Weaving the Wounds of Christ:  
Monastic Women’s Devotion and Tapestry Production in the Middle Ages

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Monastic studies have been and remain a central component of medieval scholarship. Scholars of architecture, illuminated manuscripts, and religion have examined the monastic environment of the Middle Ages, traditionally focusing on the male experience. They show that this monastic experience changed significantly in the late Middle Ages with the advent of reformation activities when the Catholic Church had grown more and more extravagant in its lascivious behavior, resulting in a call for a strict enforcement of the doctrinal rules. This tightening of rules was perceived as an attempt to eliminate heresy, such as idol worship or the violation of the monastic vows of chastity and poverty among monks and nuns.\(^1\) While there is often less documentary evidence regarding women, particularly nuns within monastic communities, the documents we do have show us that the possibility of living beyond the realm of proper piety was considered a greater threat among women than men.\(^2\) In this sense, knowledge of the lives of medieval nuns and their interaction with the imagery in their convents contributes valuable insight for the field of medieval history, particularly because nuns practiced a very different type of piety than did their male counterparts. Thus balancing our understanding of the Middle Ages by including the study of women, scholars of religion, history, women’s studies, and art history are now actively exploring the devotional lives of monastic women.\(^3\)

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\(^3\) Some of the leading scholars in the field of feminist medieval studies include: Caroline Walker Bynum, Corine
Figure 1: The Last Judgment Tapestry, Nuremberg (woven in Katharinenkloster), linen and wool, 95 5/16 cm X 57 7/8 cm, c. 1450; Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg. Image after John P. O’Neill, Gothic and Renaissance Art in Nuremberg 1300-1550 (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986), 199. 
http://books.google.com/books?id=OD8g4Eb-3EsC&printsec=frontcover&dq=gothic+and+renaissance+art+in+nuremberg&hl=en&sa=X&ei=pcG_UdmFMbih4APGlYDwAw&ved=0CC8Q6AEwAA
Within these studies scholars have shown that in the later Middle Ages monastic women across Europe faced varying degrees of freedom and interaction with each other, their monastic brothers, and the laypeople of their communities. Many convents placed their nuns in enclosure. The terms of this enclosure varied across the Middle Ages and Europe. While some nuns were granted access to monastic gardens, hospitals, and libraries, other orders enforced strict seclusion, only allowing their nuns contact with their monastic advisers for confession and communion. Whatever their situation, cloistered women spent the majority of their time in solitude praying and contemplating their faith in God.

One avenue open to scholars for an understanding of this cloistered life is through the analysis of the material objects known to be available to or produced by these women as well as an examination of the tasks they performed in their sequestration. One such object that communicates meaning through its production by nuns is the Last Judgment Tapestry woven in the Dominican convent of Saint Catherine, or Katharinenkloster, in Nuremberg (fig. 1). Documents from the convent reveal that the Nuremberg Tapestry was woven in the latter half of the fifteenth century and commissioned by two prominent Nuremberg patrons, the Schurstab family and the Volckamer family. This is evidenced in the presence of each of their family crests in the bottom corners of the tapestry. Moreover, these documents stipulate that the Last Judgment Tapestry was produced as a burial tapestry for a member of one of these families.

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Church records show that after its production at Katharinenkloster, the tapestry was installed in Saint Sebald’s, a neighboring Nuremberg cathedral, over the casket of the deceased. This fact will become relevant as we examine the iconography of the woven image.\footnote{O’Neill, \textit{Gothic and Renaissance Art in Nuremberg}, 198.}

The Nuremberg Tapestry illustrates a Last Judgment group type known as a \textit{Deësis} group.\footnote{Heinz, \textit{Medieval Tapestries}, 20.} This term is employed to describe Last Judgment arrangements including Christ with the five wounds of the stigmata, flanked by the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist. This same \textit{Deësis} Last Judgment composition can be seen in many contemporary German woodcuts (fig. 2).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{Figure2.png}
\caption{The Last Judgment. (Note Saint John's camel suit, the rising dead, and Christ seated on the rainbow). Image in the public domain, published in \textit{The Illustrated Bartsch} Vol. 162 (German Single Leaf Woodcuts before 1500) \#16201.607, 15th Century.}
\end{figure}
In the Nuremberg Tapestry, Christ is depicted with the Lily of Mercy and the Sword of Justice radiating from his head; this is a common feature in German depictions in particular. Also typical of Deësis groups, the dead are rising from their graves beneath the three main figures. These dead are being summoned by angels blowing trumpets in their direction. The Virgin and Saint John are supported by clouds, while Christ is seated on a double rainbow. This arrangement is derived from the Biblical account in Revelations. Within this codified arrangement, however, the unique characteristics of the tapestry stand out. The bleeding stigmata wounds of Christ, the instruments of the Passion, and the tactile nature of tapestry weaving were not typical components of Deësis groups. I would argue that these elements signal that this tapestry was designed with an intended devotional employment, particularly when examined in terms of the specific spirituality and piety of nuns and their sequestered life.

The problem for understanding this tapestry is that prominent scholars of medieval women’s spirituality have focused on devotional aspects as they are manifest in the reception of images and objects. I argue that for this tapestry, however, it is reception’s counterpart, production, which will yield greater insight into devotion. When production is examined in medieval studies, it is more generally addressed to the production of manuscripts within monastic settings, particularly those created by male monastic artisans. These types of studies tend to investigate the ways monks used the text and images in manuscripts, both during production in the scriptorium and afterward in the studying of the object by the monks to aid in

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12 Suzannah Biernoff has recently addressed the complexity of reception, vision, and seeing in *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 2-6.
memorization or meditation. While women’s artistic production as a whole has attracted far less attention, the important issue of the physicality of artistic production, particularly as it pertains to women, has yet to be addressed. In this it is most significant to note that scholars have not explored the meditative or devotional aspects of the production of tapestries by nuns in medieval convents. In neglecting this aspect of women’s piety, scholars have not addressed the inherent meditative qualities that are produced in the rhythmic act of weaving.

