ‘all men by nature desire to know’. (980a28-980b25) It is desire which compels the pursuit and practice of wisdom for its own sake. In other words, wisdom is sought for no other reason than for love. Aristotle says, ‘…we do not seek it for the sake of any other advantage…for it alone exists for itself.’ (982b29-983a12) The same can be said for mysticism – God is pursued for love alone and derived from it. Yet it is not just in philosophical pursuit that the human desire to know can be fulfilled, but in the mystical experience by which God is discovered as the truth, this desire is fulfilled.\(^{91}\)

Mysticism achieves the wisdom that philosophy seeks: the object of desire is the same thing. In mysticism the object of contemplation is God. In philosophy the object of desire is knowledge of first principles. Aristotle teaches us that philosophy is grounded in first principles and seeks to articulate them; he says, ‘…we must inquire of what kind are the causes and the principles, the knowledge of which is wisdom.’ (982a20-982b10) God is the first principle and the name *God* is a term for first principle. As the mystic experiences the direct presence of God, she gains knowledge of and is able to articulate God as the grounding first principle of all life. The distinction is that for the mystic the intellect is the locus for the reception of God’s wisdom, whereas for the philosopher reason is the agent that brings wisdom about.\(^{92}\) The result for both the mystic and the philosopher is wisdom, as their goals are rooted in the transcendental idea of a first principle.

Finally, philosophy in the medieval era was marked by the integration of faith and reason. Thomas Aquinas cemented this idea by stating that the truths of Christian faith gained by Revelation are not incompatible to the Aristotelian truths of philosophy. This is in spite of how these truths are known, since wisdom is infused for the mystic yet acquired by nature for the philosopher. Although the wisdom of mysticism is infused by love, it is erroneous to think it can be gained by faith alone.\(^{93}\) Catherine writes, ‘it is in reason that the light of faith is held, and one cannot lose the one without losing the other’. This concept of philosophy - as the unity of faith and reason – has been re-articulated by Pope John Paul II: ‘faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of the truth; and God has

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\(^{91}\) Prudence Allen RSM, ‘Person and Complementarity in Fides et ratio’, in *The Two Wings of Catholic Thought: Essays On Fides et ratio*, p.38

\(^{92}\) Williams, *Op.Cit.*, p.130

\(^{93}\) Catherine of Siena, *Op.Cit.*, p.103
placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth’. 94 This means that faith and reason have equal value. It also means that by interacting together – where infused wisdom meets acquired wisdom - more can be achieved in the desire to know than what can be achieved alone. 95

IX. Closing Remarks

Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Teresa of Avila demonstrate how women of the medieval era could transcend their lowly and submissive status, override their lack of education and access wisdom. I have established that mysticism was a ‘loophole’ that enabled poorly educated women to possess the ability to gain and impart wisdom as ‘prophetesses’; however, as mysticism is linked to philosophy, women mystics not only side-stepped the negative consensus of woman from certain Christians’ writings rooted in Genesis, but have invalidated Aristotle’s claims of woman’s inferior nature and lack of capacity to achieve wisdom. Granting that mysticism provides an infused wisdom, it nonetheless requires an act of the intellect. Catherine and Teresa could not have been legitimate mystics if it were true that women were irrational by nature. In their desire for God, Catherine and Teresa were not only granted wisdom; through their mystical experiences and visionary works, they contributed to the gradual negation of the concept of woman that was laid down by Aristotle.


95 Allen, *OpCit.*, 2003, p.37
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