While acknowledging, as other scholars have suggested, that the meditative elements of prayer, the identification with the suffering body of Christ, the implied physicality of the instruments of the Passion, and the tactile aspects of devotion are all integral components to the spirituality of medieval women, I argue that a contemplative trance was induced by the rhythmic act of weaving. Moreover, when combined with the tactile physicality of the artistic process, this trance facilitated nuns’ ability to meditate on their own physical interaction with the body of Christ, much like other meditative practices, such as chanting, praying canonical prayers, or processing through cloisters. In this act of identification, it is my thesis that the slow and incremental weaving of the symbols of the Last Judgment into the warp and weft of the tapestry worked in a manner similar to the imaginative meditation on the stigmata and the instruments of the Passion. The physical act of weaving can thus be seen and understood as a type of

16 For further reading on women’s meditation on the stigmata and instruments of the Passion, see Lindgren, *Sensual* © 2014 The Middle Ground Journal Number 9, Fall 2014 http://TheMiddleGroundJournalJournal.org See Submission Guidelines page for the journal's not-for-profit educational open-access policy
devotional strategy that illustrates the level of individual creativity allowed, or even sanctioned, within female monastic institutions.

Aspects of interest for this line of research are the tactile physicality of prayer and meditation present in nuns’ devotions, the corporeal emphasis on the humanity of Christ, and the physiological understanding of rhythmic movement as it pertains to meditative practice.\footnote{My principal source for the physicality of prayer and meditation in women’s devotion is Lindgren, Sensual Encounters, 4-11, 58-87. For references to the corporeal emphasis on the humanity of Christ, see Bynum, Wonderful Blood, 1-22; Bynum, Jesus as Mother, 129-140; and Bynum, Fragmentation and Redemption, 151-180. Some empirical evidence of the meditative value of rhythmic movement is provided by my personal experiences as a weaver. The principal scientific sources are Michael Winkelman, “Trance States: A Theoretical Model and Cross-Cultural Analysis,” Ethos 14, no. 2 (1986): 174-178; and Jill E. Bormann and Doug Oman, “Mantram, or Holy Name Repetition: Healing Power of a Portable Spiritual Practice,” in The Healing Power of Spirituality, ed. J. Harold Ellens (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2009), 84-86.} My contribution to this discourse, as it concerns the physicality of women’s devotional practices, is the more empirical understanding of the rhythmic, trance-inducing properties of weaving. I want to suggest that our knowledge of the sensory application of tactile touch, rhythmic movement, or repetitive sound to achieve a state of altered consciousness is particularly enlightening when focused on the practice utilized in the production of the Nuremberg Last Judgment Tapestry.\footnote{Michael Murphy and Steven Donovan, The Physical and Psychological Effects of Meditation (Sausalito: Institute of Noetic Sciences, 1999), 45.}

Before we can begin to understand the importance of this meditational production, it is helpful to situate this tapestry within the larger context of medieval monastic studies. As stated above, objects such as the Nuremberg Last Judgment Tapestry have been studied by scholars of medieval women’s monasticism who are particularly interested in the environments in which nuns lived during the Middle Ages.\footnote{Laura Weigert, Weaving Sacred Stories: French Choir Tapestries and the Performance of Clerical Identity (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 1-18; and Jane L. Carroll, “Woven Devotions: Reform and Piety in Tapestries by Dominican Nuns,” in Saints, Sinners, and Sisters: Gender and Northern Art in Medieval and Early Modern Europe, eds. Jane L. Carroll and Alison G. Stewart, (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), 182-201, here, 183-186. Both of these scholars examine the various interpretations of tapestries in religious settings. Weigert’s work revolves around Laura Weigert, Weaving Sacred Stories: French Choir Tapestries and the Performance of Clerical Identity (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 1-18; and Jane L. Carroll, “Woven Devotions: Reform and Piety in Tapestries by Dominican Nuns,” in Saints, Sinners, and Sisters: Gender and Northern Art in Medieval and Early Modern Europe, eds. Jane L. Carroll and Alison G. Stewart, (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), 182-201, here, 183-186. Both of these scholars examine the various interpretations of tapestries in religious settings. Weigert’s work revolves around the representations of saints and their roles in the medieval church. She argues that these tapestries not only served as devotional aids but also as tools for the promotion of the church’s ideals.} Scholarship includes topics relating to the economic and
political structure of convents, as well as the nuns’ interactions with their monk advisers, terms of enclosure, and the reception of images within the cloister. Prominent among these studies are those of Jeffrey Hamburger. In his book *Nuns as Artists*, Hamburger addresses the popular notion that tapestry production was a widespread practice within medieval convents.  

Hamburger and other scholars agree that the language of monastic documents is too ambiguous to draw this conclusion. These scholars now suggest that these documents actually refer to instances in which abbesses or nuns commissioned the production of tapestries from secular weaving guilds, and that very few tapestry-producing convents existed in the area we now identify in Germany. Significantly, one such weaving convent was Katharinenkloster in Nuremberg, which produced the Last Judgment Tapestry.

Tapestry commissions such as those for the Nuremberg Tapestry were generally reserved for nobility or other elite patrons, suggesting their monetary value and luxury status. Even with the financial gains to be made through tapestry production, however, there were few convents involved in the industry; instead secular and professional weaving guilds dominated the market. Given that convents did not have the same resources as these large, professional weaving guilds, convents’ products were considerably smaller, which is the case with the Last Judgment Tapestry. Yet despite the fact that the Katharinenkloster loom was presumably small, 

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the process of tapestry weaving would have been a tedious one, requiring specific skills and training on a vertical loom and in the use of linen and wool to produce the textile.\textsuperscript{27} In Germanic regions, patrons commonly supplied the materials and equipment for their tapestry, taking a portion of the financial burden of production off of the convent.\textsuperscript{28} Because of the relative rarity of weaving within convents, I draw the connection that tapestry production was not merely a functional industry considered financially necessary by monasteries; rather the act of weaving seems to have held other benefits for the nuns. This becomes particularly clear when this industry is considered in relation to the primary activity of a convent: devotion and prayer. I would argue, therefore, that nuns at Katharinenkloster made a unique connection between the economic benefits of tapestry production and the devotional possibilities inherent in the process of weaving. Viewed with this in mind, the Nuremburg Last Judgment Tapestry should not be seen solely as an object made for commission, but its production should be understood to have held particular devotional and meditative value within the convent. In order to comprehend this contextually specific value, it is therefore necessary to understand the probable devotional context in which the Nuremburg Last Judgment Tapestry was produced.

Medieval convents were places of constant prayer and devotion, often in private enclosure.\textsuperscript{29} Bodily asceticism, to include fasting, sleep deprivation, lashing with scourges, or binding the waist with chains, as a method to achieve closeness with Christ through imitation of his suffering was not uncommon.\textsuperscript{30} To this devotional context we should add the inherent human

\textsuperscript{27} Hamburger, \textit{Nuns as Artists}, 37.
\textsuperscript{28} Weigert, \textit{Weaving Sacred Stories}, 8.
\textsuperscript{29} Evangelisti, \textit{Nuns}, 27-33.
response to rhythm and the ways that this response can facilitate trance-like states for deep meditation. Scientifically defined, a “trance state” is a state of “parasympathetic dominance in which the frontal cortex is dominated by slow wave patterns.”

These slow wave patterns in the brain lead to a state that is singularly focused and receptive to meditation or prayer. In other words, trance-like states are entered through focusing, calming, and quieting the brain. This is significant for the weaving nuns of Katharinenkloster because the rhythmic act of weaving could easily have led to such a state. Austerities, the infliction of bodily pain or suffering, sexual restrictions, and extreme fasting or nutritional deficits are all factors that scientists believe contribute to the induction of trance states often utilized to reach spiritual resources untapped by the conscious mind for fulfillment of religious experiences.

All were present in the lives of these nuns. As a result of these factors, scholars have begun to entertain the theory that even the miraculous appearance of the stigmata in medieval convents was possible through intentional manipulation of cyclic brain waves and alpha rhythms.

Traditionally, trance states have been achieved through a variety of induction procedures that involve a rhythmic element. For instance, trance-like states can be entered by altering the biological clocks inherent in all humans, also known as Circadian rhythms. Biologists and psychologists have begun researching the effects of these rhythms on the human brain and the methods by which people are able to alter them. They have found that by modifying and controlling the cyclic brain waves, humans are able to reach a state of calmness and relaxation.

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Winkelman, “Trance States,” 174. The full definition reads: “A state of parasympathetic dominance in which the frontal cortex is dominated by slow wave patterns originating in the limbic system and related projections into the frontal parts of the brain.”

These characteristics are identified in Bormann and Oman, “Mantram, or Holy Name Repetition,” 85.


Still, Of Time, Tides, and Inner Clocks, 194.

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that aids in their receptiveness to deep meditative or devotional thoughts.\(^{36}\) Scholars of physiology, psychology, and biology have also noted that human beings react to rhythm in a way that stimulates intellectual, creative, and emotional activity.\(^{37}\) Thus, receptiveness to emotional meditation is significant to my research for its applications to the rhythmic process of tapestry weaving.

Examples of this rhythmically induced state are a phenomenon known as “auditory driving” and a practice called “mantram repetition.”\(^{38}\) Auditory driving involves the implementation of rhythmic auditory stimuli, such as drumming or chanting, to reach a meditative state. A similar method of achieving this altered condition is through mantram repetition, in which simple phrases are rhythmically repeated often throughout the day and night to provide comfort or encourage meditation and focus. Generally, rhythmic mantram repetition has been documented as acutely focusing attention within the meditating individual. Mantram repetition as a meditative tool has been practiced across time and geography and is evident in nearly every major religious or spiritual tradition in the Eastern and Western worlds.\(^{39}\)

Scholars have gone so far as to term individuals practicing these trance-inducing methods as having been affected by “creative illnesses.”\(^{40}\) It is in this sense that these metaphysical studies have significant implications for our understanding of the religious women’s production of the Nuremberg Last Judgment Tapestry. Groups associated with this “creative illness” include religious mystics and artists; the nuns of Katharinenkloster could

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\(^{36}\) Ibid. 197.


\(^{38}\) Information regarding these techniques is cited from Winkelman, “Trance States,” 178; and Bormann and Oman, “Mantram, or Holy Name Repetition.” 83.

\(^{39}\) Bormann and Oman, “Mantram, or Holy Name Repetition,” 83-84.


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certainly be considered under both of these categories. In conjunction with scientific theories regarding the role of rhythm in auditory driving and Mantram repetition, the production of a tapestry employs a particularly physical set of rhythms. Passing the bobbin through the warp threads strung on a vertical loom, bobbins and other tools clinking rhythmically against each other and the ground, the bodies of weavers carrying out their tasks, systematically and rhythmically, are all elements which lead to the trance-like states in which a person is more receptive to deep meditation and open to an emotional response. They are states that induce a creative mindset. Monastic women were particularly predisposed to be receptive to this type of state. Working within this rhythm and developing a deep sense of meditative thought, it follows that they would have been open to the devotional opportunities presented in the subject matter of the Nuremberg Last Judgment Tapestry.

Having achieved this state of meditative contemplation, other documented elements of women’s piety would have come into play. As previously mentioned, the devotional practices of women in the Middle Ages were far more physical and corporeal than the methods of religious men.\textsuperscript{41} I would argue that the notion of the Augustinian modes of seeing and practices such as affective participation and asceticism as well as the tactile veneration of objects were all devotional aspects relevant to the production of the Nuremberg Last Judgment Tapestry.\textsuperscript{42} These medieval conceptions of visuality and physicality lay the groundwork for interpreting the modes of prayer and meditation involved in the production of tapestries by nuns in the Middle Ages.

In general, the sensory experience of objects in the Middle Ages was often guided by

\textsuperscript{41} Bynum, \textit{Fragmentation and Redemption}, 60.
Augustine’s three modes of visual perception (corporeal, intellectual, and spiritual). Current scholarship that explores Augustine’s ideas regarding reception of images supports the notion that the Nuremberg Tapestry’s production was conceived of as a devotional practice. Using Augustine’s visual levels of perception, one could physically view an object or image (corporeal), understand its meaning fully (intellectual), and reach a higher plane of understanding and metaphysical connection with the subject of the gaze (spiritual). Each of these levels of seeing and perceiving was meant to build upon one another. Thus, by having achieved higher levels of seeing, the viewer would have reached higher levels of enlightened understanding.

Scholars have elaborated upon the Augustinian model, pointing to sophisticated levels of understanding perceived through the viewing of sacred, holy, or instructional images and objects. One of these avenues of interaction with devotional imagery, which employs both the theories of visuality and physicality, was a method known as “affective participation.” Monastic women may not have known the practice by name, but would no doubt have been familiar with the practical application. Affective participation allowed nuns to focus their meditations on an image, casting themselves within the visual composition. This meditative participation with imagery facilitated the nuns’ contemplation on particular sanctioned motifs of emotional identification: the suffering of Christ, the love that Mary felt for her crucified son, or the impassioned faith of a martyr. For example, affective participation with an image of Christ with stigmata wounds and the instruments of the Passion would elicit meditation on the immense

43 For further explanation of these three modes of seeing (in Latin, visio corporalis, visio intellectualis, and visio spiritualis), see Biernoff, Sight and Embodiment, 25-26.
44 Biernoff, Sight and Embodiment, 1-30.
45 Lindgren, Sensual Encounters, 58.
46 Ibid.
pain inflicted on Christ’s human body during the events of the Crucifixion. This type of meditation would grow in intensity from that experienced corporeally, then intellectually, until finding a spiritual understanding. Thus producing intense physical feelings of personal pain and suffering in the nuns (the corporeal level), and causing them to identify with the humanity of Christ as if sharing in his persecutions (the intellectual level), this method of participation with images depended heavily on sensory aspects of worship (the spiritual level). In the case of the Last Judgment Tapestry as an act of affective participation, I would argue that the Augustinian modes of seeing can be expanded to sensory experiences beyond vision to encompass taste and touch. Erika Lauren Lindgren addresses affective piety in her scholarship, showing that images were effectively employed as intermediary objects that served to help channel or induce visions or “mystical unions” with God. Lindgren also states that images and objects afforded nuns the opportunity to interact directly with the subject of their devotions and prayers or to “experience the immediacy of the persons or ideas that the images represented.”

An example of these types of devotion that engaged the senses was the regular occurrence of women claiming to taste God or Christ. While praying or meditating, it was not uncommon for the women to report that they received sweet tastes, often compared to honey. It is in this same vein that “Eucharistic fervor,” as one of the main themes of Christocentrism, manifests in correlation to the emphasis on the Passion and Crucifixion as pictured in the Last Judgment Tapestry. Briefly stated, “Eucharistic fervor” is a term used to describe the increased

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49 Ibid.
50 Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 190.
51 Ibid., 123, 190.
sacramental importance of physically receiving the Eucharist.\textsuperscript{52} In the historical context of the later Middle Ages, Eucharistic fervor was widespread, reaching all across Europe and transcending most, if not all, monastic orders.\textsuperscript{53} Although not documented until the fifteenth century, earlier medieval spirituality began to perceive the Eucharist as the literal body and blood of Christ.\textsuperscript{54} Here is it difficult to discern the level to which metaphor and literal reality were conflated in relation to the consumption of the Eucharist, but it becomes clearer when we look at the phenomena through the lens of the ambiguity that merges the physical and the spiritual in Augustine’s three levels of perception. Beginning in the twelfth century, the unleavened host was stamped with an image of Christ, rather than the simple cross or monogram of the earlier Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{55} This image seemed to blur the lines between the Eucharist as metaphor or symbol and the Eucharist as the physical body of Christ and is significant for its implications regarding imagery of Christ as human in the Nuremberg Last Judgment Tapestry. Like the practice of stamping the host, weaving Christ’s physical body created a channel for religious women to experience sensually the body and blood of Christ as they would have through the symbolic act of consuming the host in Communion.

There are many visual examples of this Eucharistic fervor depicted by, about, or including women. One very popular depiction of the Eucharist shows Christ spurting blood from his side wound into a Eucharist chalice. Interestingly, it is most often a woman receiving the blood in the cup (fig. 3). This appears in Hildegard of Bingen’s \textit{Scivias} (completed ca. 1150)

\textsuperscript{52} Bynum, \textit{Holy Feast and Holy Fast}, 6.
\textsuperscript{53} Bynum, \textit{Fragmentation and Redemption}, 120.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 66.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 127.
and many other notable contexts. Conveying a similar idea are images depicting women drinking the blood directly from Christ’s side wound. Contemporaries who wrote of Marguerite of Oign in the late thirteenth century described her as she “swooned with love over Christ’s bleeding side, and received a vision in which she flowered like a tree in spring when watered by Christ.” Instances such as these are not uncommon; most prominently, Catherine of Siena, a late fourteenth-century Dominican nun, is often depicted as drinking the blood from Christ’s side wound. This focus on the bleeding of Christ’s human body is depicted in the Nuremberg Tapestry and should be seen as a reference to the rampant Eucharistic fervor and Christocentrism in late medieval convents.

57 There is a late sixteenth-century image of Catherine of Siena sucking pus from the wound of a leper, and receiving an image of herself drinking Christ’s blood from his side wound in Bynum, Fragmentation and Redemption, 211.
58 Bynum, Fragmentation and Redemption, 91.
59 Ibid., 211.
Although visuality and taste have continued to dominate this line of inquiry, particular attention has been paid to the sense of touch, whether it is physical or imagined. Devotion guided by the sense of touch is of particular significance to my thesis regarding the production of the Nuremberg Last Judgment Tapestry. The emphasis on touch reinforces the notion that the

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manual production of tapestries was a devotional activity particularly suited to the nun weavers. This is supported by recent scholarship that highlights the performativity of women’s devotion with objects and images. In an essay titled “St Hedwig’s Personal Ivory Madonna: Women’s Agency and the Powers of Possessing Portable Figures,” Corine Schleif explores one particular nun’s connection with a small ivory statue of the Virgin.61 Born in the late twelfth century and canonized in 1267, Saint Hedwig was largely renowned for her possession of and interaction with personal portable figures.62 Hedwig is nearly always described or depicted either cradling her ivory Madonna and Child statuette, much like the Virgin cradles Christ, or venerating the figures on an altar.63 Claims of miracles performed by Hedwig’s ivory Madonna abound in medieval written accounts.64 From this, Schleif extrapolates that images and objects within convents encouraged both visual contemplation and tactile devotion.65 This tactile devotion was two-fold: while Hedwig touched the doll, the miracles came through Christ, demonstrated by the use of the infant figure’s hand to bless worshipers. Schleif’s claims about this physical veneration of objects are in part evidenced by multiple existing portable ivories that are worn from the women rubbing the figures during prayer and meditation.66 This has particular significance for the research of the Nuremberg Last Judgment Tapestry as it supports the notion that physical interaction with objects was of the utmost importance in monastic women’s devotion.

62 Schleif, “St Hedwig’s Personal Ivory Madonna,” 382-383; and Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, 83. MN. 126, MS Ludwig XI, fol. 49R.
64 Ibid., 394.
65 Ibid., 400.
66 Ibid., 400.
For Hedwig, touching and rubbing her ivory Madonna statuette was a large portion of her devotion to the Virgin as an intercessor for prayer.\textsuperscript{67} In terms of the nuns of Katherinenkloster, the tactile performativity of weaving tapestries should be viewed as the same type of interaction. While weaving each of the sacred figures in the Nuremberg Tapestry – the Virgin Mary, Christ in Judgment, and Saint John the Baptist – the nuns would be able to have taken advantage of the devotional opportunities presented by each figure. It is easy to imagine the women praying for a close relationship and friendship with Christ, like John the Baptist, while weaving his body into the tapestry. Similarly, while weaving the Virgin Mary, the nuns may have prayed that she guide them in being pious and holy women. Nuns weaving the body of Christ may have had the most auspicious tactile experience, perhaps praying to share in his bodily suffering during the Passion and Crucifixion.

While this type of prayer, channeled through the sense of touch and the performance of tactile devotion, is essential in understanding the spiritual components of production of the Nuremberg Last Judgment Tapestry within Katharinenkloster, it was not unique. Scholars such as Caroline Walker Bynum, Erika Lauren Lindgren, and Ulrike Wiethaus have worked closely with biographies and autobiographies of medieval nuns that detail devotional practices and prayers and reflect the physical and corporeal aspects of female devotion in the Middle Ages in terms of their asceticism.\textsuperscript{68} Instances of the nuns’ asceticism range from mild and imagined to brutal self-inflicted wounds and disease. Examples of this type of devotion serve to elucidate the

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 386.

\textsuperscript{68} Biographies of Catherine of Genoa, Marguerite of Oign, Julian of Norwich, and others can be found in Bynum, \textit{Fragmentation and Redemption}, 69, 91, 174. Gertrude of Helfta’s biography is referenced in Bynum, \textit{Jesus as Mother}, 192. Mechthilt the Rittrin, Margaret Ebner, Hedewig of Lofenberg, Adelheit Othwins of St. Katharinenthal are each referenced in Lindgren, \textit{Sensual Encounters}, 62, 65, 66, 73. Angela of Foligno and Catherine of Siena's biographies are both discussed in Wiethaus, \textit{Maps of Flesh and Light}, 38, 40.
degree to which physicality dominated religious practice within convents.

One performative example that illustrates physical aspects of nuns’ piety is the popular *Vierges Ouvrante*, or “opening virgin.” On average, the *Vierges Ouvrante* figures were approximately 114 centimeters tall and were carved of wood. These sculptural figures, when closed, depict a seated or standing Virgin holding the Christ child. Upon opening, not unlike a folding altarpiece, they reveal a variety of sculptural programs. Often included were Trinity figures and image cycles of the life of Christ painted on the inside of the Virgin sculpture. The *Vierges Ouvrante* statues were often kept on the altar, closed except for feast days when a priest would dramatically enact the birth of Christ from Mary by opening the statue to reveal the salvific message of the Trinity within. This type of physical and performative devotion to the Virgin and the life of Christ is a strong indicator that participatory modes of devotion were commonly employed within medieval convents.

Similarly documented accounts of religious asceticism involved mystical miracles of the stigmata, self-inflicted suffering, and receiving visions. These phenomena are recorded in the lives of Hedewig of Lofenberg, Mary of Oignies, Angela of Foligno, and Catherine of Siena, among others. Before exploring these examples, it is important to understand the impetus behind such behavior. Past scholarship largely viewed asceticism by nuns as punishment for

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70 Ibid., 84.
71 Ibid., 96.
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their unclean, physical, feminine bodies. More recent feminist medieval scholarship argues against this theory, claiming that asceticism was a mode for \textit{imitatio Christi}, or the imitation of Christ.\textsuperscript{74}

One example of this type of ascetic behavior is evident in the life of Hedewig of Lofenberg (not the previously mentioned Saint Hedwig), a thirteenth-century Unterlinden nun who carved crosses into her chest with a shard of wood. Hedewig claimed she did this so that her desire for Christ’s suffering would be literally fused to her body.\textsuperscript{75} Similarly, another nun, Mary of Oignies (1177-1213), cut pieces of her own flesh from her body and buried them in the ground while she was enveloped in a frenzied vision of the Crucifix.\textsuperscript{76} In the late thirteenth century, Angela of Foligno, working as a nurse, employed multi-sensory aspects in her devotion, often drank from the scabs of lepers, and wrote that they were “sweet as communion.”\textsuperscript{77}

Even Catherine of Siena, a founding Dominican nun, was documented to have worn rough wool garments under her habit and an iron chain bound tightly around her waist, flagellating herself three times daily for over an hour (fig. 4).\textsuperscript{78} These instances of self-inflicted pain should be viewed as an intense desire to identify fully and physically with the suffering of Christ. As examples of \textit{imitatio Christi}, they signal the connection between the practice of self-inflicted suffering and the desire to identify with Christ through methods of affective participation that I suggest are at play in the production of Nuremberg Last Judgment Tapestry. Perceived through their fingers, the weaving nuns would have been able to interact physically with the bleeding body of Christ in the tapestry, while they wove and meditated on the images

\textsuperscript{74} Bynum, \textit{Fragmentation and Redemption}, 125.
\textsuperscript{75} Lindgren, \textit{Sensual Encounters}, 66. Also note, this is not the same as Saint Hedwig with the ivory Madonna figure.
\textsuperscript{76} Bynum, \textit{Fragmentation and Redemption}, 131.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 132.
\textsuperscript{78} Wiethaus, \textit{Maps of Flesh and Light}, 40.
they were creating.

![Image of Catherine of Siena flagellating herself.](image)

Figure 4: Catherine of Siena flagellating herself. German translation of Raymund of Capua's Life of St. Catherine of Siena, Upper Rhine or Alsace, c. 1400-1450: Bibliotheque Nationale de France, Paris, Ms. all. 34, f. 4v. The scourge in Catherine's hand is depicted similarly to the scourge in the Nuremberg Last Judgment tapestry. Image published in Jeffrey Hamburger and Susan Marti, eds., *Crown and Veil: Female Monasticism from the Fifth to the Fifteenth Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 180, and available online at [http://pics.livejournal.com/darkelf105/pic/0000btkc/s320x240](http://pics.livejournal.com/darkelf105/pic/0000btkc/s320x240).

Understanding this desire to physically identify with Christ allows us to see that the production of Christ’s body within the Nuremberg Last Judgment Tapestry was a particularly potent devotional element.\(^79\) It is not my suggestion that nun weavers would have inflicted wounds upon themselves while weaving to identify with Christ’s suffering, although operating a loom would have caused soreness and discomfort; rather, the women would have metaphorically

\[^79\text{Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 132. Other, more extreme, examples of physical piety include: extreme sleep and food deprivation, praying barefoot in the snow, performing thousands of genuflexions, rolling in broken glass, jumping into ovens, hanging from a gibbet, praying to be afflicted with leprosy, and praying while standing on one’s head. The latter was exemplified by the miraculous clinging of the habit around the ankles to maintain modesty.}\]
experienced the pain of Christ through imagined affective participation. In addition to the myriad aches and pains that accompanied tapestry weaving – aching backs, sore shoulders, and bleeding fingers rubbed raw from handling coarse threads – these physical manifestations of piety support the notion that the production of the Nuremberg Tapestry would have been perceived as a devotional activity.

Using these examples of physical devotion as an interpretational framework, and bearing in mind the inherent physiological response to rhythmic movement, it is thus possible to reconstruct the meditative and spiritual experience of weaving the Nuremberg Last Judgment Tapestry. In this reconstructive experience, the depiction of Saint John the Baptist’s camel hair suit, the rising bodies below the Deësis group, and the instruments of the Passion should be seen as the triggers for the physical aspects of nuns’ devotion while producing the tapestry.

Beginning with the depiction of Saint John the Baptist, we see that he is depicted wearing a red robe draped over his full-body camel hair suit, recalling his time spent alone in the desert. Rather than recalling Saint John’s turmoil in the desert, however, I argue that a nun constructing this particular portion of the tapestry would have associated the garment with her own wearing of the hair shirt, replicating that experience referenced in Catherine of Siena’s biography. In weaving John the Baptist, who was often referenced as one of Christ’s closest companions, and the nuns may also have desired to experience that same closeness. Perhaps as they wove John the Baptist’s body into the tapestry, they were praying that they may be elevated to a state of close friendship with Christ. This prayer, enhanced through the meditative state engendered by

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81 Wiethaus, Maps of Flesh and Light, 40; and Evangelisti, Nuns, 39, 79.
82 Lindgren, Sensual Encounters, 68-69. In this chapter, Lindgren analyzes image types known as “Christus-Johannes-Gruppen” and their popularity within female Dominican communities in the Upper Rhine region. She interprets Saint John the Baptist as the ultimate embodiment of friendship with Jesus Christ.
the rhythmic act of weaving, would create that affective participation with the image, which would have rendered intense feelings of physical identification. For the woman meticulously producing the garment within the tapestry, this physical identification with John the Baptist would come both by way of an association with his camel-hair garment and in his closeness to Christ.

Similarly, the weaving of the dead beneath the three figures of the Dëesis group was another opportunity for the nuns to utilize affective devotional methods while producing the Nuremberg Tapestry. The primarily female figures, depicted with long hair and exposed breasts, hide their faces as they rise emaciated from their earthly graves to approach judgment. In depicting the rising dead as female, the designer of the tapestry created an avenue for the nuns to identify with these figures. Weaving this section, the female nuns would have imagined themselves similarly at this very moment of judgment. They would have identified with the figures, meditating and praying to prepare for their own imminent judgment before Christ.

At the upper end of the tapestry, four angels carry the instruments of the Passion. The spear, cross, crown, whip, scourge, and pillar surround Christ’s radiating mandorla. Of these objects, the scourge held by the angel dressed in white at Christ’s right hand would have resonated most clearly with the nuns of Katharinenkloster. The scourge depicted is an object similar to the ones used by women within convents for lashing themselves, as can be viewed in images where Catherine of Siena and other nuns who use scourges to remind themselves of the suffering of Christ.83 While the scourge stands out as an object that would have been familiar to the nuns, all stations of the Passion would have held particular importance in the devotion of medieval woman. Weaving each of these elements into the Nuremberg Last Judgment Tapestry

83 For references to Catherine of Siena's scourge, see Wiethaus, Maps of Flesh and Light, 40.
would have stimulated similar affective participation and would have been seen as an 
opportunity for devotional meditation with an emphasis on physicality and corporeality.

As an extension of, or corollary to the devotional emphasis on the physical, the 
emergence of blood piety and an increased focus on the humanity of Christ serves to further 
contextualize the weaving of the Nuremberg Tapestry as a devotional undertaking. Medieval 
scholarship that examines Eucharistic miracles and the proclivity of nuns to identify physically 
with the human body of Christ and his suffering uses the term “Christocentrism” to describe the 
emphasis on the human body of Christ in images and objects for devotion. 84  
Caroline Walker Bynum’s most recent publication, Wonderful Blood, explores blood piety and corporeal worship 
practices in medieval convents. 85  
Bynum and others work closely with biographical and 
autobiographical texts that reference the immense focus on the humanity and suffering of 
Christ’s physical body through mystical miracles of the stigmata and visions received by women.

In highlighting the corporeal body of Christ and his suffering, Christocentric devotion 
often centers on the specific events of the Passion and the Crucifixion. 86  
There are, however, other elements of medieval women’s spirituality that reflect this Christocentric emphasis. For 
instance, there is an increase in the production of image types known as the “Schmerzensmann,” 
or “Man of Sorrows,” which occurs in the later Middle Ages. These images, widespread in their 
chronological and geographical impact, depict Christ after the Crucifixion, often bleeding 
profusely over his entire body (fig. 5). 87

84 Lindgren, Sensual Encounters, 8, 64-65.
85 Bynum, Wonderful Blood, 249-258.
86 Bynum, Jesus as Mother, 130.
87 Bynum, “Patterns of Female Piety,” 172.
This emphasis on the bleeding and suffering body of Christ as specifically human, and thus capable of feeling pain in the same manner as a human weaver, served as a powerful devotional tool for the women in medieval convents. Utilizing the same methods employed in acts of affective participation and *imitatio Christi* mentioned earlier, the nuns would have imagined their own pain in relation to the pain and suffering depicted in the image. Often begging to be inflicted with the bodily pain of Christ, these nuns would have cast themselves into the image.
alongside or in the place of the suffering Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{88} Thus, while Man of Sorrows imagery and objects have been shown to exemplify the centrality of Christ’s bodily suffering and the desire by nuns to identify with Christ’s physical pain, the added physicality that comes through the sustained repetitive action of weaving would have compounded this identification process.\textsuperscript{89}

This devotion regarding the Man of Sorrows, however, should not be misconstrued as an overall interest in blood and gore. Particular instances are reported where nuns were horrified and afraid of these graphic visions.\textsuperscript{90} A woman recording the life of Gertrude of Helfta in the late thirteenth century states that blood is “itself a detestable thing,” but elaborates that it only becomes beautiful and glorious when shed for or by Christ.\textsuperscript{91} Imitating the life and suffering of Christ, the vision or physical act of bloodshed should therefore be seen as another element of \textit{imitatio Christi}. Not only is this how it is depicted in the Nuremberg Last Judgment Tapestry, but I would suggest this is how it was imagined during the weaving process.

In the Last Judgment Tapestry, the ecstasy of nuns would have revolved around three points: the five stigmata wounds of Christ, the Passion, and the Crucifixion.\textsuperscript{92} In this context, it is relevant to address the abundance of standard prayers that reference the Passion, women’s obsession with the Crucifix as a devotional object, and the prominence of miraculous stigmata wounds at the time of the Nuremberg Tapestry’s production. Scholars have recognized an important development among Dominican convents’ manuscripts, noting that they often contain

\textsuperscript{88} Bynum, “Patterns of Female Piety,” 172-173; Bynum, \textit{Fragmentation and Redemption}, 191; and Biernoff, \textit{Sight and Embodiment}, 135.
\textsuperscript{89} Here, it is appropriate to suggest that perhaps this same emphasis on corporeal, human bodies has a role in the medieval cult of saints and the levels to which Christians pored over the holy bodies of dead humans. This same theory is suggested in Bynum, \textit{Fragmentation and Redemption}, 183.
\textsuperscript{90} Bynum, “Patterns of Female Piety,” 187.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 188.
\textsuperscript{92} Wiethaus, \textit{Maps of Flesh and Light}, 46; Lindgren, \textit{Sensual Encounters}, 62; and Bynum, \textit{Jesus as Mother}, 130.
numerous “Passion prayers.”93 Henry Suso, a Dominican theologian and author in the first half of the fourteenth century, proposed one hundred meditations on the Passion to be contemplated before the Crucifix daily.94 One prayer, found in a female Dominican manuscript, reads, “Lord, I beg you for the sake of the thorny crown, and by the wounds upon your brow, and by the holy blood that ran over your human face, that you turn your godly face with grace toward me.”95 The wording in this prayer reinforces spiritual ideologies concerning the instruments of the Passion and the Crucifix, while again referencing the importance of Christ’s humanity in the late Middle Ages.

Contemplation on the Passion, as this passage suggests, often required the presence of a Crucifix as the visual aid for prayer. This stipulation was clearly stated in Henry Suso’s devotional instructions for Dominican nuns.96 As an example, Margaret Ebner, a fourteenth-century Dominican mystic, combines her obsession with the Crucifix and her desire to unite corporeally with the body of Christ in her account of a large Crucifix installed in her convent’s choir.97 Margaret employs deliberate wording such as “I pressed it forcefully against my heart,” “I could not withdraw myself from the cross,” “I shoved it against my bosom,” “I laid it under my face... around my neck,” and “I had the greatest desire to kiss it and to press it close to my heart.”98 This account of Crucifix contemplation suggests the blurred line between metaphoric prayer and real physical interaction, a line that is even more delicately walked in the devotional production of the Nuremberg Tapestry.

93 Lindgren, Sensual Encounters, 62-36.
94 The information regarding the so-called “Passion prayers” is cited from Lindgren, Sensual Encounters, 62-63.
95 Lindgren, Sensual Encounters, 64. The emphasis in the Passion prayer is mine.
96 Ibid., 62-63.
97 Ibid., 65.
In the Last Judgment Tapestry, there is a depiction of a cross though Christ is shown in judgment, not in the moment of Crucifixion. Considering the commission of this object was for a burial tapestry, it is my theory that the nuns of Katharinenkloster were bound by commission to produce a Last Judgment scene. Although the nuns were not able to incorporate a full Crucifixion scene into the composition, I believe many other elements within the tapestry allude to the devotional preferences of the women. Working within the presumably dictated subject matter, the weavers were, however, able to include the bleeding Christ, the instruments of the Passion, Saint John’s hair shirt, feminine bodies rising from graves, and many other elements that would have facilitated their affective devotional worship during production.

Important in this visual reading is that, though the cross in the Nuremberg Tapestry is unoccupied, the more compelling element is present: the body of Christ with the stigmata wounds. As the central focus of blood piety in the later Middle Ages, the body of Christ would have had more impact than an image of the cross, and would therefore have been more effective in engendering those bodily responses sought in nun’s devotional practice.99 As earlier mentioned, this is evident in the Man of Sorrows and images of nuns drinking from Christ’s wounds. There are also images that depict Dominican nuns receiving and adoring an excessively brutalized Christ from the cross after the Crucifixion.100 These imagined Deposition scenes reiterate the notion that medieval nuns were extremely captivated by the bleeding and suffering body of Christ, an interest reflected in the Nuremberg Last Judgment Tapestry.

It should be noted, however, that of the bodily miracles recorded in medieval convents,

99 Bynum, “Patterns of Female Piety,” 179-181.
100 Ibid., 174, 182.
the reception of the stigmata wounds ranks highly in significance and frequency.\textsuperscript{101} Though Christ is sometimes depicted as bleeding all over his entire body, it is the five wounds of the stigmata that are the key marks of the Passion and Crucifixion.\textsuperscript{102} In whatever manner the wounds of Christ manifested themselves, the point remains that the stigmata of Christ’s crucifixion were paramount in the devotion of medieval nuns. While some women claimed to receive the physical wounds, others envisioned the occurrence while in trance-like prayer or meditation, and still others inflicted the wounds upon themselves in fits of ecstasy.\textsuperscript{102} It is therefore significant that, within the Nuremberg Tapestry, all five of the bleeding wounds are visible on Christ’s body.

The wound in Christ’s side, punctured by the spear in the end of the Crucifixion to ensure his death and sometimes referred to as the “wound of love,” received the most attention by medieval Christian women contemplating the stigmata.\textsuperscript{103} These women often prayed to enter Christ’s heart through his side wound or imagined themselves as receiving his blood directly from his heart through his side.\textsuperscript{104} Creating an interesting parallel between the wound and a portal for entry, particularly given what we know of the practice of affective devotion, it is not hard to imagine the nuns of Katharinenkloster weaving this “wound of love” while viewing themselves as passing from their earthly realm into Christ’s metaphysical, heavenly realm by way of these physical wounds. As such, the open, bleeding stigmata wounds of Christ, created by the instruments of the Passion, became powerful devotional tools for the monastic weavers of

\textsuperscript{101} Bynum, \textit{Fragmentation and Redemption}, 186-187. Among men, the reception of stigmata was far less common; Saint Francis of Assisi and the modern figure Padre Pio are the only men in history to claim receiving all five visible wounds. Dozens of women in the late middle ages claim stigmata miracles.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 191.
\textsuperscript{103} Bynum, “Patterns of Piety,” 181; Bynum, \textit{Holy Feast}, 192.
\textsuperscript{104} Ebner, \textit{Major Works}, 96; Angela of Foligno, \textit{Le Livre de l’experience}, 382-384; and Bynum, \textit{Fragmentation and Redemption}, 103, 190, 211.
Katharinenkloster.

Given that nuns in the Middle Ages identified closely with the physical body of Christ and his human suffering, it follows that the events of the Passion were primary instances for devotional identification. While rhythmically applying the weft to the warp of the instruments of the Passion, the nuns had extended periods of time to reflect on the immense amount of pain inflicted on Christ’s body through the use of the weapons being rendered by their own hands. I contend that the weavers, while producing the tapestry, would have pictured themselves inside the stations of the Passion to further identify with the humanity and suffering of Christ in the final moments before the Crucifixion. Their physical creation of the wounds on Christ’s body is therefore particularly interesting when considered in light of the tools used in weaving. Thrusting the bobbin or shuttle through the warp threads as if piercing the fabric could well have been equated in the metaphorical sense with the instruments of the Passion piercing Christ's skin.

To weave the bleeding stigmata wounds into Christ’s body can thus be seen as a particularly auspicious responsibility for the women. The rhythm of weaving, the physical contact with Christ, and the importance of touch would have all been at play in this activity. Our understanding of this act of weaving Christ’s wounds is, however, complex. If a woman considered herself inflicting the wounds, she would have had to envision herself participating in the Crucifixion of Christ as a persecutor. Such an association would elicit overwhelming awareness of God’s grace and the immense power of forgiveness. They not only inflicted the wounds on Christ, but were nonetheless forgiven for their sins. If the weaver, however, considered herself to be healing the wounds, a completely different set of devotional opportunities were available. Drawing on the fact that women were often associated with
healing and curing the ill in the Middle Ages, their acting as caregivers allowed them to imagine themselves acting in much the same way Mary and others prepared Christ’s body for entombment. Weaving these wounds as an act of healing would have been a path to affective devotion that was more glorious than inflicting the wounds, as it would have presented the weaver with the opportunity to view themselves as a close friend and loved one of Christ, nursing his bleeding body after the Crucifixion. Perhaps in this mode, the nuns would have been inclined to envision themselves as one of the chosen few to whom Christ revealed himself after his miraculous Resurrection.

When we consider the multiple avenues for devotional contemplation and meditation within the Nuremberg Last Judgment Tapestry as entered by way of trance-like prayer created through rhythmic movement and sound, and expanded through the complex layers of women’s spirituality in the late Middle Ages, we come to understand that the production of tapestries by nuns has not yet been sufficiently studied, and that these methods of prayer and contemplation have yet to be fully explored. Seen in this light, however, it can be stated that the Nuremberg Last Judgment Tapestry, woven in the second half of the fifteenth century, served as a devotional activity for the nuns of Katharinenkloster. It was a devotional activity created through the rhythmic nature of weaving that exploited the inclination of nuns in the later Middle Ages toward physical, corporeal devotional practices that encompassed the prevalence of Eucharistic fervor and the visually affective character of blood piety.


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